Mourning Songs and Human Pasts among the Kotas of South India

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Since fire is an embodiment of divinity, special rituals accompany the lighting of special flames. In this photo one of the musicians makes fire for the dry funeral cremation by twirling a stick on the dried root of the vag tree (identified in M. Emeneau’s fieldnotes as Solix tetrasperma). Pieces of cloth are used to catch the spark and kindle a larger fire. A similar process is used for producing a flame during ceremonies for the gods.

S. Raman making the inner ring for a tabaṭk (frame drum) in the kol_l, or blacksmith’s shop. Blacksmithing is one of the traditional Kota occupations and the smithy is treated as a place of divinity.

Singer V. Mathi rendering an _tli (mourning song) in my office/bedroom in Kolm_l village, May 1992. The physicality of “shaking” or “moving” evinced by the etymology of the term is evident in her performance, which involves significant movements of the hands and expressions on the face. Note also Mathi’s jewelry, which is typical for Kota women.

Musicians perform the bier lighting tune as the funeral pyre is set ablaze. 1991 M_n_r village.

Family members congregate around a decorated chair—the bier (katl) for the dry funeral (varld_v) of a deceased relative. Underneath and on top of the bier are symbolic items associated with the deceased specifically and with the history of the tribe generally. One of the baskets, for instance, contains millet (vatm), the ancient staple of the Nilgiris. The deceased’s bone relics will later be place in the striped cloth (var_r) on the seat of the chair.

The highly decorated dry funeral biers are led musically on procession to the dry funeral cremation ground. 1991 M_n_r village

Men dance at the dry funeral ground. M_n_r village 1991.

Musicians tighten their drum skins before performing melodies to induce divine possession. The barechested gentleman in the foreground facing the fire is later “moved by the gods.” Dry funeral ground, Kurg_j village, 1997.

A photograph of Ticg_r village, the village that once had “60 houses” according to this mourning song.

Female dancer at dry funeral in Kurg_j wearing a “coin necklace” of the type described in the “Puy Avo.”