

Farewell Ritual and Transmigrating Souls: Secondary Funeral of the Attappadi Kurumbas

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KEYWORDS Death Ceremony. Funeral Car. Communion of the Soul. Ossuary

ABSTRACT This article examines the ritual importance of the secondary funeral of the Kurumbas and places it in the context of tribal religion and social relations. Among a chain of ceremonies that mark a tribal funeral, secondary funeral is the most elaborate and ritually the most complex. Tribal people all over the world practice secondary funerals but in Kerala only two tribes, namely, Kurumbas and the Mudugas of Attappadi, practice it. As the most primitive tribal groups now living in Kerala, the cultural practices of these tribes are exceptionally relevant to the study of archaic societies. The ritual is an elaborate process and is the formal ceremony by which the souls of the dead of a fixed period are cheerfully sent to the world of the spirits with the accompaniment of song, music and blood sacrifice. It also involves the retrieval and reburial of the relics of the dead. Spirit worship and ancestor worship are the basic elements of the religion of the Attappadi tribes. Rituals like secondary funeral have diametrically opposite roles in a tribal society – while helping to maintain tribal unity and solidarity, it exhaust the surplus necessary for an economic growth. However, the advancing process of acculturation is bringing about a crisis in religious practices based on ancestor-cult and is a pointer to the slow but steady transformation.