

Fertility Concept in a Ritual an Anthropological Explanation of “Pandal Pattu”

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ABSTRACT Kurichiyans are one of the Scheduled Tribes of Kerala practicing agriculture. Pandal pattu is an initiation ritual for girls. It is an elaborate ritual with group singing which act as a meta-social form for expressing the social relationships of the actors, or participants in the shape of concrete images or symbols. Some of the concepts related with fertility are also expressed and consequent linking of every individual to his own culture.

INTRODUCTION

In any society whether it is a caste or a tribe, ceremonies and rituals play a significant role in the smooth functioning of political, religious, economic and social spheres. In the case of tribal societies, ceremonies are expensive with regard to their income. However they celebrate each and every ceremony with due consideration and sanctity, as these ceremonies and rituals have certain social values. More over it express group behaviour, which includes beliefs and customs of the group concerning life and culture.

According to Radcliffe-Brown, "rituals in a culture are meaningful activities that are considered valuable and which are collective expression of sentiments. Certain rituals also express and sustain the corporate identity of social groups. Ritual actions functions to maintain the dialectical relationship between the individual mind and the communal order through the mediation of collective representations. Actually these collective representations also have a social function. In this paper an attempt has been made to analyse the symbolic activities of fertility concept in a female initiation ritual called 'pandalpattu' performed by the Kurichiyans, an agricultural tribe of Wayanad District.

ORIGIN MYTH OF KURICHIYAR

In the distant past before creation, they sky was on the top and the earth lies far below covered by the sea. At that time Vadakkari Bhagavathi, the Kurichiya deity had a dream in which the almighty ordered her to find out a place to create

1001 castes. God also allowed her to move the sea side wards and then starts work. Young virgins were given as labourers. On completion of the work the worker went out to meet the God and asked for remuneration. But he objected to give the remuneration before examining the quality of the work. God created a bird called 'Chenthamarapakshi' (bird form a red lotus) and asked the bird to fly around the earth and find out the quality of the work. After examination the bird found out a fault that in one place the work was incomplete. Two hills were standing close to each other without touching one another. There was also water in between these hills. On both the hills god created and placed 18 human castes, different types of animals and plants. Kurichiya believe that they are one among them.

SOCIETY

Kurichiyans are a matrilineal tribe of Kerala distributed mainly in Wayanad and Kannur districts. They are also known as 'Hill Brahmins'. The word Kurichiyans is derived from two words 'kuri' and 'chiyans'. The word 'kuri' means target and 'chiyans' means people. So Kurichiyans are the people who can shoot at the target. This is an indication that they are experts in archery. They exhibit pollution with all the other tribes and castes except Nairs and Namboothiris.

Generally their houses are found in clusters and cluster of houses in one settlement is called 'mittom' also known as 'tharavadu'. A lineage head called 'karanavar' heads a 'mittom'. In addition to 'karanavar', kurichiya society includes medicine man, and other social

functionaries such as 'pittan'. Joint family system is common among the kurichiyans. Society is divided into lineages headed by lineage heads. There are lots of rituals and ceremonies among Kurichiyans, and 'pandalpattu' is an initiation ritual found disappearing today due to economic constraints.

PANDAL PATTU CEREMONY

The 'pandal pattu', a female initiation ritual is performing before a girl's menarche and after the ear boring ceremony. Girls from all the mittoms of the same lineage are invited by the 'karanavan' (lineage head) to participate in the ceremony. Odd numbers of girls are generally selected based on their availability.

After fixing a date in consultation with relatives and other important persons of the lineage, Karanavan send message to all the 'tharavads' (minimum lineage division) to send their girls required for the function. In addition to the girls, their parents and maternal uncles are also invited for the function. They generally organize this function in the Karanavan's mittom and Tuesday and Friday are considered auspicious.

A temporary shed called 'pandal' is constructing for the performance of this ritual. All the male members of the mittom participate and the work is starting in the previous day of the performance. The pillars of the pandal are erected with the help of a particular tree called 'palamaram' (a tree with white juice when cuts) and no other trees are used for this. Grass or coconut leaf is used for thatching the roof. Actually the 'paalamaram' symbolises fertility as the white juice of this tree is considered as the discharge of a male at the time of sexual acts.

The size of the pandal depends on the expected number of invitees. Usually the invitees with their girls reached the Karanavan's house in the evening of the previous day itself. Food and accommodation for the invitees are arranged in the Karanavan's house.

Like any other ceremony, pandalpattu also involves a ceremonial bath. On the day of the ceremony all the invitees along with their girls have to take bath in the nearby stream with the oil given by the eldest female member of that mittom. This oil was kept in the sacred place of the settlement or temple. The girls along with their maternal uncle's wife and eldest female member of the mittom go to the riverside and after taking

ceremonial bath they return to the mittom where the function was arranged.

One of the social functionaries sprinkles 'punniahham' (sacred water) over the girls and the surroundings where the ritual is performing. One of the eldest female members applies sandal wood paste on the forehead of the girls and they will be taken to the pandal. In the pandal the girls will be seated in a row on the order of their age from left to right.

One of the social functionaries begins to recite the 'pandalpattu' song, which will be repeated by others. At this time the karanavan's wife tie the tali (sacred thread) around the neck of each of the invited girls. Karanavan is preparing these tali for the girls of his lineage.

Actually the 'pandalpattu' song summarise the conduct rules and codes of a girl as wife, mother and daughter. It also symbolise sanction requested to gods and goddesses for their blessings. This ceremony is actually a transformation from childhood to adulthood or an initiation to adulthood. In effect this ritual is seen as a kind of adjustive procedure for setting the disturbance caused by the diachronic play of life as change or movement across the backdrop of a structurally compartmented socio cultural space.

After singing the pandal pattu song for sometime, each of the invited girls will be given a brass jug filled with water. This is covered with a plantain leaf. Then they will be asked to insert one finger inside the jug piercing the plantain leaf. In one way this enactment symbolises the sexual act and pandalpattu ceremony can also be considered as an initiation ceremony for marriage. However the girls will not be allowed to begin conjugal life until their puberty ceremony is completed. After the rituals the girls and other invitees were given a grand feast.

CONCLUSION

Van Gennep recognised that the ritual acts did not merely shift the individual or group from one category to another, but in themselves were expressive symbolic enactments of the transformations. He generalised the meanings of this passage symbolism in his well-known schema, 'separation', 'transition', and 'incorporation' (1960: 20). When we examine these schemas by taking the example of pandalpattu ceremony we can see that here symbolic acts such as ceremonial bath express

separation, others like tying of 'tali' or sacred thread express incorporation.

In most cultures these kinds of rituals act as a meta-social form for expressing the social relationships of the actors, or participants in the shape of concrete images or symbols. More over it should be viewed in terms of social control system, a generalised medium of interaction in most instances linking every individual to his own culture or other cultures through significant and shared life meanings.

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