

CHAPTER IV

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The most important feature of Muthuvan social structure is the division of the tribe into six clans, the names of which are: Melakuttom, Kanakuttom, Poothanikuttom, Kanayattukuttom, Thooshanikuttom and Ellikuttom. The origin of clan organization among Muthuvans is obscure, and the accounts about it are often conflicting. It is impossible to say whether or not the clan division is a post-migration feature of Muthuvan society, or if it was already in existence at the time of their settling in the Travancore hills. It is hardly likely that a division of society into various exogamous clans arose suddenly at a particular point of time, although a popular Muthuvan legend about clan organization ascribes its origin to a fortuitous event. This legend, as recorded by Mr. Krishna Iyer, is as follows:

It is said that the Muthuvans formerly went to pay their respects to the Karthas with water in bamboo tubes. By accident a Kartha woman drank water from one of the tubes, and was excommunicated. She was taken away by a Muthuvan of the Nattayam sub-clan and married. The children born of the union belonged to the Melakuttom. Later on the Kartha is said to have gone to enquire into their condition, and presented a sword, bangle and silk to the boys who came to be known as the Melvaka of the

Muthuvans. The Kanakuttom arose from one who carried raw fruits on his hand. The Puthanikuttom refers to the descendants of a man who ^{was} carried flowers. The Kanayattukuttom arose from one who carried a Kana or stick. The Thushanikuttom refers to the descendants of one who came from Thushanam, a place near Marayur. The Ellikuttom refers to the descendants of one who came from an illom in the north.¹

While most Muthuvans subscribe to this legend in its basic facts, there are certain variations in detail. Some Muthuvan informants maintain that originally there were only three clans, the Melakuttom, Kanakuttom and Poothanikuttom. The other three clans represent the later immigrants who were incorporated into the system. It seems probable that members of the first three clans were the original settlers who penetrated westward into the forests and became vassals of the Kodikulom Karthas. The connection of the Karthas with the above legend lends support to the assumption that the earliest Muthuvan settlers are the western Muthuvans and that they settled in the hilly tracts over which the Karthas had proprietary rights. Even at the present day, the predominant clans among western Muthuvans are the Melakuttom, Kanakuttom

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1. L.A.Krishna Iyer, op. cit., p. 8. It will be noted that in the above legend there is mention of an already existent sub-clan, namely the Nattayam sub-clan as one into which the woman of noble birth was married. It would seem, therefore, that even at the time of occurrence of this incident, there was some sort of clan organization among the Muthuvans.

and Poothanikuttom. Members of other clans among them are small in number. On the other hand, the eastern Muthuvans, who presumably settled in the hills at a later date, fall mainly into the Kanyattakuttom, Thooshanikuttom and Ellikuttom clans. The predominance of three out of six clans in either region, with sparing intermixture of some or all of the remaining clans, seems to indicate that originally the two sets of three clans each formed a distinct territorial distribution. The small admixture of other clans with the main body in either region is a later development brought about by inter-marriage, and the natural movement of population in the course of pursuing a migratory system of cultivation.

The legend about clans is perhaps only an attempt to ascribe a historical origin to the clan organization, or a means of explaining in terms of time and place a continuous social process for which, in actual reality, there is no historical origin. For instance, one may assume that the belief that Thooshanikuttom and Ellikuttom came from elsewhere, namely from a place called Thooshanam, and an illom in the north, respectively, is only a convenient conceptualization in concrete terms of a slow and long-drawn-out process of migration, inter-marriage and eventual incorporation. A word must be said about illom which is alleged to be the raison d'etre for the

clan name, Elikuttom. An illom is the house of a Nambudiri Brahmin. Since Muthuvans are far below Brahmins, the story that the Elikuttom came from an illom can be no more than a grandeur myth purporting to establish Muthuvan superiority over other tribes, or of this particular clan over other clans.

For the present purpose the origin of clan or of any social institution is not of immediate consequence. We shall try to see how the clan functions and what purpose it fulfils in Muthuvan society. Nevertheless, there is one point in the Muthuvan legend about origin of clans which deserves particular mention. Each clan is believed to have sprung from a particular ancestor. This reflects the Muthuvan tradition that members of a clan are matrilineal descendants of a founding, male ancestor.

The eastern Muthuvans generally believe that the clan organization was instituted by the Poonayattu Perumal for the purpose of regulating marriages by the rule of clan exogamy, and thus preventing incestuous unions. They also believe that this structural division of society was created at a particular place and time, namely, at Muttukkad where the Perumal reigned for fourteen years before proceeding to Poonjar to found the principality bearing that name. The prince called an assembly of his followers and grouped them into the three clans of Kanayattukuttom,

Thooshanikuttom and Elikuttom, and assigned regions for their habitation. He also appointed various functionaries in an heirarchical order, and charged them with duties and authorities commensurate with the hereditary status of each person.

It will be observed that the suffix kuttom occurs in the names of all clans; it means an assembly or congregation. It also refers to a collection of houses. According to Logan, kuttom is a Dravidian word meaning junction or assembly; a collection of houses consisting of five hundred or six hundred persons.

As the word kuttom indicates, the Muthuvan clan is a collection of people or an assembly. Members of a kuttom believe that they are descended from a single matrilineal ancestor, but they are unable to trace the generations or establish the exact kinship relations between members of the same kuttom.

Each kuttom (clan) is divided into a number of sub-clans the members of which are classificatory brothers and sisters in the same generation. The sub-clan is a group that traces descent from a known matrilineal ancestor. This does not mean that the ancestor is personally known to ego; he is known only in a historical sense. The depth of Muthuvan genealogy is only two or three generations. Since the founding ancestor of a sub-clan, is much farther

removed than this, from ego, a person, in tracing his ancestry, 'jumps' over several generations.

Among the western Muthuvans there is an elaborate division of clans into sub-clans. There are thirty-nine sub-clans altogether. The following table shows the sub-clans of each clan. In each group of sub-clans, there is one sub-clan which alone possesses hereditary judicial rights over all members of the clan of which it is a part. In the table this sub-clan is called the senior sub-clan. (See page for table)

The senior-most male member of the senior sub-clan of each clan is the head of that clan. He is known by the title of the sub-clan itself. Thus, the Moopan is head of Kanayattukuttom clan, Ambraman the head of Thooshanikuttom, and so on. A senior sub-clan has the privilege of calling upon the services of lower sub-clans of the same clan, when assistance is needed for agricultural operations, house-building etc., but in practice this privilege is seldom exercised, "because", they say, "being members of the same clan we are equals, and although by ancient tradition we are allowed certain privileges over others, we do not like to exercise these privileges in day-to-day life except in the matter of judicial rights."

The clans themselves are not all of equal status. The Melakuttom is superior to all other clans. The word

TABLE X

MUTHUVAN SUB-CLANS

Clans	Sub-clans	Number of sub-clans	Senior sub-clan
Melakuttom	Melaka Moothaka Chennapra	3	Melaka
Kanakuttom	Velimuthuvan Nattayan Edavura Kormuthiyan	4	Velimuthuvan
Poothanikuttom	Kerimbiyam Kidathadan Chottam Anacheri Perunkunnu Pulikadu Kaiyinganom Thaniyam	8	Kerimbiyam
Kanayattukuttom	Moopan Nedungadan Patalaka Kollarachandrandi Neduni Poramala Pandaram Pottanal	8	Moopan
Thooshanikuttom	Ambraman Moopukaran Valiyathalari Thalayari Nedumpuram Velikollaran Chirukollaran Vellari	8	Ambraman
Ellikuttom	Mootthavanduthan Naduvathuyanduthan Elayavanduthan Valathraka Elayaka Palimoothaka Kosarapandi Ediyaran	8	Mootthavanduthan

Melakuttom itself is a compound word derived from mel (top) and kuttom (group or assembly), meaning the top group or top clan. Of the three sub-clans of Melakuttom, the Melaka is superior to the other two. Members of the Melaka sub-clan are not only the heads of Melakuttom clan, but also the paramount heads of all Muthuvans. The senior-most male member of the Melaka sub-clan is called the Melvaka, and he is the ritual and judicial head of the whole tribe. He is the supreme judge and arbiter in all disputes; his word is law; he has a claim over a share of fines collected in all kudis; he has a right to call upon members of all other clans, except the Kanakuttom, for menial services, and for assistance in agricultural operations. When the Melvaka visits a kudi he is received with great respect and ceremony. A special seat of honour is made for him by spreading a vella (white linen) and karimbadam (blanket)¹ over an elevated thatti (bamboo platform). A fowl is cut for the Melvaka's dinner, and

1. The spreading of vella and karimbadam is an honour done to men of superior status. All clan-heads are hereditarily entitled to the vella and Karimbadam honour. Village headmen sitting in Council are also entitled to this honour but since village headmanship is not a hereditary office, the honour is a recognition of the man's office and not of birth. Subtle distinction in status between two men entitled to the honour is indicated by differences in the height of the seat. A man of higher status is entitled to a higher seat.

when he departs he is presented with pattu (a lenth of silk) or kodi (new, white linen) and honey and other delicacies. When a Muthuvan visits the Melvaka to pay his respects to the latter, he is expected to carry similar presents to him.

The Kanakuttom is next only to the Melakuttom in status and judicial function; it is the clan of the hereditary manthris (ministers). All men of Kanakuttom clan are potentially the manthris of the Melvaka. In a given kudi, the senior-most male member of Kanakuttom resident in that kudi is the manthri. As hereditary ministers of the Melvaka, and as his official representative, there is at least one adult male member of Kanakuttom in all kudis. This applies particularly to villages of the western Muthuvans among whom the Kanakuttom men alone could be manthris. In the eastern regions where Kanakuttom members are hardly found at all, each clan-head has a hereditary manthri belonging to the same clan. The manthri has a specific function and a defined position in the panchayat (judicial council). In fact no panchayat may be held without a manthri. When he attends the judicial council he occupies a position next only to that of the presiding head of hamlet or clan head. He has a right to render advise in matters of dispute, to levy fine and collect the same on behalf of the Melvaka. ~~The head of~~

The head of Kanakuttom clan is the Velimuthuvan, who, by virtue of his hereditary position, is also the chief manthri of the Melvaka.

Members of the Melakuttom can marry only from Kanakuttom, but the latter may marry either from the Melakuttom or Poothanikuttom. The other three clans of Kanayattukuttom, Thooshanikuttom and Ellikuttom are of equal status as clans, but the sub-clans in each clan are not all of equal status. Therefore, although in principle a man of one of the three clans may marry a woman from either of the other two clans, the elders permit the marriage only if the sub-clans of the man and woman are of matching status. The Poothanikuttom is technically considered to be of no higher status than the three clans last named, but in view of the fact that they could have affinal relations with a clan of admittedly higher status, i.e., the Kanakuttom, they do not favour marriages with the other clans. This is especially true of the two superior sub-clans of Poothanikuttom, namely, Kerimbiyam and Kidathadan who view with disdain affinal alliances between their members and members of Kanayattukuttom, Thooshanikuttom and Ellikuttom, unless it be with members of the senior sub-clans of these clans. However, marriages between members of Poothanikuttom and the other three clans are few in any case because of the regional separation of clans.

As already stated, the first three clans of Melakuttom, Kanakuttom and Poothanikuttom are mostly confined to the western regions, whereas the last three clans are mostly confined to the eastern regions.

The status differentiation of sub-clans has been precisely worked out in Muthuvan society. The function of a sub-clan depends on the nature of authority conferred on it by the Rajahs in ancient times; such is the Muthuvan assumption, anyway. An office of authority is spoken of as an adhikaram (right, authority, jurisdiction), or, more often, as pattam (title, honour, distinction).

As between western Muthuvans and eastern Muthuvans there are slight differences in the structure of the clans and in the function of various sub-clans. The western Muthuvans count all six clans as sections of the tribe, with the Melakuttom at the top, and the head of the senior sub-clan of Melakuttom as the paramount head of the whole tribe. This is a hereditary office, succession being reckoned in the matrilineal line. The two other sub-clans of Melakuttom, although inferior in status to its senior sub-clan, are yet superior to all other sub-clans of all clans. All members of Melakuttom, regardless of sub-clans, are accorded ritual honours should they visit other kudis. This is possibly related to the belief that the Melakuttom clan as a whole has sprung from the union between a

Nattyayan Muthuvan and a Kartha woman who was excommunicated due to her inadvertent drinking of water off a Muthuvan. The off-spring of the union was given a higher status than that of the genitor, because children belong to the mother's clan, and the mother in this case was a Kartha woman; but they could not claim equality with Karthas, as their mother had lost caste by pollution. Still, in recognition of the fact that the mother was originally of princely lineage, the children were given a higher status than all other Muthuvans by designating them as the highest clan, and hereditary chiefs of the whole tribe. In course of time the clan branched off into three sub-clans of differentiated status, with succession to the office of Melvaka remaining in the senior sub-clan. Nevertheless, all members of Melakuttom, being descended from an ancestress of higher caste status, are superior to other Muthuvans. This explains why all Melakuttom men, regardless of sub-clan, are accorded ritual superiority over others.

The Kanakuttom is the clan of the manthris (ministers) of Melvaka; it is also affinal kin of the Melakuttom. It has four sub-clans of differentiated status, but the male members of all sub-clans are potential manthris. In all Kudis of western Muthuvans there are fractions of Kanakuttom who represent the Melvaka in their own kudis. If a particular kudi has no adult Kanakuttom man to act as manthri, one from a neighbouring kudi may be asked to

be present when a panchayat is held.

Melakuttam and Kanakuttom are the only clans which, as clans, have hereditary functions, and an acknowledged superiority in status. Other clans have no defined functions, as clans, but they have within themselves sub-clans with hereditary status and functions in relation to other sub-clans of the same clan. The western Muthuvans recognise only one sub-clan within each of the remaining clans as having hereditary function. This is the senior sub-clan whose senior male member is the head of the clan itself. Other sub-clans have varying social status, but no hereditary functions.

The structure of clan among the eastern Muthuvans is slightly different. This section is composed mainly of Kanayattukuttom, Thooshanikuttom and Ellikuttom. Their sub-clans are essentially the same as among the western Muthuvans, except that there are variations in certain names. The chief difference between the two sections in clan organization is that among eastern Muthuvans each clan has its own sub-clan of manthris, whereas among western Muthuvans, a whole clan, Kanakuttom, is a clan of manthris.

The senior sub-clan of each clan is the sub-clan of the respective clan heads or Gurukkal. Below this is the sub-clan of the manthris, and still below this are several

sub-clans of commoners of equal status called Bandhukkal (lit. Relations). Members of the lowest sub-clan are supposed to be vassals of the clan head, but they are known by the euphemism of Elaya Bandhukkal (lit. Junior or Younger Relations). This status differentiation of sub-clans among eastern Muthuvans may be shown in tabular form as below: (see page for table).

Unlike the western Muthuvans among whom the clans themselves are differentiated in status, the eastern Muthuvans consider all the above three clans to be of equal status. The western Muthuvans have some status differentiation of sub-clans as well, but not as precisely as in the other section. We might say that among eastern Muthuvans, the individual clan has more or less the same structure as the structure of the whole tribe for western Muthuvans. In other words, the structural pattern of the tribe itself, as conceived by the western Muthuvans, is reflected in the structural pattern of the individual clan among eastern Muthuvans.

This difference in social organization has its effects on social life. The western Muthuvans have a more unified and disciplined organization than the eastern Muthuvans; among them authority is highly centralised in the person of the Melvaka who exercises undisputed sway over all clans. Where distance or difficulty of communication

TABLE XI

STATUS DIFFERENTIATION OF SUB-CLANS AMONG
EASTERN MUTHUVANS

Clans	Kanayattukuttom	Thooshanikuttom	Ellikuttom
<u>Gurukkal</u> Senior Sub-clan (clan heads)	Moopen	Ambraman	Moothavanduthan
<u>Menthris</u> (Ministers)	Kollarachandrandi	Chirukollaran	Neduvathuvanduthan
<u>Bandhukkal</u> (Commoners: lit. Relations)	Nedungadan Patalaka Neduni Poramala Pandaram	Moopukeran Valiyathalari Thalayari Velikollaran Nedumpuram	Elayavanduthan Palimoothaka Valathraka Elayaka Kosarepandi
<u>Elaya Bandhukkal</u> (Vassals: lit. Junior relations)	Pottanal	Vellari	Ediyaran

makes it impossible for the authority of the Melvaka to be exercised directly, the presence of his manthris of Kanakuttom clan acts as a restraining influence. As far as possible the Melvaka himself makes periodic visits to kudis, and this helps to maintain the unity of the tribe under a central authority intact.

Another result of the centralisation of authority in the Melvaka is that the heads of individual clans have little authority in their own right. Collectively and severally they are subordinates of the Melvaka whose superiority in all matters is unquestioned. The judgement of a clan head in a case of dispute is not necessarily accepted; the party may appeal to the Melvaka. In actual practice, however, the clan head exercises greater authority than may appear from a description of his position, for, due to the wide scatter of kudis and the virtual isolation of some of them, the only immediate and effective authority is that of the clan head. It is true that the manthri, as the representative of the Melvaka could alter a decision of the clan head, but this rarely, if ever, happens, because in a given kudi, the highest authority is the kani or head of hamlet.

Among eastern Muthuvans, the clan head, as is only to be expected, wields great authority. In matters pertaining to his clan, he is the supreme authority. All three clan

heads have equal status, and each has his own manthri. Here we see that authority is decentralised, and each clan functions as a unit by itself in judicial matters. In a matter of vital concern such as an incestuous marriage (marriage between two persons of the same clan), the heads of all three clans meet. In such meetings, precedence is reckoned by age. In this respect one might say that the oldest clan head has virtually the same status, in practice, among eastern Muthuvans, as the Melvaka has, among western Muthuvans.

A word must be said about the position of the Melvaka among eastern Muthuvans. We have already seen that he is the paramount head of the whole tribe. This is not disputed by any one. The eastern Muthuvans also accord this position to the Melvaka, but at the present time he does not exercise any direct control over them. All the same, they generally hold the Melvaka in great reverence, and say that should he choose to visit them he will be received with all honours due to him, and given him the customary presents. It may be of interest to note here that one clan head, the Ambraman of Thooshanikoottam, a man of strong personality and decided views, and the owner of a sizable cardamom plot, went to the extent of saying, "We, the eastern Muthuvans do not acknowledge the supremacy of the Melvaka, because he got his pattam (title,

authority) from the Kodikulom Karthas whereas our titles are from the Poonayattu Perumal. Melvaka has authority over the western Muthuvans only, who went over to Malayala desam (Malayalam-speaking land, region, area) with Kannaki."¹

Considerations of relative status of sub-clans play an important part in marriage. This is especially true of the eastern Muthuvans who have a more rigid and watertight stratification of sub-clans. The accepted pattern of marriage is the isogamous marriage in which the bride and bridegroom belong to sub-clans of equivalent social status. Table XI shows the social stratification of sub-clans. The first two sub-clans which are those of clan heads and manthris are believed to have obtained pattam(title) from the Rajah which is identified by the name of the title itself, e.g., Moopan, Ambraman, Kollarachandrandi, Chirukollaren etc. The titled sub-clans have hereditary judicial rights, whereas the non-titled sub-clans have no hereditary rights or duties. It may appear that the sub-clans of Elaya Bandhukkal(vassals) in each clan are hereditary servants of the titled sub-clans, but in practice this is not so. Although the latter retain a traditional right to call upon the services of the vassals for manual assistance in agriculture etc. this right is scarcely exercised. Members of both groups

1. p. 58 ~~and~~ Supra.

say that such differentiations existed in ancient times when the Rajah allocated rights and duties to various families according to their original social position and the services rendered to kings, but in the long passage of time the differentiation has lost its practical significance; it is only a nominal distinction now. Furthermore, by payment of due penalties, or with the special approval of clan heads, marriages have taken place in all generations between the lower and higher sub-clans with the result that all are practically equal. However, the nominal distinctions are still maintained, and marriages between members of sub-clans of unequal status are disapproved. In the case of all disapproved marriages, the heads of the clans concerned meet in panchayat and either condone the action after appropriate admonitions, or impose a penalty on the offending couple which, when paid, constitute adequate reparation for the offence, and the matter is forgotten.

As the approved marriages are isogamous marriages between members of equivalent sub-clans of all the three clans, a marriage between members of two sub-clans of the same clan amounts to incest and is severely dealt with. Since clan membership is derived from the mother, there is greater opposition to a marriage between a man of higher sub-clan and a woman of lower sub-clan, than between a

woman of higher sub-clan and a man of lower sub-clan.

Let us suppose that A and B are two sub-clans of unequal status, A being higher than B. When a woman of A marries a man of B, the children born of the union will all be A's; when a woman of B marries a man of A, the children born of the union will all be B's. Thus, a woman may marry from any sub-clan without detriment to her children's status, whereas a man must marry either from a sub-clan of the same status as his own, or of higher status in order that his children may have the same status as himself, or the higher status of the mother. A Muthuvan woman has greater freedom than the man in respect of choice of marital partner.

The heirarchical pattern of clans and sub-clans is the chief characteristic of Muthuvan social structure, with something like a royal lineage at the top and below it various orders of hereditary functionaries like ministers, heads of clans, ministers of heads of clans, commoners, and vassals. Muthuvans themselves speak of their social organization as being patterned on the kingdoms of the ancient Pandyas, Cholas and Cheras. They call it Rajakka mura (the royal pattern).

Apart from the sentimental reverence that Muthuvans have for status differentiations and hereditary authority, and which therefore sustains a social order of that

nature, there is an important social function that the stratification performs: it is the chief means of social control in Muthuvan society. The pyramidal nature of judicial authority holds before the individual Muthuvan a series of institutionalized sources of control which makes infringement of rules a thing of dread. At the same time, the communal life of the kudi, the co-operation and mutual help that members render to each other and the tolerance with which minor offences are viewed, make for a considerable degree of ease in behaviour. The balancing of these two sets of forces enable the tribe to maintain a fairly stable and happy social life.