

Baluvu: A Ritual among Kadu Kuruba Tribe of Karnataka

S.C. Jai Prabhakar* and M.R. Gangadhar**

*Centre for Multi-Disciplinary Development Research (CMDR), Dr.B.R.Ambedkar Nagar,
Dharwad 580 004, Karnataka, India
E-mail: <anthroprabhakar@yahoo.co.in>

**Department of Anthropology, University of Mysore, Manasagangotri, Mysore 570 006,
Karnataka, India
E-mail: <gangadharmr@yahoo.com>

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ABSTRACT Kadu Kurubas are religious minded people and have a strong belief in their ancestors. *Baluvu* is a sacred ritual performed at *Ambala* to fulfill their vows to their deities. *Ambala* is the place where *Baluvu* is performed. It is very sacred and central place for all activities of their community. This ritual is very significant and it is believed that without fulfilling their vows by performing *Baluvu*, a deity or spirit would take possession and cause misfortune or troubles. They worship ancestors and holy spirits and believe in the existence of supernatural beings as guardian and benefactors of humans. This ritual is carried out throughout the night. A hen is sacrificed and eaten after cooking to fulfill their benediction.

INTRODUCTION

Rituals are mechanisms through which beliefs are fulfilled. Problems or tribulations are common to human life. In urban industrial society, the problems are solved by experts. For instance, if there is an illness, a physician is approached; if there are problems regarding studies, the respective subject teacher is consulted; so on and so forth. What can a tribal man do in this situation? If he experiences problems in hunting, domestication of animals or agriculture, he would definitely go to experienced men around him. But, if there is an illness or some unknown disease or any problem related to birth or death, local traditional experts are consulted. These experts are not always successful in giving remedies, but there is some articulation towards the solution of the problem. Almost all tribes accept the existence of the soul. Each culture has its own distinctive animistic beings and its own specific elaboration of the soul concept (Harris 1983). Animism is particularly widely found in the religions of indigenous peoples (Bird-David 1999). The tribes of south India possess a religion which to some extent, can be characterized as animistic. They venerate the forces of nature and find their gods residing on the hills and in the forests of their habitats. They have a strong veneration also for their ancestors (Fuchs 1992). In tribal society, there is wide prevalence of belief in supernatural powers as causes of sickness, disaster, problems, death etc. They also believe in

malevolent and benevolent spirits of the dead. The malevolent spirits may harm them is their belief so in order to be protected from them, they worship the benevolent spirits, especially their ancestors by performing rituals. Thus, there is a definite place for rituals in tribal society. If a community believes that worshipping benevolent spirits can control natural calamities and diseases then sacrificing a goat or hen or offering a coconut for spirits could also be considered a ritual. Keeping above in view, the present study tries to look at the significance of *Baluvu* ritual and its connection with customs, values and belief system of Kadu Kuruba tribe.

The present paper is organized in the following ways. First part of the paper presents the techniques used to conduct field work and to elucidate the information. The second part discusses contending issues of socio-cultural factors of Kadu Kuruba tribe. The third part describes the structure and importance of sacred centre in tribal society. The fourth section reports the mechanism of *Baluvu* ritual and discusses its significance in tribal society. The last section of the paper concluded with importance of rituals in belief system of Kadu Kuruba tribe.

METHODOLOGY

Data for this paper was derived from folk beliefs of Kadu Kuruba tribe, who lived in Brahmagiri *haadi*, a rehabilitated settlement and almost adjoining to Begoor forest area of Heggadadevanakote (H. D. Kote) taluk, Mysore dis-

tract, Karnataka State. Conventional anthropological techniques like participant observation and unstructured interviews were carried out to collect the detailed data. Elucidations of information were also through collective discussion with elders, informants and other members of the settlement.

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

The term Kadu Kuruba is derived from 'Kadu' meaning 'forest', and 'Kuruba' which indicates a caste name. Kadu Kuruba is also called Betta Kuruba. The Betta Kurubas are one of the sub-groups of the Kuruba, inhabiting the area of Wynad, Niligiris and the Mysore hills of southern India (Gupta 2003). The Kadu Kurubas are active, tough and experts at forest work. They are concentrated in the Mysore district and also in Kodagu, Dakshina Kannada and Hassan district. Within Mysore district they are settled in H.D.Kote, Hunsur, Piriapattana and Nanjangud taluks (Jai Prabhakar and Gangadhar 2010). Kadu Kurubas are short and very short stature people, round headed, broad faced with very broad nasal profile, thick lips, and rather rough hair, with blackish brown complexion (Thurston 1909; Sirajuddin et al. 1992). They speak a dialect of their own among themselves. The dialect is a mixture of Kannada, Tamil and Malayalam and is known as *kadukuruba language*. It has no script of its own. They also speak Kannada among themselves and with outsiders. These tribes are mainly occupied as small-scale agriculturists and landless labourers, while many of them strive as daily wagers and domestic servants. These people specialize in crafting bamboo utensils. Their socio-economic status is relatively low. The families are generally nuclear, patrilineal, and patriarchal type. The age of marriage is determined by the age of puberty. Cross-cousin marriages are preferred, while parallel cousin marriages are avoided (Iyer 1988). Kadu Kurubas lived in compact settlements and each settlement has its own chief. Each community of Kurubas residing in a group of villages has a headman or *guru*. He acts the part of *pujari* or priest in all their ceremonies, presides over their tribal meetings and settles disputes. They follow Hinduism, believe in ghosts and spirits and have their own family and community deities. Traditionally Kadu Kurubas are food gather-

ers and shifting cultivators. But presently shifting cultivation is banned and many restrictions on the use of forest are imposed by the government. After the traditional rights of access to the forests and its resources were severely curtailed subsequent to the declaration of the national park, the indigenous people have lost their livelihood and have been forced to delve into the monetized environment (Reddy and Prakash 2002). In recent years, the rehabilitated tribe has undergone a rapid process of cultural change. Provisions of food security through public distribution system (PDS), introduction of local self governance (gram panchayat) through panchayati raj system, many schemes from central as well as state government etc. have changed their food pattern, occupation, income and lifestyle. On the other hand, it experienced difficulties in social, political and economic adjustment, and in maintaining internal cohesion, resulting in hitherto unknown socio-economic problems of poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, diseases, malnutrition etc. However, even so, their customs, values and beliefs have not disappeared with altered urbanization and wider the prevalence of belief in supernatural powers as causes of death, sickness etc., higher the rate of consulting local traditional experts. When the Kadu Kuruba recognize an illness as having purely natural causes, they apply modern medicine; when supernatural causes are suspected, they consult traditional healers and shamans. They believe in the existence of supernatural beings as guardian and benefactors of humans. They also believe in malevolent and benevolent spirits of the dead. They believe that malevolent spirits may harm them so in order to protect themselves from evil spirits, they worship the benevolent spirits predominantly ancestors. They sacrifice sheep, goats and chicken to appease their deities.

AMBALA: A SACRED CENTRE

In the centre of Kadu Kuruba settlement there is a community shed where they assembled for variety of activities. They observe several rituals in which the community participates (Misra 2004). *Ambala* is a very sacred and central place for all activities of the community. It is the place where *Baluvu* is performed. Sacred centers are most important because all rituals and devotional activities are performed here (Srivastava

2007). It even stands as a legal place from where the justice delivery is done. It is also the meeting place where emergency problems are taken into consideration and decisions are made.

Structure of *Ambala*

In every Kadu Kuruba settlement, *Ambala* is designed in east-west direction. It is made up of ten pillars and a roof. The holy fire called '*Mogasalethicchu*' is kept on eastern side of *Ambala*. In each and every activity held at *Ambala*, it is compulsory to spread three (number three is very auspicious for them) cleaned mats (made out by bamboo leaves) as a kind of obedience by '*Mūjāri*' (assistant to head) to seat the head (*haadi* head or chief), community headman and clan heads ('*Naanchimage*', '*Kalkarmage*', '*Kuppasimage*' and '*Jeerumage*'). While performing *Baluvu*, the head and clan heads of the settlement along with *Mūjāri* are made to sit near three pillars row, placed in the eastern side of the *Ambala*. *Vokkalanada yajamāna* (cultivator's head) is seated near two pillars row, which are placed before the three pillars. The next three pillars just opposite to two pillars row are considered the place for community headman called '*Ajjanapata*'. The last row of two pillars is meant for community men, women and children.

BALUVU: A SACRED RITUAL

The word '*Baluvu*' is denoted as a religious vow. It is an important and sacred performance with a set of ritual and rites performed by worshippers at sacred centre (*Ambala*). The performance is mainly dedicated to god, deities and ancestors etc. In the opinion of Kadu Kurubas, if a person commits an offence against the tribal law or offends a certain deity or spirit by neglecting to fulfill a vow, then he would be taken possession by an evil spirit that will make him sick and cause his death unless the spirit is exorcised. The task of the diviner or *shaman* is to find out the real cause of disease or misfortune or troubles. In order to fulfill their previous vows, to grant them a prosperous year, blessed to get a child would perform *Baluvu* ritual by idolizing their ancestors and benevolent spirits. Monday or Friday is the auspicious day during the month of April to perform the ritual.

A small *pandal* decorated by four small bamboo sticks, banana plants and a replica of parrot made out of coconut tree leaves are constructed in north-south direction at *Ambala*. Four bamboo sticks donned by cotton and one by cloth are lit and each stick placed at the corner of squared small *pandal* and one at front. Five rice balls are kept at the center. After *pūjā* is over, rice balls are kept at 15-20 meters away from the *Ambala* and offered to animals and birds with high gratitude. Frazer, an eminent social anthropologist during 1890 illustrated in his most famous work '*The Golden Bough*' that the custom of offering first-fruits to the ancestral spirits is very common among most of the population. Kadu Kurubas have strong belief that ancestral spirits are embodied as animal or a bird and would eat offered rice balls, and then the benediction is fulfilled. If not, the family is considered as impure.

Those worshipping husband and wife or mother and son or head of the family have to wear clean dress; while women wear white saree and they keep fast during the *pūjā*. Purity is strictly observed otherwise the spirits may become displeased resulting in disasters to the persons, family or village concerned. The priest (*pūjāri*) will perform *pūjā* by chanting prayer; a hen is sacrificed and eaten after cooking it. The spilling of blood on the forehead and little toe of votaries is an important part of the ritual.

Kadu Kurubas light fire and prepare food near the *Ajjanapata* of *Ambala*. This particular fire at *Ajjanapata* is called '*Kyarambalthicchu*'. Those '*Kyarambalthicchu*' and '*Mogasalethicchu*' will be lighted across the proceedings of the *Baluvu*. Both these holy fires have got their own significance and serve the purpose of illuminating the place where *Baluvu* is performed and also helps in safeguarding the people from cold.

Saaru (curry) is prepared with the ingredients of pulses, edible leaves and sacrificed hen. The prepared food is first offered to their ancestors and holy spirits, later it is served to all the people. Portion of right thigh of the sacrificed hen will be roasted in fire and cut into small pieces then served with puffed rice to all the votaries who are assembled inside the *Ambala*. But there should not be any shortage of food. Later, *Haadi* men call excitedly upon their ancestors and holy spirits by handing over the small '*Mutthulu*' (which is made by bamboo

stick layers used to clean the food grains which is tying one tiny bell inside) to the priest. It is believed that ancestors or spirit or deity are induced into the body of priest and speak through him. The worshipping *Haadi* men and women will ask questions, make promises and get a reply in their own language. This ritual is carried out throughout the night at *Ambala*.

CONCLUSION

Kadu Kurubas are religious minded people and have a strong belief in their ancestors. They believe in veneration of the ancestors to protect from malevolent spirits and appease their deities through rituals by sacrificing a goat or hen or offering a coconut. *Baluvu* is a sacred ritual performed at *Ambala* to fulfill their vows to their deities. *Ambala* is a community shed where they observe several rituals and it is a sacred place for all activities of the community. By elaborating the mechanism of ritual and discussion, it can be said that despite the drastic changes due to urbanization and industrialization, the Kadu Kuruba tribe is still maintaining their traditional religion, customs, practices, values and culture.

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APPENDIX

<i>Ajjanapata</i>	:	believed as the sacred place of ancestors
<i>Haadi</i>	:	tribal settlement or hamlet
<i>Mogasālethicchu</i>	:	a fire at veranda
<i>Pandal</i>	:	alter or raised canopy
<i>Pūjā</i>	:	it is modeled on the idea of giving a gift or offering to deities and receive their blessings.
<i>Pūjāri</i>	:	one who perform pūjā; tribal priest
<i>ticchu</i>	:	vernacular term of Kadu Kuruba language; meaning fire