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The Kota Society in Nilgiri District -A View

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Abstract:

The name is found variously spelt. Kota, kotar, koter, kohatur, the deviation is uncertain. Kohata or Gohata, cow killer, has been suggested, but this seems doubtful. The Todas call them kouf, or cow –people. They recognize no caste among themselves, but are divided into keris (streets), and men of one Keri must seek a wife in another. The historical aspects of Kota polyandry frame a significant problem. Before, the English came up to the Nilgiri plateau, its inhabitants were relatively isolated from the main currents of South Indian life. Contact with the people of the lowlands were few, since the honey up the hills was hard and hazardous. Soon after the Europeans discovered that the climate to the plateau was a life saving refuge from the fevers of the plains, roads and later a railroad were built. In the wake of the English came Tamilians and other lowland Hindus. Within the last fifty years, the advent of these newcomers has effected significant changes in the tribal culture. New deities have been adopted, new methods of cultivation practiced. It is striking that there has been no change in the practice of polyandry. A man may have more than one wife and so the Kota marital system includes true polygamy as well as fraternal polyandry. A woman lives only in the house of her legal husband and he is recognized as the father of the children these bears. The husband has precedence to his wife’s attention and favors. However, in the absence of the husband, any of his brothers have the right and the obligation to act in his stead. The Kotas marry only one wife, unless she should be barren, when they may take another. In this case, the two wives live in the same house. Widows may remarry. Kotas profess to have no traditions of any kind. They even pretend ignorance of the story of Koter, though it is evident from their manner that they do know it.

1. Introduction

The name is found variously spelt. Kota, kotar, koter, kohatur, the deviation is uncertain. Kohata or Gohata, cow killer, has been suggested, but this seems doubtful. The Todas call them kouf, or cow –people. They recognize no caste among themselves, but are divided into keris (streets), and men of one Keri must seek a wife in another. They are a very industrious tribe and devote themselves to agriculture and to various they excel as carpenters, smiths, tanners, basket makers. They are well formed of average height, not bad features and fair skinned.ⁱ

The Toda and Kotas lived near each other before the settlement of the latter on the Nilgiri. Their dialects too betray a great resemblance. The Kotas are the only hill people who are not affair of the Todas, and they treat them occasionally even with bare courtesy, though , as a rule, a Kota, when meeting a Toda and Badaga, lifts both his hands to his face and makes his obeisance from a distance. They do also not, like the other hill tribes, greatly admire the mysterious power of witchcraft, with which the Todas are credited.ⁱⁱ

Kotas lived in seven villages of 30 to 60 detached huts, at the center of Toda and Badaga spheres “ the size of the Kota population is almost the same as that of the Todas” They are that artisans and musicians of the Nilgiri society. Though all classes look down on the Kotas, all agreed that they are excellent artisans. The Badagas invite to Kota Musicians for their ceremonies and joyful event. They are skilled at black smithy, carpentry, rope, and umbrella making, gold and silver jewelry making, and are indispensable to other tribes.ⁱⁱⁱ

2. Marital system

A man may have more than one wife and so the Kota marital system includes true polygamy as well as fraternal polyandry. A woman lives only in the house of her legal husband and he is recognized as the father of the children these bears. The husband has precedence to his wife’s attention and favors. However, in the absence of the husband, any of his brothers have the right and the obligation to act in his stead. It is a right in the sense that a husband may not attempt to interfere and may not exhibit any signs of jealousy, when he finds so brother with his wife. It becomes an obligation when the husband is away from the village overnight. No woman will sleep

ⁱ ..Shortts Account of the Tribes of the Neilgherrys., Madras, 1868, pp 53-57.

ⁱⁱ .Gustav Oppert , On the Original Inhabitants of Bharatavarsa or India. Madras, 1894 ,p.180

ⁱⁱⁱ . Edgar Thurston, Castes and Tribes of Southern India, Cosmo publications Delhi, 1975, p.7

alone in a house lest the sorcerers' from the nearby Kurumba tribe find her an easy prey. Although any one of a man's brothers may be the biological father of his wife's child, only the husband is recognized as the sociological father. The kinship system further reflects the operation of the principle of fraternal equivalence. A man calls the children of his brother by the same terms as he uses for his own sons and daughters. This is true for the children of classificatory brothers as well as for the children of real brothers.^{iv} In South India, polyandry is of especially frequent occurrence.^v

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3. Religion Rites

Their priests are of their own tribe. There are two to a village one called Devadi, whose office is hereditary. If the family fails entirely, recourse is had to inspiration for the choice of another. The Devadi appoints the second. Neither lives in the temple; they cool food before it at the feast of Kamataraya, and distribute it to the householders, sow and reap the first handfuls of grain at the proper seasons, and make the first obeisance other corpse at a funeral. The devadi is liable to be possessed by the deity.^{vii} Generally, they recognize, but one god, under the name of Kamataraya, and his wife, each represented by a thin silver plate. Traditions say of Kamataraya that perspiring profusely; he wiped from his foreheads three drops of perspiration and out of them formed the three most ancient of the hill tribesmen the Todas, Kurumbas, and Kotas. The chief Kota festival, however, is the annual feast of Kamataraya, called Kamabata or Kamata.

This lasts for about a fortnight. On the first evening, the priest lights a fire in the *swami* house, and then brings it to the principal street of the village where it is kept up during the whole of the feast.^{viii} On the second day no work may be done, except digging clay and making pots, but not particular ceremonies take place on this or the Three following days.^{ix} On the sixth day men are sent to fetch bamboos and rattan, and on the seventh day the two temples are newly thatched and decorated; it's essential that this should be accomplished before nightfall.

The eighth and ninth days are spent in feasting. Contribution of grain and ghee are demand from the entire neighboring Badaga village and cooked in the enclosure of the temples. Only boiled grain, ghee and a sort of pea soup are eaten on this occasion. A portion is laid before the temple, then the priests eat and afterwards at the rest of the villagers all sitting in a row before the temple.^x The tenth day is passed in dancing the Kotas dress up to the occasion, wearing the long robes and borrowing jewels of all sorts from the Badagas, who are obliged to propitiated their artisans by attending and contributing on this occasion. On the eleventh day, they decorate themselves with leaves, tie buffalo horns to their heads, and go through various appropriate pantomimes. The women also dance at this feast only; they sing at the same time, which is an improvement on the drum and horn accompanied of the men's dancing. On the twelfth day they make a fire inside their temple, by drilling a pointed stick round and round in an hole in a piece of wood, bring a bit of iron, and go through the form of heating and working it up by way of asking '*shastras*' and say to the god, "let all be well and prosper."^{xi}

4. Birth and Marriage Ceremony

During a woman's pregnancy, the husband leaves his hair and nails uncut. Three houses built for women to occupy after the birth of children, or at other times when they considered unclean. Immediately after birth, the mother, and child are removed to the first hut, a temporary erection of bough called vollogudu, from vollu inside and gudu nest, where they remain for thirty days.^{xii} The second and third months are spent in two permanent huts called telulu. A woman with her first child, on leaving the vollugudu for the first telulu, must make seven steps backwards among seven kind of thorns strewed on the ground. Some Kothagiri, however have only the vollugudu in which the woman remains for a month, and he treading on thorns takes place, when she leaves the vollugudu to return

^{iv} . G.Mandelbaum David, Polyandry In Kota Society, Yale University, 1952,p.87

^v .L.K.Anantha Krishna Iyer, The Cochin Tribes and Castes, Vol I Madras, 1909, pp. 9.161.

^{vi} G. David Mandelbaum, Op.cit p.581.

^{vii} G. David Mandelbaum, Technology, Credit and Culture in an Indian Village, The Economic Weekly August 15, 1952, p.827.

^{viii} The Kotas in their Social Setting." In Blue Mountains: The Ethnography and Biogeography of a South Indian Religion, ed. Paul Hockings, Delhi, 1989, pp.144-85.

^{ix} G.David Mandelbaum, Op.cit., p. 828

^x Hockings, Rain, God and Unity among the Kotas. In Blue Mountains Revisited: Cultural studies of the Nilgiris, Delhi, 1997pp. 231-92.

^{xi} Of God and Death: Music in Ritual and Everyday Life. A Musical Ethnography of the Kotas of South India. Ph.D. diss. (Ethnomusicology), School of Music, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1997

^{xii} The World and the World View of the Kota. In Village India,(ed). McKim Marriott,2 23-54. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press. 1955, p.532

home. This is Mamul, no other reason is of course discoverable. On leaving the second Telulu, the mother generally goes to a relative's house for three days; if this is not convenient, she returns home. Her husband purifies the house on her return by sprinkling it with cow-dung and water. On the seventh day after this, a feast is given to the relatives; the child is fed with congee and the paternal grandfather names it.^{xiii}

When a boy is from 15 or 20 years old, his parents ask in marriage for him some girl of six or eight. If her parents' consent to the betrothal the boy with his parents goes to their house, salutes the boy bowing his head and clasping their feet, and presents them with a Birianhana of gold and ten or twenty rupees amongst well-to-do Kotas some jewels are presented to the girl at this time.^{xiv} This ceremony is called bali med -deni, from bali, bracelet, and med-deni, when the girl becomes of age, she is sent at the request of the boys relations to his father's house, a feast is given with music, and the bridegrooms mother ties on the tali, in this case a silver necklace made by Kotas. In some places the bridegroom goes to the brides house and presents there with the tali, two madige or brass armlets, and a Bali or bracelet.

The Kotas marry only one wife, unless she should be barren, when they may take another. In this case, the two wives live in the same house. Widows may remarry. Kotas profess to have no traditions of any kind. They even pretend ignorance of the story of Kote, though it is evident from their manner that they do know it. Some declare that they were born on these hills, others that the inhabitants of each Kothagiri came from a different part of the neighboring plains^{xv}.

5. Social Life

The social organization of any society involves mutual relation obligations, elements of idea behavior anticipated behavior and the accrual behavior of the community members. Thus, social organization is the network of relations existing among individuals and groups in a society. However, Kotas have a unique social feature of **keri** (street) system that regulate their marriage alliances. **Keri** in Kota dialect literally means a street.

According to Kota informants, since quite a few Kota persons in each settlement bear similar names, it is easy to identify a person when the name of his or her **keri** is prefixed to this name. Thus, the social organization has developed among the Kotas in such a way that, a **keri** corresponds to a clan, and the members of a **Keri** itself has become a social grouping of kinsmen^{xvi}.

6. Music

Instrumental tunes, or kol of the Kotas differentiate, mark and partially constitute ritual occasions. There is a repertoire for dancing, a repertoire for funerals and a repertoire for 'god'.^{xvii} Each is characterized by broad stylistic features, but the criteria for distinction between repertoires are to a greater extent contextual and singular (piece by piece) than they are musical. Within each repertoire, a particular tune may be associated with a particular action (in a funeral, for example, one tune is associated with lifting and carrying the bier to the cremation ground).^{xviii} In general, the ways in which the structure of instrumental melodies co articulates with ritual structures can be analyzed as a system of indigenous classification in and of itself.^{xix}

One of the two basic rhythmic patterns, each of which may be elaborated in different ways, accompanies melodies. In Kolme -1 the rhythms are called ca · da da · k (ordinary variety) and tirugana · da · k ('turning dance variety'). Unlike the complex rhythms performed for various occasions by Paraiyaror Cakkaliyarensembles on the plains in Tamil Nadu, rhythms performed by Nilgiri tribes are not used to differentiate ritual occasions-although they do differentiate dances.^{xx}

7. Conclusion

The Kota society is a partilineage descent group whose membership is based upon a rule of matrilineal descent is a cultural principle, which automatically affiliates a child at birth through his male ancestors. As with other tribal societies, Kotas do not have separate social divisions based on territorial or occupational levels.

^{xiii} . Z. Abraham., Ethnobotany of the Todas, the Kotas , the Irulas of the Nilgiris. In S. K. Jain (Ed.).

Glimpses of Indian Ethnobotany. Oxford & IBH Publishing Company, New Delhi, 1981, pp, 308-320

^{xiv} . M.B. Emeneau, and T. Burrow Dravidian Borrowings from Indo Aryan. [DBIAJ. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1962 .p.63

^{xv} .Breeks., Op.cit.,pp 43.47

^{xvi} . Jakka Parthasarathy, The Kotas., Op. cit. p.35.

^{xvii} . Hanchett, Suzanne, Coloured Rice: Symbolic Structures In Hindu Family Festivals. Delhi:1988 p.34

^{xviii} . P. William Harman., The Sacred Marriage of a Hindu Goddess. Delhi: 1989.p.53

^{xix} . Roderick Knight, Tribal Music of India: The Muria and Maria Gonds of Madhya Pradesh. Madyapradesh, 1983 p. 428

^{xx} . B .Emeneau, Murray. Kota Texts. 4 parts. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press.1944 . p.6

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- xvi. *The World and the World View of the Kota*. In *Village India*,(ed). McKim Marriott,2 23-54. Chicago:Univ. of Chicago Press. 1955.