

Symbolism and Social Structure in Kota Ritual

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This article explores interrelations among Kota rituals and ceremonies as expressed in key physical and musical elements, processes, actors, and animals. I use the term "ceremony" to refer to large-scale, often multiday affairs composed of distinct units that the Kotas term *cātrm* (from Skt. *śāstra*), here meaning "rituals." The principal ceremonies are the following:

1. *devr*, literally "god," here "the god ceremony," the annual festival in honor of the Kota gods
2. *pactāv*, literally "green funeral," a ceremony following shortly after someone dies. It culminates in the cremation of the corpse; and
3. *varldāv*, literally "dry funeral," the secondary mortuary ceremony performed at the end of one or more years, in honor of all those who have died recently.

(The term *tāv/dāv* in the names of both mortuary ceremonies means "corpse," "death," and "funerary ceremony," depending on context.)

The importance of these three ceremonies is indicated by their length and complexity and by the detailed musical pieces that are often integral and specific to particular rituals. Kotas may sing and play on soft-sounding bamboo aerophones for their own enjoyment at home; and for visitors and at occasions outside the village they may also dance and play outdoor instruments such as the drums and the *ko!* (a type of shawm). However, Kotas play their core repertoire on their outdoor instruments only in connection with these three ceremonies. Other life-cycle rituals such as those for birth, coming of age, child naming, and marriage have no associated music.

The three ceremonies also index the two dominant moral realms in Kota society: divinity and death. Divinity is associated with cooperation, equality, and unity of the community, as well as the power of the gods to act on Kotas' behalf provided they behave righteously. Death is a form of pollution that makes worship inappropriate. Mortuary ceremonies focus on the individuality of the deceased and mark the memory of that individual. The dry funeral helps the spirits reach the land of the dead, and brings the village (one of seven) back to a state of purity fit for celebration of the god ceremony. The land of the dead (*nār*) is a realm of an alternative kind of power, ambiguously related to the divine.

Similar ritual elements in different ritual contexts often articulate cultural relationships between those contexts – relations of similarity and difference, form and function, and time and space. Kota explanations of rituals may vary by village and over time. Some of their forms are found elsewhere in South Asia, and with alternative interpretations.

Grain

For Kotas, millet references ancient tribal life, for (as many of them point out) millet, not rice, was

the traditional staple on the Nilgiris. Millet, particularly the *vatm* (bot. *Panicum miliare*) species – like rice on the nearby plains – is synecdochical for food in general; thus an analysis of millet consumption is an analysis of ritual eating per se.

Kotas ritually *feed* a person a minute quantity of boiled, husked millet (*tāymayk*) at two prominent moments in the life cycle – the moment of death and the moment a baby is given a name. The identity of the ritual substratum in both contexts highlights the sociocultural function accomplished at both moments of transition – the first, the departure from the social world (of the living) and the second, the creation of a social identity for what was merely a biological being, still culturally inchoate. The inscription of identity at death operates at a number of levels of individuation. Here the ritual does not concern a remembrance of the deceased per se (as a song might, for instance), but rather prepares the deceased for entry into the ancestral world, being both a reference to and a foreshadowing of entrance into ancestral collective memory. The action also draws a connection, by analogy, between birth and death.

A slightly larger quantity of cooked millet is included “for ritual’s sake” (*cātrtk*) in culturally significant meals. Sharing meals from the same plate is particularly important in this society, as it signifies the strength of interpersonal bonds. Conjugal unity and reproduction are gastronomically coded in the wedding: the bride and bridegroom eat from the same plate, leaving remnants for children to eat. Intervillage unity is cemented on the “dance day” of the dry funeral, when men and women from the seven villages pair off as symbolically married couples to eat from the same leaf, each person taking a small quantity of millet along with a more generous helping of rice.

Intravillage solidarity is performed through the act of eating on the night of *pul pabm*, a festival centered on the playing of tipcat and other ritualized games (Emeneau, 1937–1938; Hockings, 2012, 773–774). Each villager shares food from one plate. The millet, with stew, is kept on one communal plate in each house and a small quantity from it is eaten by each visitor. Then, depending on familial closeness, an extra amount of food will be eaten from a few communal plates by whomever happen to be in the house then.

The god ceremony is the only context during which millet (and no other grain) must be eaten. This is in keeping with other ritual practices during the god ceremony that refer back to an idealized tribal past: the formal collection of forest materials for the symbolic rethatching of the temples (which are now made of cement), the use of melodies whose stories index the power of the gods (whose effectiveness is less visible today), and dancing beside the temples in recollection of a time when gods and humans were together. The sheer quantity of millet consumed and its exclusivity at the god ceremony are grounds to consider boiled, husked millet as a food primarily associated with the divine (though little of it is grown today). The ritual leader (*mundkānōn*) of Porgar village explained in detail how millets are prepared for consumption by the ritual specialists and the gods. This involves matters of ritual purity, roles for particular exogamous divisions, and mixtures of millets.

What foodstuff is explicitly funerary? On the first day of the dry funeral, millet that has not yet been husked or cooked is poured onto a yard attached to each of the three main housing clusters (*kērs*), which correspond to exogamous clans in the village. The yard of packed mud in front of each house is used to dry beans, grain, and spices, as well as for funerary and other rituals. Almost the entire village participates in a funeral, the roles determined in part by kinship and in part by personal closeness to the deceased. The millet used on the first day of the dry funeral, called *koṭanm*, is considered to be the corpse (*tāv*) of the deceased. The meaning is created through the ritual of

pouring and by the sound of a special “millet pouring tune.” The moment the musicians start to play, female mourners begin to cry: the music often begins before the actual millet pouring, and the women, if so moved, will begin crying wherever they are in the village. Each villager, according to rank, touches the millet to his or her head. In Kolmel this tune has a particular significance, because it is related melodically to the Venus (*vely mīn*) tune, one of the longest and most emotive melodies, which is intended to effect the final send-off of the departing soul to the land of the dead (when Venus is sighted in the sky). The Kota musician S. Raman, with whom I worked regularly throughout my first decade of fieldwork, said that the emotiveness of this tune makes a version of it appropriate for the *koṭanm* ritual. As millet is poured the music evokes sorrow; it recalls the green funeral and creates the idea that what is lying on the ground is not a heap of grain but the deceased, who had lain on a bier right there some months before. The two tunes also index moments of spatiotemporal transformation: the *vely mīn* tune, the transformation of the deceased into a being in the other world; and the *koṭanm* tune, the transformation of the wandering soul (still present at the cremation ground) into a concrete, edible form.

After this ritual, the millet is redistributed to each of the households, where the women must dry-roast a portion of it (causing it to pop) for later consumption at the funeral ground (some of it is also burned with bone relics of the corpse). This puffed millet (and other grains as well: *pacayk*) is the quintessential funereal food, in the same way that boiled millet with salt stew is god-ceremonial food. A small amount of puffed grain is placed under the biers of the deceased in a green funeral. In the dry funeral large amounts of puffed grain are produced (some put under the dry funeral “bier”) and distributed for everyone to eat.

The preparations of grain during the dry funeral further support the equation of human beings with millet. During the green funeral the corpse is still wet, or “fresh” (the implication of the word *pac* in a green funeral, *pactāv*); after the cremation only some bone fragments remain. The dry funeral (*varldāv*, lit. “dry death” or “dry corpse”) culminates in the cremation of a “dry corpse,” in the form of bone relics. When the corpse is reconstituted as millet at the start of the dry funeral it is fresh, wet, unprepared millet. The process of transforming the millet into puffed millet is like the transformation of the corpse from its fresh, wet corporeal form into dry bones. Whereas participants will snack on the puffed millet, incorporating the transformed substance into their own bodies, the actual bones are burned and the souls of the dead (*āyv*, “spirit” or “vapor”) make their transition to the land of the dead.

In the green funeral, Kotas use *kīr*, a type of amaranth (bot. *Amaranthus caudatus* or *Amaranthus hypochondriacus*) once extensively grown. Unlike *vātm*, which is used in multiple ritual contexts, its preparation inflecting its meaning, *kīr* is used ritually only in the dry and green funerals, where it is dry roasted and puffed. A small quantity of *kīr* must be kept in each house in the event that a death may occur. During the green funeral women line up, and to the accompaniment of a special tune carry small baskets of this grain on their heads and place them under the bier. Other foodstuffs, including millet, barley, and jaggery, are put under the bier in a less formal manner. *Kīr* and rice are distinguished from other grains in today’s funerals because they are part of funerary prestations and encode kinship relations between the grain givers and the immediate family of the deceased.

Boiled, husked millet and rice are offered to the gods during the god ceremony and the dry funeral. The ritual in both is called *eṛ vecd* (“placing of *eṛ*” [probably derived from Skt. *idā*, “offering”; Emeneau, fieldnotes]). The two rituals are distinct, of course, in terms of time and place. The tunes integral to the rituals, in Kolmel, both link the two rituals together and separate them: the two melodies are substantially the same, thus drawing attention to the fact that both rituals fulfill the

same function; but the melodies differ slightly, as they must by definition, because one is a god tune and the other a funeral tune.

The fact that multiple meanings are attached to grain in Kota society is not unique in South Asia. The methods of grain preparation, manners of eating, and instrumental melodies all inflect and create the meanings of grain in each ritual context.

Dung and Grass

At the green funeral the ritual leader is a child or young person known as the “child who grasps the fire” (*tic pac mog*). At the beginning of the ceremony he or she uses a ball of dung to gently touch areas in the house where the corpse had lain. Sticking out of the ball is an odd number of blades of grass. The dung of a cow or buffalo and certain kinds of grass play a purificatory role in many Hindu rituals, including funerals. In Brahmanical ceremonies especially, a grass called *darbha* (or *kuśa*, bot. *Poa cynosuroides* or *Desmostachya bipinnata*, a grass with long, pointed stalks) is placed under the corpse. M. Moffatt has noted that in South India the grass is in various contexts a seat for the gods, a representation of the gods, a vehicle for temporal power and wisdom, and a sign for cosmic fertility (1968, 37).

Among Kotas the grass stuck in cowdung is found in three contexts: the funeral, the naming of a child, and the offering of salt water to cattle (especially cows). A need for “ritual purity” is too general to account for these contexts. Dung might provide protection against malevolent spirits attracted to funerals and child naming. The feeding of salt to cows is indirectly an offering to the gods. That ceremony is probably connected to fertility, timed as it is one week before the annual “rain ceremony” (*may cātrm*; Wolf, 1997). Kotas would wish to protect the cattle from harm – particularly as harm to cattle would metonymically represent dysfunction in Kota society as a whole.

The appearance of a common element in different contexts would, if nothing else, draw a set of potential relationships among those contexts. Perhaps the dung-and-grass combination draws parallels between life, death, and the primordial link between Kotas and their gods. The three rituals also index moments of sociocultural transformation: becoming a Kota person (through the rite of naming); leaving the world of the living; and the emergence of the Kota people in the Nilgiris (i.e. through reverence for the cow, and by extension, the primordial black cow that originally led the Kotas to the Nilgiris: see further discussion below). Kotas did not speculate on the significance of these elements in any detail. Notes of the anthropologist D.G. Mandelbaum (Apr 6, 1938) (Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley) document the comments of one of his more reliable informants, Kaka Kamatn of Kolmel. The context is a description of the measuring of rice for the feast at the end of the *varldāv*:

Then I go to the heap of rice, measure it with a bamboo measure and estimate if it will be enough. Beside the pile I place a ball of dung with three grasses. I do that because some man from my family must do it. Even on ordinary day[s] when we measure a pile of grain, the ball of dung and three grasses must be put on the heap first. The reason for this is *māmūl* [tradition], but according to my idea the heap will grow large if the dung ball is put atop of it. And yes, perhaps it is also to ward off the evil eye. This is also done when grains are measured at sowing or at harvesting – at any time when a heap is measured.

Toe tying

A ritual of tying the big toes together, of cutting the thread, and of cleaning the hands and feet of the corpse is conducted during funerals, in some instances before and in some instances after the mourning widower or widow is made to remove his or her jewelry. Sometimes it occurs in a special “corpse-keeping place” (*tāv vecd eṛm*) though not always.

M. Moffatt found that the ritual tying of limbs “is almost universal in the South,” though rarely explained. In the vedic funeral, the limbs were evidently tied together to prevent death from returning to the house (Dumont & Pocock, 1959, 17; see Moffatt, 1968, 43). Among the Mala Ulladan, a Kerala tribal community, the toes and thumbs are tied, a lamp is lit, and incense burned “for the fear that a tramp spirit may enter the body and the corpse may spring to life” (Nandi *et al.*, 1971, 88). For Nilgiri funerals, W.H.R. Rivers and A.R. Walker make no mention of a toe-tying ritual in the Toda funeral, but in one that I attended the two big toes of the deceased (a female) were tied together with a black thread. Badagas also follow this practice, to ensure that the genitalia of the dead are not exposed during the procession. Among the Irulas, as among the Kotas, the eldest son of the deceased ties the big toes together. In A. Good’s account of a Tamil funeral, the barber (not the son of the deceased) binds the limbs of the corpse with strips from a new, white waistcloth called a *vēṣṭi* (1991, 133).

Among the Kotas, the toe tying and thread cutting occur in conjunction with washing the fingers and toes, and passing a knife under the nails of each digit. Although the order and direction of this cleaning is strictly specified, mistakes are sometimes made, seemingly of little real consequence. S. Raman commented that this action “probably means we have made [the corpse] clean.” D.G. Mandelbaum’s informant Veln indicated that the entire complex (water and knife touching, thread tying and cutting) was a ritualized relic of a practice of thorough washing that would have once occurred at that juncture; but as the corpse may have been around for several days, it would have stunk so no one would want to wash it.

A number of scholars have analyzed the place of “binding” in Tamil culture (e.g. David, 1980; Ram, 1991, 87). One might think of the binding as itself a set-up for a symbolic (and physical) release; indeed, the cutting of the thread seems to be the point in at least one case. Saln, a *mundkānōn* in Kurgoj village in 1990, described the *tic pac mog* as cutting the thread holding together the toes while saying “with this let the sins and merits of the deceased reach the world of the gods.” This interpretation may have been transferred to this ritual after the cow sacrifice (see below) – for which a similar interpretation was offered – had been abandoned many decades earlier.

The informant V. Sulli explained to D.G. Mandelbaum that not one but seven threads were taken from the cloak (*varār*) of the deceased to tie the toes together, each thread being tied by a representative from one of the seven villages. V. Sulli saw this ritual as equivalent to giving a cloak to the deceased, which was, in turn, equivalent to giving a wife to the deceased. The toes themselves were equated in this ritual with the married couple; the right toe representing the husband, and the left, the wife. D. Mandelbaum evidently questioned V. Sulli as to the degree that these interpretations were shared; V. Sulli insisted that all this was common knowledge.

It is curious that surrogate marriages would have been included in the funerals of everyone; it would seem more likely that such a ritual would occur only in the case of a person who was unmarried; but this practice seems to be confined to the Nilgiris, for elsewhere in India funerals for those who were unmarried are simply not so elaborate as for those who were married. There is also general concern in India over the lingering attachments of young people who die before marriage,

without offspring, or otherwise before their time. A focus on relationships between affines (especially in the case of a man) highlights not only the importance of cross-cousin marriage ideology in the south (Dumont, 1983, 93–104; Moffatt, 1968, 75), but also the thematic connection between death and the regeneration of life (Parry, 1982, 81ff.). We have now encountered this theme in the feeding of millet, the purification with cowdung and grass, and the affinal symbolism of toe tying.

The affinal bond also signifies solidarity among all seven Kota villages. The symbolic activities at green and dry funerals tend generally to strengthen these intervillage bonds; while god ceremonies tend to promote solidarity within a village. The meaning of this version of the ritual, in which representatives of the seven villages participate, sets up an important pattern of redundancy when considered in conjunction with two rituals during the dry funeral: the *jādykupāc* (“community-costume”) in which representatives from each village must dress up in a colorful dancing costume and dance a few ritual dances; and the *jādykū* (“community-cooked-grain”), in which unmarried male and female representatives from each village must line up in putative husband-and-wife pairs and eat food from the same leaf.

In sum, Kota explanations for the toe-tying ritual cluster around three themes:

1. the severing of the knot in effect detaches the worldly deeds from the doer and allows the soul to travel unencumbered to the other world;
2. the tying and severing are parts of a larger ritual of purification; and
3. the ritual strengthens affinal ties and cements intervillage solidarity.

Ritual Specialists

The function, training, and negotiation of who may perform as a ritual specialist in the funeral allows us to discuss some of the generative bases for differences between god ceremonies and funerals.

The one who conducts Kota funeral rituals, the *tic pac mog*, is structurally analogous to the Hindu “chief mourner,” and often the son of the deceased. The roles of ritual officiant (often a barber) and chief mourner (eldest son) are separated among Hindus, whereas among the Kotas and other tribes who serve as their own ritual specialists these roles are not separate. The *tic pac mog* is the *catrngārṇ*, literally the “ritualist” for the funeral, just as the *mundkānōn* is the ritualist for the god ceremonies. Although, unlike the chief mourner in Hindu funerals, the *tic pac mog* is not shaved at the end of the funeral, he or she performs the analogous purifying act of rubbing his/her head with clarified butter. To emphasize the contrast, it is the “purified” boy from within the community, not an “impure” barber from another community, who is considered of primary importance in this ritual.

They choose a separate person as funerary ritualist because the *mundkānōn* and *tērkārn* would become defiled from contact with the corpse or from entering the cremation ground. The *tic pac mog* is *conceptually* a child, even if the person in that role is actually older. Children are seen to be inherently clean, ritually pure, and morally virtuous.

Usually the *tic pac mog* will be the classificatory son or daughter of the dead because this person is chosen from the same exogamous division and is usually younger. Several of my consultants said the individual should be “lucky” (*rāci*). S. Raman stated that the *tic pac mog* should not have been

born on the same day of the week as the deceased; V. Sulli stated just the opposite. Either way, kinship and days of birth set up possible relations of both equivalence and difference between the *tic pac mog* and the deceased. Social and cultural reproduction is almost literal: in order for the deceased to travel to the other world safely, a close (but not too close) equivalent of the deceased him- or herself must conduct the rituals. It is as if a version of the deceased person him or herself creates the conditions for the renewal of social life following the incidence of a death.

Kotas accord respect to the *tic pac mog* as follows:

1. formal ordering: after the cremation, all sit in the veranda of the deceased's house and await the *tic pac mog's* return, as he or she should be the first to enter. Leaving the right shoulder bare in a formal ritual fashion the *tic pac mog* utters the name of god and enters the house, auspicious right foot first. Others may enter only after they see a lamp burning in their own houses – a token of god's presence there;
2. residence in the death house: in Menar village (and perhaps elsewhere) it was the rule in the early 1990s that the *tic pac mog* alone must sleep in the house of the bereaved. As such he or she is pure yet contaminated by death, both a villager and a close equivalent of the deceased; and
3. precedence in communal eating: the others who have helped clean the cremation ground must finish the food from the *tic pac mog's* plate.

These three kinds of ritual separation are evident in practices involving the *mundkānōn* and *tērkārṇ* at the god ceremony and other contexts of worship that these ritualists lead. The practice of sleeping in the bereaved's house is paralleled in the god ceremony, where the ritual specialists for the gods must sleep under a separate canopy. Separate and precedent dining are also evident in a number of rituals, the most important of which occur during the height of the god ceremony.

In former times, according to S. Raman, the *mundkānōn* in Kolmel village was required to touch his forehead to the chest of the corpse at a place called the *nelāgōṛ*, at the edge of the village where the bier is set down during the funerary procession and several other rituals are performed. The *tērkārṇ* was not required to bow before the corpse in this place, but could do so in the *kavāl* – the yard in front of the house where the bier was first constructed. Neither ritualist was allowed to accompany the funeral procession beyond the *nelāgōṛ*. The implication is that some quality of the *nelāgōṛ* and/or the corpse once it had reached this stage in the ritual proceedings, *allowed for* as well as required the *mundkānōn's* signs of respect. This is important because both *mundkānōn* and *tērkārṇ* are required to uphold rigorous standards of purity and conduct. They must, for example, walk only in designated parts of the village, and these parts change according to ritual conditions in the village.

It is not simply that the pollution of death is abominable to the gods. Conceptions of death and divinity are in some ways intertwined, especially with regard to the status of the ancestors as guides and embodiments of righteous living. It is therefore interesting that in recent times the role of the *mundkānōn* has been purged of what are today considered compromising associations with death: the *mundkānōn* in Kolmel is not now supposed to bow before the corpse. This change in the priestly role was introduced by V. Kamatn (d. 1991) after he was chosen to become *mundkānōn*: an interesting move, because it suggests that "death pollution" became at that time an overriding concern for a priest. V. Kamatn also supported a faction in the village that emerged in the 1930s who were staunchly opposed to holding the dry funeral. When he died, the bones remaining after

his cremation were treated in a Hindu manner: floated in a stream metaphorically equated with the Ganges. That is, he supported a “soul reaches god” eschatology as opposed to a “soul goes to the land of the dead” one. If at all we are to interpret a modern Hindu set of beliefs and practices concerning death which is in some way different from those of premodern Kotas, it could be the strict compartmentalization of the “pollution” side of death from the whole notion of transmigration or reaching the divine.

What can be learned from earlier accounts concerning the role of the priests? Veln’s statements are not entirely consistent. In one account he indicates that the *mundkānōn* (who will on that day perform his ordinary morning prayers) must not enter the bereaved house but goes directly to the edge of the cremation site. In another account Veln indicates that the *mundkānōn* does *not* go directly to the cremation spot (*dūv*) but to the corpse-keeping place, where his presence as well as that of the *tērkārṇ* is required. In 1937 in Kolmel, the *mundkānōn* and *tērkārṇ* did not return to the village until the final rituals of circling with oxen and spreading millet were completed.

According to Veln’s descriptions of funerals in Kurgoj, the adult ritual specialists used to bow before the corpse while it was still in the house. His two descriptions conflicted, however. In the first, which was prescriptive, the *mundkānōn* and *tērkārṇ* were required to bow before the corpse; afterward, the *koyltāḷ* (lit. “stick holder” and at one time the ritualist in charge of sacrificing a cow or buffalo), the *gotgārṇ* (headman), and the rest of the men there were to do so. But in the second account, describing a particular funeral, only the latter two ritual specialists bowed before the corpse.

The roles of religious practitioners have changed significantly. The *koyltāḷ* survives as a ritual office only in the village of Menar (at least as of the early 2000s). Now the *mundkānōn* and *tērkārṇ* play extremely limited roles in funerals. In Kolmel they may not enter the death house at all, and there are some who will argue that it is inappropriate for these ritualists to bow to the corpse at any time.

Cows and Buffaloes

Kota ritual and song serve to project species classifications onto ethnic classifications. Kotas broadly identify themselves closely with the cow, and the Todas, with the buffalo. The use of clarified butter, particularly from the buffalo, in many rituals is an artifact of close Kota-Toda relations, because Toda men were its traditional purveyors. Since Kurgoj is the village in which Kota relationships with the Todas have been the most enduring in recent years, and where some Kotas claim consanguineal kin ties with Toda families, it is not surprising that practices associated with the Todas, such as the use of clarified butter, are evident to a greater extent there than in other villages.

The cow is not only a marker of distinction from the Todas but also is associated with Kota notions of divinity and origination. In the stories Kotas tell of village origins, for example, a divine black cow led them through the Nilgiris, indicating with its leg the sites upon which villages should be founded; thus the physical location of the villages is connected closely with the divinity of the cow. Spatial practice in sacrifice also served to articulate the centrality of the cow. Quite literally the cow was sacrificed centrally, near the corpse at the corpse-keeping place. The place where the buffalo was sacrificed was not particularly important, and was generally a short distance away.

Practices of people’s eating also differentiated the cow from the buffalo. Sacrificial cows’ flesh was not consumed at the funeral (containing, so it seems, the “sins” of the deceased, *pāpm*), whereas

sacrificial buffalo meat was. Both meats could and can be consumed on ordinary occasions by ordinary Kotas. According to S. Raman in 1991–1992 the differentiation was articulated by gastronomic practices of the *mundkānōns*. They could drink the milk of the cow but not the buffalo, and eat the meat of the buffalo but not the cow.

Cows and buffaloes were used sacrificially in funerals and played roles in theories about the afterlife. The identity between Kotas and cows was symbolically construed as the stronger. According to Kaka Kamatn sacrificed cows were believed to travel alongside the deceased to *amavnār* (the “motherland” or land of the dead), while the buffaloes would follow behind or even lead the way.

The reasons for sacrifice and the manner in which they were accomplished are also different. The cow is made to go to *amavnār* only if the funeral participants place the requisite cloths on its belly and bow down (Mandelbaum notes, Aug 2, 1938); no such cloths were necessary for the sacrifice of a buffalo. Buffaloes were believed to be necessary in the other world as a source of wealth – the more buffaloes, the wealthier the individual. Cows were not valued for their numbers but for their symbolic value, so one was enough.

The special name for the cow sacrificed at a funeral is *koṭgīt av*. According to Veln, this name derived from the special sickle-shaped bell (*koṭkaty maṇy*) that was placed around the neck of the sacrificial cow. There was only one such bell in the village, believed to be very old, and it was kept in the house of the *gotgārṇ*. V. Sulli’s interpretation was “topknot-tied cow” (*koṭ* “tuft,” *kaṭ* “that which is tied”), because the deceased ties the cow in his hair and thus takes it along to the motherland. This interpretation combines the idea of the divinity of the cow with the idea that the *mundkānōn* keeps the deity tied in his hair during the god ceremony. No other descriptions of the journey to the motherland indicate the cow is transported in this way – it always walks alongside the deceased.

The stated purpose of the cow sacrifice was to remove the sins of the dead. It was also believed that the cow would accompany the dead to the other world; since cows were the primary animal with which the Kotas identified themselves, it was necessary in this world as in the other to have them around. Kota ideas about their relationship with the cow have changed over the years. The significance and form of the cow as a religious symbol in Kota culture in some ways parallel and in some ways reverse its significance in Hindu society. For example, in modern high-caste Hindu society beef eating is scorned because the cow is revered. Until the Kotas began to accept this ideology, the cow was sacrificed *because* it was revered. Later (over the past half-century) they have attempted to reconcile their “cow” with the Hindu “cow” as part of a broader effort at assimilation.

Despite the principle of male-female complementarity in divine ritual offices, men often stand in a formal sense for the totality of Kota society. The cow’s centrality to the Kota people in general perhaps explained the fact that men would formally mourn over the sacrificed cow during the funeral. The buffalo, on the other hand, was connected with subsistence, with daily life, and represented both symbolically and actually a form of relationship with the Toda tribe. Perhaps the domestic association made the buffalo the focus of mourning for Kota women.

Why were buffaloes sacrificed? Although they are a sign of wealth and are believed to accompany the dead to the other world, many Kotas thought of the sacrifice primarily as an important source of food for the funeral. The buffalo sacrifice provided the opportunity for a contest among the men, who would wrestle the animal to the ground before killing it with a blow to the head (this practice

persists among Todas at their funerals). The excitement, athleticism, and expressions of masculinity associated with this ritual (and the responses of women who might have been witnessing it) contributed to the funeral's complex "emotional texture" (Wolf 2001). In addition to serving practical and expressive functions, the buffaloes became media for the enactment of kinship relations through the process of exchange. Buffaloes were like cloth in this regard.

One anomaly in the ritual differentiation of cow from buffalo is that music played no part in it. Music was used rather to attract buffaloes and cows generically. I offer no explanation for this, save for the idea that identity and difference in ritual practice operate at multiple levels, and there may be no systematic reason why one set of practices (food taboos, for example) operates at one level of generality while others (music) operate at another.

Ritual and Social Structure

It is scarcely surprising that Kota relationships with one another and with outsiders are encoded in ritual. Their ritual may also effect changes in or control social relationships. Here I will document the ways in which relationships are encoded in ritual and consider how these formal expressions change, as well as the implications of these changes for Kotas' own views about culture change and identity. As they represent themselves to others and to themselves, Kotas participate in an ongoing dialectic construction of "tribalness" that not only leaves ritual traces but also sometimes grows out of ritual concerns.

All the rituals under discussion involve solidarity in T. Parsons's sense of a *systematic* orientation toward supporting the integrity of the collectivity, and in particular, the types which manifest and regulate "the common moral sentiments or need-dispositions of the members of the collectivity" (1951, 96–98, 395–396). Each type listed below draws on É. Durkheim's (1947) "mechanical" versus "organic" distinction in simplified form – cohesiveness through sameness and cohesiveness through difference/complementarity:

1. the sharing of responsibility in a ritual;
2. the sharing of substances (food, tobacco, and so forth);
3. representation of participants in a ritual, each performing the same task; and
4. performative utterances and discourses of unity

The Sharing of Responsibility in a Ritual

This microcosmic form of "organic solidarity" involves division of ritual labor, usually along the lines of gender, family, clan, and village. The *mundkânōn* and *tērkārṇ* are each, for example, drawn from particular families (*kuty*) in a village. One family also provides the traditional "grain-mixers" (*kūmurcōr*), that is, those in charge of offering the grain to the gods and redistributing communal grain to the village during the god ceremony. The ritual sacrificers of cows used to be drawn from a particular family too. In the enactment of their institutionalized roles representatives from these families create a temporary "organic" unity by fulfilling complementary ritual functions.

A trivial musical example of this form of organic solidarity is the division of musical responsibility in an instrumental ensemble – trivial, because each member does not stand for a wider cultural category as he does in the above example. Slightly more consequential is the division of labor in which those who can play music are expected to do so, while others must fulfill other responsibilities according to their age, clan membership, gender, or office. There are no examples,

to my knowledge, of members of one exogamous division living in a row of houses (*kēr*) being obliged to provide musicians in the way that particular *kērs* provide other sorts of ritualists. This is a sense in which musicianship differs from other ritual specializations.

Unlike dividing up a corpus of functionally differentiated tasks or rituals, sharing the responsibility of hosting guests may be construed as a form of “mechanical” solidarity because all participants share the same intentions and perform the same task. Similar to this is the practice in which equal shares of rice are collected from each household and redistributed according to the number of people residing in each house. The women of the houses then cook the reapportioned rice.

The Sharing of Substances (H2)

The sharing of substances is ritualized in several ways:

- (a) The process of sharing from one plate as symbolic of “marriage.” With this emphasis on gender and clan complementarity, differences merge to create a larger whole (*organic*).
- (b) The process of sharing from one plate as a ritual and an everyday practice, by Kotas *because* they are Kota or because they belong to one family (*mechanical*).
- (c) The division of foodstuffs into equal portions (such as each organ of the sacrificial buffalo), signifying equality through the similarity of participation (*mechanical*).

Representation of Participants in a Ritual

The whole is represented by key figures from each village, clan, family, or household. Solidarity here is “mechanical” in the sense that all fulfill similar roles and “organic” in the sense that it is structural *difference* that brings the participants together to create a whole. Examples include the rain ceremony in Kolmel, where two *mundkānōns* (each associated with different clans and gods) jointly place a monetary offering under a bush associated with divinity; and the god ceremony in Ticgar, where seven men each put one finger under a boulder and lift it (thus confirming god’s presence and power). A musical example of this form of solidarity occurs at the beginning of the god ceremony in Porgar, when players of the double-reed *ko!* from different *kērs* must play simultaneously.

Another example of this type of musical solidarity is the singing of god songs, where women sing while dancing together in a circle and clapping their hands. The “representativeness” of the participants is not conscious, as in the other examples, but implicit. The natal villages of women living in any one village are likely to include all or most of the other villages; thus the gathering of women for collective rituals instantiates the collectivity of all the villages.

Performative utterances and discourses of unity (H2)

Social solidarity of a mechanical type is created in god ceremonies in part through “performative utterances” (Austin, 1989, 235). While standing before a temple or before making an offering, for instance, the *mundkānōns* will ask, “Have we all joined?” to which those present will reply “We’ve joined!”

Another solidarity-related discursive practice is formal attendance taking at the god ceremony. Here the elders call out the names of all the men in the village to ensure that all are physically gathered together to sleep under the canopy in the center of the village.

Among women, recently composed god songs textualize actions of worship: “we joyfully gaze at you,” “with turmeric water we dance,” “we worship you by singing,” “with affection we celebrate.” Some of these performatives truly exist only in textual form, such as the phrase “with turmeric water we dance” – for worship of the Hindu goddess Māriammaṅ involves turmeric water and Kota women may indeed use it at times, but in the context of the song, dancing with turmeric water is evoked verbally rather than being physically performed.

Solidarity in God Ceremonies and Funerals

The social construction of “divinity” among the Kotas depends to a greater extent on forms of mechanical solidarity than on forms of organic solidarity (using Durkheim’s terms); organic solidarity appears to be more prevalent in funerals. Perhaps the most fundamental idea behind the god ceremony is that the Kotas are unified – this is a unity of sameness, not one of opposites. It is also a unity that defies time while simultaneously trying to represent it. It attempts to deny time in that it argues the Kota people are and always have been “as one.” The efficacy of the divine depends on all being “of one mind.”

Although principles of affinal complementarity, for example, are stressed in the division of labor to enact the god ceremony, principles that ordinarily articulate these differences are erased. To take two examples: all the men sleep together in one shelter, not in houses of their respective *kērs*. And although the men are separated from the women (who do sleep in their houses), the two sexes are forbidden any sexual contact.

Funerals are more fundamentally based on the idea that social bonds are being broken and re-formed. Funerals are endings and beginnings; while reproduction and rebirth are ideas far more central than social similarity. The theme of *individuation* in the funeral predicates that of complementarity. The sequence of prestations at a funeral depends not on static responsibilities based on clan membership in a village, but rather on the nature of the relationship to the deceased. The deceased is not symbolically construed as *like* everyone else (as are participants in the god ceremony) in every respect, but as having variable degrees and kinds of social status. The following are a few of the ways in which such differentiation is marked in the funeral:

- funerals for aged people are more elaborate than those for young people – “elaborateness” here measured by the presence of music and dance and the number of people attending;
- biers and catafalques are constructed differently for wealthy people, poor people, infants, children, and ritual specialists;
- items burned along with the deceased reflect his/her habits, hobbies, tastes, ritual status, and gender.

Funerals code not only the participants’ statuses but also their relationships with the deceased. Some relationships appear in the very names of ritual items, such as the *mālmunḍ* (waistcloth), named after the male ceremonial friend, *māl*, and the *naṅṅ nūl*, “brothers-in-law” thread, which is used to tie the toes of the deceased together. Other relationships are manifest in the order and manner of mourning over the corpse, observation of mourning restrictions (including whether music should be performed), and the processional order. Ceremonially important male roles (playing music, carrying the bier), for example, precede those of the women (carrying objects).

The idea of the married couple as a functional unit appears in both god ceremonies and funerals.

For example, in order for men to become the ritual specialists (*tērkārṇ* and *mundkānōṇ*) they must be married and their first wives must be alive. These first wives serve as ritual leaders for the women.

In the funeral the functional unity of the married couple (one of whom is the deceased) extends to both sides of the family. A recurring theme in the way responsibilities for the death of a man or a woman are divided up is on one hand, the affirmation of natal ties for the woman, and on the other, the reckoning of kinship based on the married couple as a unit. The following practices illustrate multiple ways in which these principles operate:

- in the ritual restoration of jewelry, for a widow, male relatives (*naṇṭṇs*) formally assist her in putting on the jewels, and for a widower, his wife's brothers (*ay!bāvngū!*) do. Whether the husband or the wife dies, the same people perform this ritual. In this sense, the marital unit is the operative base.
- the gifts of cows and buffaloes, according to S. Raman's account, are reciprocal affinal gifts.
- according to V. Sulli and Velu only the buffalo is given as a reciprocal affinal gift. The cow is provided by the natal line (by the estate of the deceased if a man dies, by the male relatives of a deceased woman). With the gift of a cow, according to this practice, it appears irrelevant whether or not the deceased was married. The gift of a cow thus draws upon the identity of the deceased in terms of consanguinity, rather than affinity.
- the *tic pac mog* is supposed to be served food by the *aṇtamīc* of the deceased (wife of a deceased man's younger brother). The relationship of *aṇtamīc* would ensure that the food server would remain in the classificatory relationship of "wife" to the deceased.

A note on the societal level of solidarity expressed in funerals (intervillage) and god ceremonies (intravillage) is in order here. God ceremonies are concerned with *intravillage* solidarity, not only for reasons of local sociality: since god ceremonies of each village are scheduled almost simultaneously, it is nearly impossible to attend one ceremony without missing another. It is a symbolic fact that green and dry funerals involve relationships among villages; but it is also a consequence of the fact that family ties extend throughout the entire tribe. When a Kota dies his or her relatives from every village have an obligation to participate in both green and dry funerals, by proxy if not in person. Dates of dry funerals in the villages are therefore staggered.

Intervillage solidarity in green and dry funerals is manifest primarily in the form of "representation of participants" (type 3 above). In principal examples of this form, representatives of the seven villages participate in:

1. cleaning the funeral ground and preserving the bones;
2. toe-tying rituals;
3. *jādykū* (also a "sharing of substance": eating in classificatory husband-wife pairs);
4. *jādykupāc* (village representatives dancing together in costume); and
5. tribal council meetings (*kūṭm*).

Intravillage solidarity in the god ceremonies is manifested in performative utterances such as "Have we all joined?" through "representation of participants" and "sharing responsibility" of exogamous divisions at the village level, and the sharing of substances such as tobacco.

Conclusion

Some modern Kotas live in cities and towns across South India, working as doctors, engineers, civil servants, factory workers, and military personnel. Nevertheless, they retain strong ties to their fathers' villages as well as, among women, their husbands' villages. Marriage outside the Kota community is still strongly discouraged, although instances of children born to mixed parentage are common in oral history. In this age of widespread travel and geographic dispersal, people may experience a kind of social isolation that would have been inconceivable in the village context. Being a Scheduled Tribe in modern India has benefits reaching beyond those of affirmative action. Many who are educated and virtually indistinguishable from other South Indians, attract genuine and respectful curiosity from new colleagues and friends, unlike during the 19th and early 20th centuries when other Nilgiri communities treated Kotas as socially inferior. In these modern circumstances, traditional rituals – or at least the underlying principles of some of those described here – are no less important than they were earlier on. The economic and social forces that pull Kotas from their homeland are counteracted by the bonds constantly being reinforced between affines, exogamous family groupings, and villages, and by the myriad forms of mechanical and organic solidarity within them. The motivation for bonding at all these levels may be practical and emotional on a day-to-day basis, but it is also rooted deeply in Kota understandings of themselves in relation to the gods and the ancestors. Events in the past continue to have impact in the present through the agency of the gods, the ancestors, and the Kotas themselves as they continually rework their rituals and rethink the appropriate ways to act.

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