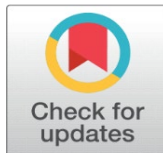


EXPLORING THE CONJUNCTION OF CHILDHOOD AND RITUALS: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF KUTHIYOTTAM BASED ON SELECT TEMPLES IN KERALA

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ABSTRACT

Kerala has a rich repertoire of folk arts and forms. The diverse culture of the place gives expression to these forms. Kuthiyottam is a ritualistic offering unique to the Devi temples of Kerala. It is a mélange of physical and religious facets. Though the performance has its basis on human sacrifice, it entails a perfect synchronization of song and dance movements. Despite exhibiting certain common traits, the practice varies markedly across various regions. The study primarily focuses on the Kuthiyottam performance prevalent in Pulimath Devi Temple in Thiruvananthapuram, while also examining the regional variations at Attukal and Chettikulangara temples. Kummi and Kavithavum are distinct segments of Kuthiyottam songs. The songs are predominantly focused on the veneration of the deity but also encompass characters from the epic. Boys aged eight to twelve are chosen for the ritual. Accompanied by percussion, children are led in front of the deity and the ritual of 'chooralkuthu', piercing by cane is done on the flanks of the children. The paper intends to explore the conjunction of childhood and rituals concerning the performing folk art, Kuthiyottam.

Keywords: Chooralkuthu, Kavithavum, Kummi, Kuthiyottam and Rituals

1. INTRODUCTION

Kerala possesses a rich repertoire of folk-art forms, that serve as dynamic representations of the cultural legacy of the region. These vibrant and diverse artistic traditions, which embody the unique character of the region, have been nourished and molded by the local culture. Padayani, Mudiattu, Kolkali, Theyyam, Thiruvathira, Koodiyattam, Kuthiyottam are some of the ritualistic performing folk arts of Kerala. Observed during the month of Kumbam- Menam, Kuthiyottam is a ritualistic offering unique to the Devi temples of Kerala. Folklore exponents regard this art form with its perfectly synchronized dance and song movements, in compliance with the Adi Dravida folk practices, that are still in vogue in Central Kerala. The paper intends to explore the conjunction of childhood and rituals with respect to the performing folk art, Kuthiyottam. The primary emphasis is on the Kuthiyottam practice prevalent in Pulimath Devi Temple in Thiruvananthapuram, a temple with a history that exceeds over three centuries. It also brings forth the

regional variations, particularly with reference to the performances at Attukal and Chettikulangara temples in Thiruvanthapuram and Alappuzha respectively.

2. LEGEND OF KUTHIYOTTAM

Kuthiyottam literally translates to “stabbing and running”, has its basis in human sacrifice (Narabali). At Pullimath Devi Temple, Kuthiyottam is a seven- day long celebration. The festival commences on the star of Bharani, the Malayalam month of Kumbham. The deity being invoked is known as Kunjalamma. The young boys who are part of the Kuthiyottam arrive at the sacred site at least one week prior to the festival. The boys accept offerings (prasadam) from the priest in the presence of the authorities and neighbours. Escorted by the asan, the boys move to their temporary residence, Vilayilveedu, half-a kilometer away from the temple. The corresponding legend is that, a priest at Pullimath Devi Temple resided at Thamaraseri Madam, in the premises of the temple. He had an adorable son, but never instructed any hymns or spells entitled to him. Profoundly exasperated, the boy secretly studied the scriptures when the father was away at a ritualistic ceremony. To put it into practice, he recited the mantra and turned the nearby land into a field of cucumbers. The father returned home on being incapable of continuing the ceremonial act. Upon his return, he found that the nearby land was covered in cucumbers, leading him to realise what had transpired. In response, he murdered his son, prepared a pyre and the entire family committed suicide. It is held that the three spirits meander around those premises. Later they were enshrined in the temple as ‘Brahmarakshas’. Formerly, the aforementioned brahmin used to often visit the ‘Vilayilveedu’ to pay homage to the ancestral deity and this accounts as to why the Kuthiyottam preparations still continue at this location.

3. RITUALS OF KUTHIYOTTAM

The group of boys, who perform Kuthiyottam observe certain austerities. First and foremost, they are forbidden from entering into their own house and also restricted from maintaining any communication with their family members for these seven days. They need to observe ritual vows during this period and the person who has undertaken the vows for the greatest frequency is termed as ‘Pandaram’ and food is prepared under his supervision. The boys have to get up before sunrise and after their morning routines, they’re led to the temple. They engage in religious invocation, and leave the premises only after having ‘Padachoru’ i.e., cooked rice offered to the deity. The evening food is prepared by the ‘Pandaram’ at their residence. The practice for the ritual commences by dusk. It is under the supervision of an expert that the boys prepare for Kuthiyottam. At the Pullimath Devi temple, it is under the tutelage of Jhanardhana Kurup that Kuthiyottam is practiced.

In the initial days of practice, the Kuthiyottam performers’ body are massaged with oil, particularly with gingelly oil; in order to separate the skin from flesh while it is being pierced. Following the five days of preparation, there is day of respite before the actual performance. On the seventh day (i.e. on Bharani); on the ceremonial day of the deity, after invoking the deity, the performers bow before it. Subsequent to it, they circumbulate the temple in front of the caparisoned elephants, accompanied by the ‘Pandaram’. Following it, they return to ‘Vilayilveedu’ and subsequently prepare for the performance. By eight ‘o clock in the evening, the boys are dressed and proceed to the temple, escorted by ceremonial procession. Upon arrival at the temple, they prostrate before the deity and are adorned by the garland

and red sandalwood offered by the priest. Subsequently, the Kuthiyottam performance commences. Both the sides of their spine are pierced by the asan with a silver thread and cane. Upon piercing, a few drops of blood exudes and this ritual is termed as 'Deivathe raktham kanikal'-which means showing blood to the Goddess. Thereafter, the rites begin and the boys dance according to the song and their movements are rhythmical. Previously, the performances were done on a public platform; however, approximately 36 years ago, they were relocated to a building adjacent to the temple. After the performance, the boys prostrate before the deity and are taken away to be bandaged. Roasted betel leaves are attached to the wound. Thus, the Kuthiyottam performance comes to an end and the boys return home.

4. KUTHIYOTTAM SONGS

Kuthiyottam songs are divided into Kummi and Kavithvum. Expertise is required to sing Kummi; it is generally lengthy, whereas Kavithvum is brief and sung between the Kummi. At the Pullimath temple, the song begins with eulogizing the Goddess. It also welcomes the audience.

Oh Inthatthiitthatto thakathitthai
 Pulimatthu vazhum bhagavthibhadrae samasthanayikae
 Arachukondum ninnihanjangal chalichamanusharayi
 Nadaykku moonu pradhakshinamayi kalichupadunnen
 Polikkanam sabhavasikalellam kalikkushobithamayi
 Oh Inthatthiitthatto thakathitthai1

The song begins with a refrain, on translation it means: to the deity who resides at the Pullimath temple, we the devotees perform our rituals unto. While undertaking three rounds of circumbulation, we sing to your glory. Let the performance be adorned with festive splendor.

Besides the main songs, there are songs incorporated with characters from epics.

Pankjanabhanusakhiyam parthanu theru thelichathumarai?
 Parichodu Brahmaavin Thalayottil Pichayirannathum aarae?
 Kachanimulayal seethadeviyai kattugamichathumarai?
 Eeduperuttavanodiha chennu yudham cheythathumarai?
 Oh inthatthitthatto thakathitthai2

On translation, it means- Who led the ceremonial chariot of Arjuna? Who used God Brahama's skull as begging bowl? Who abducted the elegant Seetha Devi? Who led the war with the egoistic Ravana?

Onamadutthallo pranadha eniku
 Onamundippazhe vangideenam
 Onatthinulla palvyanjanangalum
 Venamorukettu parppadavum3

On translation, it means- My beloved, Onam is imminent, do get an attire and groceries for Onam.

Onnapaathu koolu anghuyarnna malayil
 Kombil vasichoru Keeki munnam
 Sambrathi vrikshamathin chuvattil oru
 Paambinumundu vaasasthalam pol4

On translation, it means- At the crown of a tree; on the top of a mighty mountain lived a peacock, and at the base of it lived a snake.

Such festivities are also incorporated into Kummi. It illuminates the universalities and specificities of life.

5. CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN KUTHIYOTTAM

At Attukal Devi temple, the boys below the age of 12 are chosen for Kuthiyottam. Here, the boys are offered to the temple by the parents of the children.

Figure 1



Figure 1 Kuthiyottam Performers Before the Deity at Attukal Temple

The performers symbolize the injured soldiers of the Goddess Mahishasura Mardini. It is observed during the month of 'Kumbham', the ceremonial month of the deity. The practice commences on the third day of the ten days long festival, the boys accept the offering from the priest; and this initiates their seven days of penance to purify their mind and body. The performers have to undergo rigorous mental and physical austerities. Over the course of these seven days, the boys are restricted from returning to their house; they have to remain in the temple, observe restrictions in diet and take repose on the floor. In the morning and evening, after their ablutions, the performers have to prostrate 1,008 times each before the deity. On the day of Kuthiyottam, the boys are embellished and escorted by various forms of dance, musicians and mimetic arts. In the front of the deity, the ritual of 'chooralkuthu', piercing by cane is done. The flanks of the children are smeared with ash and pierced with a hook. Here, the Kuthiyottam performers are regarded as slaves of Goddess.

Of all the Kuthiyottam performances, Chettikulangara Kumbha Bhaarani festival is the most colourful spectacle.

Figure 2**Figure 2 Kuthiyottam Performance at Chettikulangara Devi Temple**

The arrangement commences seven days before the actual performance. It is funded by local patrons from the thirteen neighborhoods and the boys are adopted for the performance. Boys aged eight to twelve are chosen for the ritual. A song popular in these regions implies it:

Chettikulangara Matheeviyammayku

Ettuvayasile Kuthiyottam5

On translation it means, Kuthiyottam is offered to Chettikulangara Goddess from the age of eight.

The rituals begin on the seventh day; with the children being positioned before the shrine. The flanks of the children are smeared with ash before being pierced. A cane is inserted parallel to the incision. Accompanied by percussion instruments, the children are then led to the temple ground. Upon reaching the temple, they circumambulate three times before heading to the main altar of the Goddess. On stepping onto the main altar rhythmically, the pierced cane is pulled and offered to Goddess. Following the performance, the boys are conceived ritually deceased.

6. CONCLUSION

From the earlier times onwards, Kuthiyottam was perceived as an offering to Goddess to prevent contagious diseases. The rituals of Kuthiyottam are analogues to that of human sacrifice. In earlier periods, human sacrifice was done as offerings to appease the Goddess. Over time, the practice evolved into ritualistic offering of blood before the deity. In Alappuzha, children are adopted for Kuthiyottam performance. In contrast, in Thiruvananthapuram and Kollam, the performances are done as an offering to the Goddess by children's parents. In the former instance, the performers are conceived as inauspicious after the ritual. In many instances, these performances were perceived as incrimination of child's rights. The key inquiry focuses on how many children are genuinely engaged in the ritualistic performance and to what extent they gauge the significance of the ritual. The offerings are either dictated by parental decisions or children are adopted at a very young age by affluent households to fulfill the performance as part of their offerings. At an early age, these children are separated from their families and have to undergo tedious ordeal. Thus, there occurs a conjunction between childhood and rituals.

NOTES

Song collected from Aravinakshan Nair, Kuthiyottam Asan, Pullimath Village

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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