

An insight into *kolamthullal*; the ritualistic art form of the Kanisa community

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Abstract

Kolamthullal is a unique ritualistic art form practiced by the Kanisa community of northern Kerala. It is closely associated with temple rituals and traditional beliefs, reflecting the deep connection between art, religion, and community life. This study attempts to provide an insight into the origin, performance structure, symbolic elements, and cultural significance of Kolamthullal. The ritual combines dance, costume, music, and sacred narratives, transforming the performer into a ritual medium believed to embody divine or ancestral spirits. Through this transformation, Kolamthullal serves not only as a form of artistic expression but also as a medium for spiritual communication and social cohesion within the community. The article also examines the role of the Kanisa community in preserving this tradition and changing cultural practices. By analyzing its ritualistic, social, and cultural dimensions, the study highlights Kolamthullal as an important element of Kerala's intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords

Kolamthullal, Kanisa Community, Ritual Art, Cultural Heritage.

Introduction

Generally, society can be regarded as an aggregation of individuals who are related to each other through complex pattern of relationships. They relate each other through their distinct cultures. The land of Kerala is rich in its cultural heritage. The relationship between an individual to his family and to his society is an important aspect that determines village life. It is the guiding factor of the nature of society. MacIver and Page define society as a system of usages and procedures, of authority and mutual aid, of many groupings and divisions, of controls of human behavior and of liberties (MacIver and Page,1959,p.5)ⁱ . Every region has their own form of art. While *Theyyams* and *Thiras* are performed in northern Kerala, the Southern Kerala performs Padayani as a ritualistic art form. Folklore is often instrumental in community recognition. Some genres of folklore are the property of certain caste or castes (Peter & Frank ,1991,p.25)ⁱⁱ.Caste differences are also prominent in the worship of certain deities. A major part of folklore arts are ritualistic in nature. Durkheim defines “religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things , that is to say , things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions-beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community called a church”(Durkheim,2001,p.46)ⁱⁱⁱ. According to Spiegel for understanding the historical development of a ritual, it is also important to understand its social setting. Worshipful (*upasana*), deity related, fertility related, pregnancy-sacrifice-related, *uchadana* (exorcism), *avahanam* (evocation) all fall under this category. They are reserved for certain castes and tribes (Vishnu Namboothiri,2007,p.43)^{iv}. This includes religious and non-religious. Malayan, Vannan, Mavilan etc., are the major communities who are engaged in Theyyam. Nairs, Thiyyas, Chaliyas and Asaris are involved in *poorakkali*.

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Marars and *Malayas* perform *Chendamelam*. The Pulluvar had performed *naverupaattu*. *Oppana*, *Kolkkali*, *Duffmuttu* are being reserved for the Muslims. *Kolamthullal* (image dancing) was a traditional ritualistic art form performed in southern Kerala by the Kanisa community. It was performed in Bhagavathi temples and in some Hindu houses. It has similarities with the *yaktovil* ritual performed by the Sinhalese in Srilanka and with the *padayani*.

The material culture of the Kanisa community

According to Tony Blackshaw nowadays the word community can be seen everywhere from the writings of communication philosophers to business communities in the market. Benedict Anderson define community as 'imagined communities' which emerged according to him due to the influence of modern technologies like printing . Even though numerically small in number, the Kanisa community was a prominent group in Kerala. They are known by different names in different parts of Kerala like *Kanisan* derived from *Kana ajan* or *asan* means teacher. *Kalaripanikkan* because of being in charge of *kalari*, *Ganakan* means calculator or astrologer. They are known as *Balme* in Karnataka region. They were treated as "*cherujanmakkar*" means they were engaged in their traditional occupation of astrology and teaching children. L K Ananthakrishna Aiyer said that there exists some kind of division between the Kanisas of North Kerala and South. The northern Kanisas sees themselves as superiors because they were the masters of *Kalaris* while the southerners mainly engaged in umbrella making. There is a myth associated with their origin that they were descended from Pazhur Bhattathiri by marrying an Ezhava woman. William Logan also says that "they had followed patrilineal system of inheritance for which they had followed polyandry like the Pandavas" (Krishnan, 2009, p.114)^v. The villagers met the expenses of their marriage because they were the masters of *koodippallikkoodams* and *kalari*. The main ornament worn by the groom during the wedding was "*ezhuthukathi*" (oneside knife and other side *ezhuthani* or *narayam* used to write in cadju leaves). L K Anatha Krishna Aiyer says that "when he set out on his wedding journey, he is accompanied by a party of Nairs, who escort him firing guns, blowing horns, and beating tom toms as the procession advances to the house of the bride" (Aiyer ,1909,p.195)^{vi}. It was because they were the masters of *kalari*. Lalithambika says that Most of the menfolk of the Kanisas used to wear *kadukkan* as ear ornament. *Kadukkan* is of two types single and double. A double ring is like sticking two rings together; in some areas like Payyannuran ear ornament called *patta*, similar to *kadukkan* was worn. It is shaped as a bell attached to a small ring. A rare few wore the *vallikkadukka* with stones. They wore rings on their fingers.

As the caste formation in Kerala was based upon division of labour, every castes had their own traditional occupations and this has helped them to excel in that profession. "The central hypothesis in guiding Durkheim's study is Comte's argument that the continual subdivision of labour as especially constitutes social solidarity and becomes the elementary cause of the extension and growing complication of the social organism" (Law ,2011,p.77)^{vii}. Umbrella

making was another major profession in which the Kanisas were involved. The women of this community got a major income from umbrella making. They were well versed in its making. *Kalakkuda, thoppikkuda, marakkuda, olakkuda, acharakkuda* are the different types of umbrellas made by this people (Lalithambika, 2011, p.177)^{viii}. The name varies according to their use. This community in certain temples as a part of the existing custom gave *acharakkuda*. At Poomalakkavu in Payyannur, Kottiyoor and Kakkothkavu are some of the temples they still follow this custom. Only men make these *acharakkudas* by taking *vratham* like abstaining from eating non-vegetarian food.

Astrology was another major way of living of the Kanisas. By analyzing the cowries placed in *grahanila* they foretell the future of the people. Their service was inevitable in traditional Kerala societies. "He is invariably consulted as to the cause of all calamities, and the cautious answers that he gives satisfy the people. "*puthro na puthri*", which may either mean no son but a daughter, or no daughter but a son, is referred to as the type of a Kaniyan's answer, when questioned about the sex of a child *in utero*" says Edgar Thurston and Rangachari (Thurston & Rangachari, 1909, p.188)^{ix}. The people used to go to the Kanisas for fixing the dates of important events in their life. For their service, they will be provided with some *dakshina* in the form of money. Prasnamarga written by Panangadan Narayanan Namboothiri is a major work followed by the Kanisas of Kerala. This work is said to have written during 17th century at Edakkad Temple near Thalassery. Even now the astrologers from different parts of Kerala summon at this temple in memory of their common *Guru*. In those periods, severe caste system was prevailing and the knowledge in Sanskrit was the monopoly of the Brahmins. Even though the Kanisas were a polluting caste, they had great knowledge in astrology and major works of which were written in Sanskrit. In the classical Tamil anthologies, also there are references about people going to the astrologers for knowing the right time for sowing the seeds. When we ask about the origin of certain Kanisa families in particular village, they say that they are being invited by the landlord of that particular village for teaching the children of their families. Therefore, we can assume that they might have been migrated from a society in which they were allowed to learn Sanskrit. They had followed *gurukula* system of education in learning in astrology.

Kathleen Gough mentions that the Kanisas also served as the masters of *ezhuthupalli* along with other Castes where the students got basic knowledge of reading and writing. These institutions were also known as *ezhuthukalari* in order to distinguish it from *poithukalari*. Instance of going to *ezhuthupallis* can be seen in the *bhairavan thottam* of Panar "*arikondachoriyunnu Maakkurikkalu , ariyilezhthangane padichu kunjan*". (Vishnu Namboothiri 2007, p.121)^x. Even today we follow this custom in the beginning of education. Some of these *ezhuthupallis* were transformed into primary and upper primary schools in that region. There are several schools in different parts of Kannur started like this. They also served as the masters of *Kalari*, the traditional martial art of Kerala. All the heroes of the northern ballads were people who got training in Kalari. They had also practiced *ayurveda* particularly in treating snakebites. Along with medicines, they had also used *mantras* for the cure of disease. Performing ritualistic artforms like *kalampattu, kolamthullal, pooppada*,

akanalneekku were other major source of income for the Kanisas. Both higher castes and lower caste people performed *Kalampattu*. It was performed as a pregnancy related ritual. *Pooppada* was another ritual performed for this purpose in southern Kerala.

Characteristics of Kolamthullal

According to Durkheim, “Against the profane world, the sacred combines both the pure and impure, good and evil, sanctioned and contaminated, saint and sinner. This ambiguity means that the passage from the profane world to the sacred one needs to be carefully regulated by complex rituals and ceremonies. Rites of passage symbolize the death of the profane and a rebirth into the sacred. Ritualistic control is essential because the is deeply ambiguous. For instance, some religions prohibit the eating of pork, but it is unclear if this is because it is forbidden as something impure or as something holy” (Durkheim,2001,p.305)^{xi}. Kolamthullal was performed in houses as a pregnancy related ritual. According to the belief of the people if a woman doesn’t got pregnant after many years of marriage, it is believed to be due to the influence of *Gandharva* who resides in her body. So in order to exhaust the evil spirit out of the body *kolamthullal* is performed. In a society where medical facilities were limited, these kinds of rituals provided hope of getting pregnant. They were also performed for avoiding abortion and for the overall wellbeing of the family. Kolamthullal was a ritual that lasts from dusk to the dawn of next day. *Kolam* (image) of *Gandharva* was drawn in the *paala* (end part of the arcanut tree palm). The normal colours used are black, green, red, white and yellow which denotes the five colours of the universe like the earthsphere by green, *akasa* (sky) by yellow, *Vayu* (air) in black, *Jala* (water) by white, and *agni* (fire) in red. Black colour is made from burning the coconut shell or from burning the oil lamp. Green is made from the leaf of *ithilkkanni* (loranthus). Red is made up of mixing turmeric and slaked lime and also by grinding the laterite stone. White is the colour of *paala* itself. Yellow is made from wild turmeric (*manjakkoova*). This head mask is worn by the person who performs *kolamthullal*. By wearing this, he will transform himself to that particular deity. It symbolizes the particular deity. Eliad defines symbols as by manifesting the sacred any object becomes something else, yet it continues to remain itself, for it continues to participate in the surrounding cosmic milieu. Likewise, the performer transform himself to that particular deity and his words are being interpreted as the words of God. Paul Ricoeur defines symbols as “any structure of signification of which a direct, primary, literal meaning designates, in addition, another meaning which is indirect, secondary and figurative and which can be apprehended only through the first”(Ricoeur,1974,p.54)^{xii}.

Only one *paala* is used for making the mask for this ritual. The performer will also wear single white dothi (ottamundu) with a red cloth around his waistline. He will also hold a *choottu* (torch made by burning coconut leaf). His companion (*parikarmi*) which will include the singer and those who plays the instrument will accompany him. *Thavil*, *thappu*, *ilathalam* are the common instruments used in the performance. *Vaikurava* (sound made with mouth) is also made.

The next stage in the performance is making the particular woman to sit in the *kalam* (drawing made with colours). *Maaranpaattu* was the common song sung in the performance. The performance will start with *ganapathisthuthi* and most probably ends with *santhanagopalam*. Every song starts with the description of the physical characteristics of that particular deity. Sometimes the affected woman would show some mannerisms of the deity. This was known in local language as *urayal*.

“*santhanagopalamamikadha
sandhatham chollisthuthichal
chinthichavannam labhikku-
mathisambathu vardhikkumettam
sandhathiyundam gunangal
nalla bandhusoughyangalumundam*” (Lalithambika, 2011, p.235)^{xiii}

During the course of the performance, the deity will be provided with food and liquor. By satisfying all his wishes he promises to exhaust himself from the body of that particular woman by blessing her to have a baby and if she is pregnant, for a smooth delivery and a healthy baby. Santhanagopalam was the popular song sung for this. Even if the result was negative, people continued to perform these kinds of rituals. Like March Bloch has opined it is belief of the people which help for the survival of these rituals rather than their results. The various items used for this ritual were given to the performer as *dakshina* along with money. Kolamthullal can be regarded as an instance of the worship of fertility cult.

These songs sung for the performance are transmitted orally and additions and deductions may be happened in the course of time. These folk songs represent the socio political, cultural and economic background of the society. Both male and female deities are described as wearing ornaments made of gold, silver, diamond, emerald etc. that shows the society was aware of these metals and stones some of which are rare to their native places. They conduct seven days *paattulsavam* (song festival) in certain temples like Poomalakkavu in Ramanthali near Payyannur. *Marakkalappaattu* is an important song that is being sung in in this festival. The theme of the song is that there existed a goddess called Poomaala at *Aryadesa*. Once she had a desire to visit Malanad ruled by Ariyaraja. When the daughter of this king visited this Aryappoongavu of poomaladevi she enters into the body of that princess. Then her father visited a *nallarivan* (astrologer) to know the reason of his daughter's ailment. Then he found out that the goddess poomaala wanted to visit his country. Then the king built a *marakkala* (ship) made of sandalwood to bring the goddess. Then in that *marakkalam* the goddess by crossing hundred and eight *azhis* (ports) reached, near Ezhimala and settled down there. There are mentions about the ports like Mangalapuram, Kundhapuram, Nileswaram etc., in these songs, which reflects Kerala's trade contacts with these regions through Port.

Along with *Kolamthullal* there are numerous other rituals performed by the Kanisa community. *Ganapathihomam*, *Akanalneekku*, *saktheyapooja*, *urukkujapam* etc., are few to name. These include both Brahminical and Tantric rituals. In all this rituals there is a predominance of red colour which denotes the *saktheya* cult. *Gurusi* made of turmeric and lime and red flowers are inevitable in this ritual.

Similar artforms

Padayani is a ritualistic art form performed in the Kavus and Bhadrakali Temples of Southern Kerala. It has its similarities with Kolamthullal. It starts from Malayalam month Dhanu 5th from Thelliyoorkkavu and lasts up to Medam 11 at Kunnanthanam Madathilkavu. The origin of padayani is shrouded in a myth that a demon named Darikan got a boon from Brahman that men or gods could not kill him. With this boon, he challenged everyone including the gods. Then in order to kill Darika, siva created kali and after killing Darika she returned without losing her anger. So in order make the kali laugh, the *bhoothas* performed various *kolams* and finally the *kolam* (image) of Kali herself was worn by her brother Subramanya. By seeing her brother's performance, she laughed and this is said to be the beginning of Kolamthullal in padayani. This was known as the Bhairavi *kolam*. The Bhairavi *kolam* is the largest and last *kolam* being performed in padayani. Kadammanitta Vasudevan Pilla says that the existence of padayani during the perumal period can be seen in the song of padayani itself. After the war with the neighboring *nadus* the army men would take rest and this art form can be said to have performed by them during their leisure time. It has also similarities with the *kachakettal* in *kalari* and still the training in padayani is known as *kalariyil kachakettuka*. “*Thappu, thavil, madhalam, kaimani* are the musical instruments used in padayani” (Kadammanitta, 1993, p.11)^{xiv}.

Different *kolams* are performed in padayani. *Ganapathi, marutha, sundaranyakshi, andharanyakshi, pisachu, madan, pakshi, kalan* are some of them. Different colours and designs are used for their portrayal. Usually they are drawn on the *paala* (back portion of the leaf of arcanut). Hundred and one *paalas* are used for the bhairavi *kolam*. Black, yellow, white, green and red are the normal colours used to draw *kolams*. Black colour is extracted from burning the coconut shell. Yellow is made from turmeric and manjakkoova. White is the color of the *pala*. Green colour is made from the leaf of *vaaka* (Fabaceae) plant. Red is made by grinding the laterite stone. These colours represent those society which had an inalienable relationship with the earth and the universe which provided them their means of livelihood and protected them. This may also reprint the five metals there being in use like gold, silver, iron, copper and lead. Kadammanitta Vasudevan Pilla also says, “These *kolams* are drawn by the people belonging to the Kanisa and Paraya community” (Kadammanitta, 1993, p.16)^{xv}. This *kolams* can be regarded as the symbiosis of different communities. While *konginippattar* represents the Brahmins, *thangalum padem* represents the Muslims. *Kuthirakolam* represents the trade relations between Kerala and Arabs. *Choottu* made with the coconut leaves were used for the light.

Padayani can be regarded as an agriculture festival. After harvesting the crops the people celebrated their hard work of an year by performing these kinds of arts before sowing the seeds for the next season. Burning of *choottu* was made as a part of slash and burn agriculture. When these ash falls into the soil, it will make the soil fertile as well as it will temporarily eliminate the weed and pest species. It can also be regarded as the promise made by the inmates of *kalari* who were the protectors of their village.

CONCLUSION

Paul Tillich calls the religious symbols as the “depth dimension of reality” (Tillich Paul, 1968, p.59)^{xvi}. Kolamthullal draws certain signs and symbols on the head mask as well as in the *kalams*. By doing so, he transforms himself to that particular deity. People interpret his words and actions as that of god’s communication to them. Mother goddess was the popular deity worshipped in these kinds of rituals. However, with the influence of Brahminical religion these deities were amalgamated into Vedic pantheon. With the growth of science and technologies people started to question the logic behind these kinds of rituals. Even the younger generation members started to move away from their traditional occupations. One’s profession is now no more based upon caste. Still these kinds of ritualistic arts represent the rich cultural heritage of Kerala.

Endnotes & References

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