

INFLUENCE OF FARMING CULTURE ON RITUALS OF NORTH MALABAR REGION OF KERALA STATE

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ABSTRACT

This paper forms a part of the theses entitled “Influence of farming culture on the folk arts and rituals of North Malabar region of Kerala state”. The objective of the study was to identify specific elements as influenced by farming culture and to assess their scientific rationale, if any. The research design followed was exploratory and ex-post facto in nature. The study revealed that most of the rituals have been originated from an ancient agrarian society which had a deep-rooted stand in farming culture. It was also seen that these rituals, through superstitions, taboos, etc. prompted the public to conserve the ecosystem. They promoted eco-friendly sustainable farming supplementing the endeavor towards a greener Kerala.

KEY WORDS

Kolathunadu, Farming culture, Rituals, Folklore, grain worship, fertility potential

INTRODUCTION

The highly diversified agro ecosystems of different regions of Kerala give rise to varied cropping patterns and farming systems. These quite often influence the life styles and traditions of the community in these regions. Meanwhile, farming culture at large is an interplay of the socio-economic settings and ecological embodiments in every region. North Malabar is considered to be a repository of folk arts and rituals. The tradition-conscious people of this area belong to the farming community at large. The rituals still survive the onslaught of science and politics over ages in this area. So far, no scientific enquiry has been made about the influence of farming culture on the rituals followed in different locations, particularly in relation to the farming practices and indigenous systems which are location specific.

In this backdrop, study was conducted with the objectives of identifying the specific elements in rituals as influenced by the various farming practices and assessing the scientific rationale of these elements in the context of farming culture.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research aimed to trace back to the history of an agrarian society that prevailed in the past. In the backdrop of the stated objectives it was inferred that most of the attributes included in the study were exploratory in nature and hence an exploratory survey design was adopted for the study. It was intended mainly to yield qualitative data and ethno-history narrations. The study was conducted in erstwhile *Kolathunadu* of North Malabar region of Kerala state. The area extended over parts of Kozhikode, Kannur and Kasaragod districts of Kerala. The respondents of the study include purposively selected individuals belonging to the following categories viz; social workers of the region, members of the cultural and voluntary organizations connected with the performance of selected rituals, researchers belonging to different organizations that conduct investigations of different dimensions of rituals; and professionals and experts in agriculture and allied sectors. Methods of data collection included participatory appraisal techniques, oral history narrations and consultations with experts in folklore. The data thus generated relating to rituals influenced by farming culture or season-bound practices was subjected to scientific scrutiny or assessment of its rationale by experts who have established their competence in the related fields.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Art and culture are the reflections of the fertility cult. Belief has been the building blocks of many a ritual. Rituals may be classified into magical rituals and religious rituals (Frazer 1976). As far as North Malabar is concerned rituals here are not exclusively magical or religious. Instead, they are magico-religious in nature (Nambiar 2000). During ancient period, the vast majority of people who depended upon agriculture for their livelihood did not have much knowledge about germination of seeds, growth of plants, etc. They believed that through magical rituals agriculture would flourish and give bumper yields. These types of rituals were prevalent even in different parts of Europe. The strong belief which prevailed then was that the caused behind human fertility and crop fertility was the same. In this background people used to conduct ritualistic sexual intercourse in the crop lands at the time of initial sowing of crops with the aim of boosting up agricultural production from the land (Maple 1973). Narrowing down to North Malabar people had believed that the fecundity of plants and trees can influence human beings also. On this basis, different fertility festivals like *Nira*, *Puthari*, *Kothaamoorippaattu*, etc. were conducted here. Here, *Uchaaral velakal* are prevalent even now. The period following harvest is known as *uchaaral*. The belief is that the land on which cultivation is to be done is the Mother God or a female rather. She is supposed to take rest during this period. This

continues until the coming monsoon. So during the first week of Karkkitakam (July-August), the soil should not be manipulated in anyway. Ploughing is strictly prohibited during this period since the ploughing implements are attributed symbolic resemblance with male sex organs. Even though the emic interpretations behind this are based on symbolic comparisons with human activities, the rationale is that during the heavy monsoon, ploughing of land may lead to severe soil erosion, uprooting of trees, etc.(Crooke 1925).

Worship of food grains also had its influence on the rituals of North Malabar. Paddy grains were seen as the symbol of prosperity. Paddy inflorescence is believed to be *Shree Bhagavathi* meaning Goddess of prosperity till today. There is a ritual of welcoming the Goddess and exorcising chetta, the symbol of scarcity. Girls from every house collect materials like dried grass, broomstick, wooden spoon, etc. and put them into a clay pot. These are then boiled in rice gruel. With this in hand, they walk around their house thrice and then the whole stuff is poured beneath the Strychnose tree in the homestead which is believed to absorb all the misfortunes of the family.

Fertility potential of many trees and plants is believed to have influence on the same in human beings in *Kolathunadu*. Based on this several rituals are conducted here. Women after marriage nail metal pieces into the trunk of tamarind tree and walk around the tree thrice. This is to get the fertility potential of the tree imparted to them. This ritual is called *Pulinkaathal kollal*. During the fifth, seventh and ninth month after conception, the pregnant woman consumes a tablet prepared out of the seeds of several species of tamarind. The rationale is that most of these are medicinal and may promote health conditions of both the intra uterine foetus and the expectant mother.

In the livestock sector, cow is believed to possess this quality as that of tamarind. Based on this, there is a ritual called '*Panchagavyam sevikkal*' practiced during the fifth month of pregnancy. The pregnant woman consumes a mixture made out of five products from cow's body viz; milk, ghee, curd, dung and urine.

The same belief forms the base for the ritualistic folkart, *Kothamoorippaattu*; but with a difference that this ritual stands for the prosperity of livestock. The myth is that Godavari, the sacred cow is sent from heaven to earth by her mother Kamadhenu (symbol of prosperity) in order to bring all sorts of prosperity here. This is usually performed after the harvest of first crop of paddy. Godavari (a small boy entering a wooden structure carved in the shape of a cow) is taken to the houses in the locality where they welcome her with the harvested grains. It is believed that once the 'cow' comes to a place,

the area gets rid of its scarcity. While the boy dances, those accompanying *Godavari* sings songs in praise of Annapoorneshwari, the deity of food grains. The name of this Goddess is mentioned in *Chimmaanakkali*, another folk art form of *Kolathunadu*, all these denoting that a group of people or society who considered food grain as their Goddess were behind the origin of such art forms and rituals. The practice of Shift cultivation is which existed during a period is also described elaborately in *Chimmaanakkali*.

Thus the farming practices of each locality had deep rooted influence on the traditions beliefs of the community and vice versa. The indigenous knowledge has been observed to be the accumulation of the ancestral wisdom carried over through generations. Many of the rituals are also embedded in the traditional wisdom with sufficient rationale generally related to the rural life activities of the farming sector.

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