

Fading Values: An Oikopoetic Study of Songs of Kaanikaran

¹Ms. Siffo Kumeds, ²Dr. Suresh Frederick

¹Research Scholar, Bishop Heber College, Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu

²Associate Professor & UG Head, Dept. of English, Bishop Heber College, Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu

The lush green forests, crystal clear silvery streams, soothing and captivating scenic valleys, amazing shades of the shady clouds and the cool fresh blanket of air holds one frozen in wonder and admiration as they step into the beautiful mountainous forests found in the southernmost part of the western Ghats belonging to the Kaanikaran.

The Kaanikaran are mountain people who helped the king of Travencore against the sons of Ettuveettu Pillaimar and in return got 102.5 Kaani of land from the king and the freedom to move freely in the mountains of the Southern part of Travencore. Kaani denotes a measure of land, therefore these mountain people came to be known as Kanikarar. This explanation of their origin indicates that the Kanikarar are the regional inhabitants of the mountains of Travencore. During the process of state re-organization the southern part of Travencore, ie. Kanniyakumari district became a part of Tamil Nadu (Singh xlvi).

They, at present, inhabit various parts of Kanniyakumari district and the Shencottah taluk of Tirunelveli district. In Kanniyakumari district, their settlements are generally found near places where the Tambaraparani, Kothayar and Misipatti rivers emerge into the plains from the forest. The present habitat of the Kanikaran is easily accessible because of the development of such villages as Pechi Parai, Perunchini and Papanasan. The forest in this region is rich in timber, teak, rosewood and black wood. The area also has plantations of cardamom, tea, white pepper and rubber. The census of India recognizes them as Scheduled Tribes (Singh 619). They speak Malayalam among themselves and Tamil with other communities.

Songs are an integral part of Kaanikaaran. Their songs are mostly concerning the relationship between humans and environment. These songs also portray their philosophy of life and most importantly their attitude towards nature. They delineate the importance of companionship and inclusiveness of all living and non-living beings. Shyju Kaani from Thenmalai settlement says, "The Kaani people group sings songs for every occasion in life; courtship, love, wedding, pregnancy, childbirth, early childhood, late childhood, adolescence, adulthood, old age, sickness, death, festivals and they also sing songs displaying the influence of the mainstream culture in their lives". He also says, "These songs clearly talk about their lifestyle and also reveal their historical background. The songs sung on special occasions by the Pilathi or priests are

called Chaatu Paatu. They sing Chaatu to propitiate gods when they begin agricultural operations. It is Pilathi, the tribal head, who performs this ritual".

Through these songs the integrative Oikos of the Kaanikaaran can be explored. "An Oikos could be regarded as a nexus in which the sacred, the humans, natural and cultural phenomena stood in an integrated relationship" (Selvamony1).

Song of Kaanikaaran

Forest of mangroves where the bears and tigers live in the middle of the mangroves lived the ancient tribal.

Clearing the forest, sowing paddy millets, plantains, wild potatoes and vegetation lived the tribal happily. Unbearable disturbance caused by elephants on mountain tops, built their house on tall trees, built their house in suffering, they lived their lives -the tribal built our huts in the valleys. Tribal king and his people gave to us, records of the Augustan sage which now our Chaatu (songs) talks about our lives. Teak, pine, mast wood, mushroom and Arjuna trees doesn't belong to us, tribal. Fearing the forest, fear of the tribal Part of our lives this forest. Laws must be passed to make the forests belong to the KANIKARAN.

(This song was sung by Mr. Suresh Kaani, a Pilathi from Thenmalai settlement. It was translated by Mrs. Stovy Kumara Dhas).

The Kaanikaaran very evidently through this song reveal their attachment towards the forest, i.e., nature. Kaani Oikos was an integrative one. "The integrative Oikos, is the first type of Oikos which integrates the sacred, nature, culture and the humans in a complex kinship, even as a family of kith and kin" (Selvamony1). "The kin-like Oikos of primal societies allows freedom with responsibility. The power relation shared by the members of this familial Oikos is both horizontal and vertical; both love and authority are normative" (Selvamony 2).

This song speaks about the relationship that they enjoyed with the sacred or spirit being. It was the same as that they enjoyed with nature. For instance, they worshipped nature and also their ancestors who had a prominent place in their life. They would acknowledge the dead even after their death and would do rituals to keep them happy and believe their presence in their houses. For this reason they would not move

from one place to another frequently, as every time they move they have a long ritual which they perform for seven days to bring the spirits of the dead to the place they have moved to.

In times of danger, they found comfort in the arms of the forest which is nature. The Kaanikaran used to send all their women into the seclusion of the dense jungle on the arrival of a stranger (Thurston). The song replicates the content life in living as one with nature in the forest. Even though the song says that they clear forests for agriculture, they would not destroy nature for pleasure or wants but only utilize it according to their needs. Mr. Ravi Kaani from Aarukaani settlement points out that his ancestors had informed that they worshiped nature, the forest being a part of nature, they would not destroy it.

The song displays Kaanikaran belief on nature, although they suffered at times yet they lived their lives happily. Therefore before they were exposed to the people of the mainstream societies there was harmony and integration in their Oikos which after this exposure transformed into Hierarchic Oikos. "The hierarchic Oikos the members stand in a hierarchic relationship, with the sacred at the top, the humans in the middle and nature at the bottom" (Selvamony 4).

The second stanza of the song talks about how the Kaani people were pushed down the valleys. Here the song also shows the slow extinction of the ancient beliefs and traditions, which were destroyed by modern religions and cultures. They mourn on the transition of their Chaatu from folk to Vedic hymns. Kaani primal people group started following various religions which the people of the low land believed, such as, Hinduism and Christianity.

The song also talks about how exotic plants and trees invaded their homes and the way they were driven out of the forest. Through this song they protest for their land and they believe that it is their right to stay in the forest. It shows that forest is their Oikos, which is the only thing that gives them comfort and joy.

With the influence of the main stream societies, they have started clearing forests to plant small gardens and build houses. Earlier, with integrated Oikos they would not cut trees to build houses but built bamboo shelters on hill tops. These shelters protected them from wild animals.

The mainstream people were tenacious in developing these primal people group, therefore started displaying their labour saving technologies and teachings through researchers, visitors and social workers who became successful in their attempt to develop them by transforming their Oikos from Hierarchic to that of an Anarchic one.

Anarchic Oikos is the one in which man exploits sacred and nature according to his selfish desires. The sacred is now considered useful for certain purposes and for that reason acknowledged and involved in ceremonies and customary practices. "Nature, on the other hand, was more tangibly useful. With investment, it paid off considerable returns. Humans were also at times looked upon as resources and assets" (Selvamony 5). The anthropocentric attitude of the human beings is cause of this Oikos. "In other words, this Oikos was anarchic in spirit but economic in practice. It helped accumulate knowledge about the sacred, nature, and man and also in working out strategies to exploit these to human advantage" (Selvamony 5).

This interruption of the external sources to the Oikos of the Kaani primal people group has brought a transition in the Oikos of the Kaani people from an integrative to an anarchic one.

The present Kaani settlement is no longer an integrative one. It has transformed into an anarchic one with the Government and NGOs building small one room houses for them, providing them with electricity, free televisions and free educational facilities and giving them employment in rubber estates. It is such an unhappy scene to see the new generation forgetting the songs so native to them, the tradition of sitting under the blanket of stars on a moon-lit dark sky every single night, listening to the ancient stories passed on to them by the senior most person in their Kaanikudi, is lost to evenings where men and women come home tired after a long day's work in some estates of the mainstream people and sleeping with their televisions on.

In the past, Kaani people were living in Integrative Oikos. They have lost touch with the knowledge of medicinal plants, which at present are so valuable to the herbal or Siddha doctors. The rich culture of Kaani people, where they had strong inter-personal relationships and respect for elders are all fading away to power, technology and selfishness.

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