

Mundiyānkalaṣam: An Eco-cultural Ritual of Ancient Farming Community

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ABSTRACT In the ancient farming communities many rituals were associated with agriculture and allied operations. Most of these practices have been discarded today due to modernization and mechanization of life. This paper explores the ecological and socio-cultural dimensions of an agriculture related ancient ritual, *mundiyānkalaṣam*. Its relevance to agricultural operations, conservation of nature and propagation of healthy social practices in community life has been examined. The Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) tools were used for data collection.

INTRODUCTION

Kerala is situated on the south-western-most tip of India. The Arabian Sea borders the western boundary of the State and the eastern side is covered by the mighty Western Ghats. The Western Ghats form a continuous mountainous wall broken by a few gaps and the Ghats form the abode of several primitive tribes (Iyer 1936). The climate is humid and tropical with two monsoons and a long summer which results in the land being evergreen throughout the year. All these made Kerala develop a unique culture, tradition and history of its own (Panikkar 1999). With plenty of rain and sunshine, the land is ideal for agriculture and paddy cultivation; the main occupation of the people during the ancient days. Many traditional practices, rites and rituals are associated with paddy cultivation. Many of these practices are intertwined with the social life and cultural practices of the people that even today the presence of paddy grain or rice is inevitable in almost all auspicious functions.

Agricultural Ritual of Ancient Times

Ancient farming was fully dependent upon weather and the farmers were cautious about the

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uncertainties of the climatic conditions. Because of these uncertainties, the ancients must have begun to practice many rites, rituals and prayers were offered to gods and goddesses to protect the crops and cattle and to bestow blessings to get a good yield.

To quote Wallbank and Taylor (1949) "primitive man responded to his environment, of which he was almost completely ignorant, by attempting to propitiate what he feared. The ancient gods were vengeful deities who demanded blood sacrifices, and the rules of religious conduct were cast in negative form, as taboos." When man found that the agricultural production fell beyond his collective capacity, he attributed it to the deity he adored. *Mundiyān*¹ is one of such deities worshipped by him. The ritual practiced by farmers to protect their cattle is known as *Mundiyānkalaṣam*. *Mundiyānkāvu* is seen in Palghat area of Kerala state and is the cult spot for the worship of *Mundiyān* (Namboothri 1989). Ancients considered *Mundiyān* as the god of cattle and his ire may cause harm to cattle. Besides, people folk together and sing hymns in praise of *Mundiyān*. If pleased with all these, it is believed that he will bestow his blessings on cattle. The modernization of agricultural practices in the State might have forced the farmers to abandon many of the rituals, but the ethno-cultural relevance and the ecological utility urges a revival (Vasudevan 2007).

Objectives

1. To examine the ecological and socio-cultural dimensions of an agricultural related ancient ritual.
2. To analyse the influence of *Mundiyânkalaṣam* to agricultural operations, conservation of nature and social practices.

Study Area

The primary data for the investigation were collected from a traditional agricultural village, Vandazhy of Alathur taluk of Palghat district. *Veluthâkal* family of Vandazhy with more than 150 years of agricultural history was identified for the purpose of collecting data. The authors also visited a *Mundiyânkâvu* at MLA road, Munderoor panchayat, Kongaad, Palghat district and elicited data. Both the places are well connected by public transport system.

METHODOLOGY

Participatory Rural Appraisal (Chambers 1983) was the main approach used to draw information on *Mundiyânkalaṣam*. Farmers and farm labourers formed the focus group and the information was confirmed only after consultation with eighty- two year old V. Karunakarankutty Nair, and V.Venugopal, members of *Veluthâkkal* family, who were regular performers of *Mundiyânkalaṣam* and are experts in traditional agricultural practices and rituals. Data were also collected from Sri Balagangadharan M.P. 'Karthika,' Kongaad, Palghat district a retired headmaster and an expert in local history.

The data collected through discussions with the focus group were used to analyze the ecological and socio-cultural aspects of this primitive ritual. The PRA tools such as seasonal calendar, time-line, transect walk and Venn diagram were the main techniques used for the appraisal of the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Karkadakam the last month of the Malayalam calendar corresponding to June-July is the rainy season in Kerala. Torrential and continuous rain is the characteristic of this month and most of the time people remain indoors.

Karkadakam means crab in Sanskrit. This is a period with little or no agricultural activity. In olden days, it was a time when people suffered a lot of hardships due to unemployment, having hardly anything to eat, with many diseases often ending in death. To develop and improve individual and community hygiene and health, many religious rituals were practiced during this month. Various 'health treatments' like rice porridge with medicines, body massages etc. were done during this time. This month is also known as '*Râmâyana mâsom*'² with much religious significance. Another important religious ritual observed during this month is the "*Sivothike-vekkal*" or inviting *Mahâlakshmi* (Goddess of prosperity) into one's own house. As a part of this ritual, the household and its surroundings are cleaned and all unwanted things and wastes are burned; helping to develop community hygiene and health. In the opinion of the famous traditional ayurvedic physician (Moose 2007), the month *Karkadakam* is significant physically, religiously and socially – health wise, spiritually and environmentally.

During the night of the new moon of *Karkadakam*, *Mundiyânkalaṣam* is conducted and after a few days, agricultural activities start. The traditional custom is that the ritual should not be completed in one day; so, the programmes are scheduled in such a manner that it begins at night by around 10'o clock and concludes by 2 am early next morning. The members of the family who conducts the *kalaṣam* will be on fast on that sacred day and they will take food only after the completion of the *kalaṣam*. The ritualistic worship or performance or *pûja* is done in a *kalam* or figure drawn inside the *ara*, the room where grains are stored. Two figures, *Uthamathil Kalam* (Fig. 1) and *Adharmathil Kalam* (Fig. 2) are drawn and in each figure the ritual is performed.

Uthamam means auspicious. Using *bhasmam*³, a square is drawn and is divided into eighteen small squares. In each of the small squares, the leaf tip of plantain, locally known as *nâkkila* is placed. On this *nâkkila*, oiled wicks either in *cherâth*⁴ or in small pieces of curved sheathing leaf bases of plantain are placed except in the central two or three squares where three *idangazhi*⁵ paddy is placed. Small balls are made out of cow dung and a twig of basil (*Ocimum sanctum*) is stuck into each. This

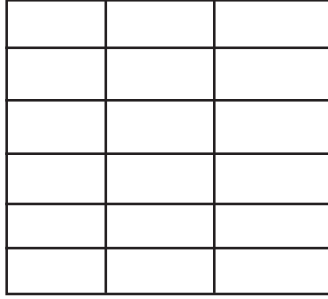


Fig. 1. Uthamathil Kalam

represents *pillayâr* or *ganapathi*⁶ and this is also placed in the squares. Other things that are placed in the squares are a little *payasom*⁷ and three *idangazhi* of cleaned rice barn. On the south-east corner of the *kalam* a lighted oil lamp is placed.

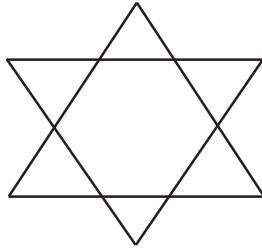


Fig. 2. Adharmathil Kalam

Adharmam means an evil act. The ritual is conducted in a *kalam* consisting of two equilateral triangles; one erect and the other inverted, placed one above the other, so that six triangles and a central hexagon are formed. To draw two perfect triangles, first a circle is drawn using *bhasmam*, then the triangles inside the circle, the corners of the triangles touching the circle and after drawing the triangles, the circle is erased. *Nâkkila* is placed in all the six small triangles and in the central hexagon. In all the *nâkkila*, oiled wicks in *cherâth* are placed except in the hexagon where three *idangazhi* of paddy is placed. Other offerings which are kept in the small triangles are flaked rice, parched paddy, gur, boiled pea (*Vigna sinensis*), boiled mungo (*Vigna mungo*), chicken curry, country liquor and *doṣa*⁸

The Kalaṣam

The landlord or the owner of the cattle acts as the priest and he does the *pûja*. First of all,

Ganapathi pûja is conducted. After the *pûja*, a coconut is broken by striking it on the ground. After the *Ganapathi pûja*, *pûja* is done in all the squares of the *Uthamathil Kalam* using sandal wood paste and water. After the *pûja*, the priest comes out of the *ara* and the door is closed. It is believed that the *Mundiyân* now comes and consumes the offerings. After ten minutes, the door is opened with clapping hands and the *pûja* in the *Adharmathil Kalam* is conducted exactly as in the *Uthamathil Kalam*. After *pûja*, a torch is made by wounding cloth at one end of a two foot long wooden stake, dipped in oil and lighted. Using this torch, all the oiled wicks in both the figures are lighted. The priest comes out of the room, closes the door, leaving the offerings to *Mundiyân*. After ten minutes the door is opened just as in the previous case. Now the farmer, labourers and others present go to the cattle shed carrying betel leaves, a basil twig, sandal wood paste and the offerings of both the figures. On the way they will chant three times " *Chathô Kulavô Kuu* " meaning, Demon goddess come out, protect and bless our cattle. On the forehead of cattle sandalwood paste marks are made and offerings except the liquor are fed to the cattle and everyone prays to *Mundiyân* to keep their animals healthy and fit during the agricultural activities. Afterwards the liquor is consumed, then all the participants come back to the *ara* and a community meal is served with the offerings. *Mundiyânkalaṣam* is also conducted for the safe delivery of female cattle. *Pûja* for this can be done on any new moon night but only ten days after the delivery, which is the period of *pela* or unclean days.

According to Aravindshan (2007), offering and sacrificing of domestic fowls and consumption of liquor is a part of the most primitive type of celebrations or rituals. Cultural parallels are seen between *Mundiyânkalaṣam* with other ancient folk rituals of Kerala like *Thendan ada*⁹, Thendachen *Theyyam*¹⁰, agriculture related hunting¹¹ (Unnikrishnan 1997) and magic cults. The magic cults were used by ancients to control the invincible forces of nature that turned hostile to human beings (Frazer 1976) Ancient religious and magic rituals had been going hand in hand. In India different types of *Yanthram* – the holy power charged figures or diagrams – like *Ganapathiyanthram*, *Moolatrikônayanthram*, *Sudarṣanayanthram* and *Sûliniyanthram* etc. are very significant in

magic practices (Varier and Gurukul 1994). It is very interesting to note the similarity of star signs seen in some *yanthram* like *Sudarśana-yanthram* and *Sūliniyanthram* of magic cult with that of the *Adharmathil Kalam*. Similar star signs are also seen in the opened right palm of *Dhanwantari* - the sage of *ayurveda* and an incarnation of Lord *Visnu* - in the left arm, he carries the *Amrt*- the drink which gives immortality. Again such star is seen on *Chakarâyudham* or *Srichakra* or disc, the weapon of Lord *Visnu*, which symbolizes the power to annihilate all evil men; Lord *Visnu* is worshipped as the mentor of good and the destroyer of evil.

Mundiyankâvu

On a field visit to a *mundiyankâvu* the authors could gather a lot of information through a personal interview with Sri Balagangadharan M.P. Here in the *kâvu*, two granite stones, about one foot high are instituted on a raised platform without a roof under a tree in a small open area. On closer examination we could see a human figure sculptured on the granite stones - the *Mundiyan*. After the harvest in *Makaram*, (Malayalam month) corresponding to January-February, it is believed that the earth goddess is in her monthly periods and so she is given rest - without any activity in the soil. At the end of *Makaram*, on the day of *ucharal*- a ritual in connection with the storage of seeds and grains, in front of the door of the store house, *Mundiyankalaśam* or the *pûja* for *Mundiyan* is conducted. The offerings are as in the case *Mundiyankalaśam* described earlier. Usually the head of the family or anybody can act as the priest. Here, no elaborate rituals and ceremonies are practiced as in the earlier case. Those who do not like meat and liquor can do the *kalasam* using paddy grain, rice barn and other direct plant products and it is called *uthamathilpûja*.

The most interesting aspect is that, *Mundiyan* is not a *mantramûrthy* - no prescribed prayers or rituals for *Mundiyan*; devotees can directly pray for the benevolence of their desires. Protection of cattle from all ailments, wild animals, accidents during agricultural activities and a good yield are the usual requests to the deity.

Recent Modifications

According to the informant, Sri Balagangadharan, some new constructions have come up

in the *kâvu*. Three foot high masonry wall with a small iron gate is built around the platform where *Mundiyan* is instituted; a multistoried oil lamp in front of the gate, a box for cash offerings in front and to the side of the gate and two feet broad extension of foundation around and outside the wall, are new additions.

Eco-psychological Effect

The rituals like *Mundiyankalaśam* can not be regarded as a mere external ritual but a practice with definite meanings. Shifting the responsibility of protection of cattle and production of good yield to gods, help people acquire confidence and mental peace and at the same time the cattle get nutritious food, rich in protein, vitamins and carbohydrates along with the usual 'health treatments'¹² during the monsoons, thus making the cattle fit for the next season's strenuous work. The cleaned rice barn of red rice contains a lot of vitamin like B-complex. It was a common practice in olden days to eat rice barn mixed with *gur*. It is further observed that the *Mundiyankalaśam* is a mandatory ritual practiced in all agricultural families of Palghat district even though they fail to take care of the 'health treatments' to the cattle.

There is an ecological reason for leaving the land free for some time after the harvest in *Makaram*; first, it will help in the rejuvenation of the soil and secondly, it is the summer season and with the exception of a few summer showers; rainy season will start only after three months. In ancient Kerala paddy cultivation was purely rain fed. The purpose of *Mundiyankalaśam* is same, but the differences in the two localities must be the regional variations or careful and intentional modifications according to the situations.

This ritual shows the ecological consciousness of ancients and the importance and reverence given to the agricultural animals or the flora and fauna in general. In ancient agriculture, plants, animals and men formed a single unit.

Not many studies have been conducted to analyse the socio-cultural and ecological impacts of the agriculture related ancient rituals. However, there are studies which has explained the ancient rituals (Frazer 1976; Unnikrishnan 1977; Namboothiri 1989; Chandera 2004) But, the present study highlights its relevance in contemporary practices for the betterment and well

being of farm animals, nature conservation and social relationships and practices.

The function of primitive religion is much more direct, concrete and practical. It is not to interpret life but to obtain those things which are reckoned needful to its existence (Iyer 1936) *Mundiyankalaṣam* can be a remnant of a primitive ritual, when people began to settle and started cultivation as a way of life. As in the case of many other rituals and practices, *Mundiyankalaṣam* also might have fashioned through centuries.

CONCLUSION

To get things done with the minimum of explanation and instructions, many things are encapsulated in religion in India. In modern mechanized age, the observance of rituals may appear to be old fashioned, but their inner meanings and the scientific principles have to be examined and the possibilities to utilize them in the modern age to be explored. Each ritual has its own significance in the ecological niche where it is performed. When the socio-cultural and ecological changes take place, the rituals may sound meaningless. But, when these practices are deeply analyzed, one can observe that their roots are fixed in the conservation of flora and fauna of a region. The *Mundiyankalaṣam*, although obsolete these days had the virtue for social bonding and reinforcement of social solidarity in the man-nature relationship.

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NOTES

1. Although it has been mentioned in the folklore dictionary, (Namboothiri 1989) that *Mundiyan* is a forest goddess; but, from our field experience it was revealed as a male god.
2. During *Karkadakam*, reading of the sacred epic *Rāmāyana* is a usual practice for mental peace and solace.
3. Fine off-white powder prepared by the smoldering of cow dung and the powder is smeared on the body, arms and forehead, after bathing. There are certain rules for smearing the *bhasmam*. The preparation of *bhasmam*

is a ritual performed by unmarried young girls on the *Sivarāthri* day; festival of Lord *Siva*.

4. Small saucer shaped earthen vessel.
5. A country measure used in olden days to measure grains, one measure is approximately 500-600 grams of paddy depending on the variety.
6. Lord *Gaṅṅa* or *Vigneswar* - elephant headed god, son of Lord *Siva* and goddess *Pārvati*, is capable of removing all types of hindrances during any function.
7. A sweet preparation made of rice, coconut milk and *gur*. *Gur* is a product obtained on concentrating sugarcane juice with or without prior purification into a solid or semi solid state.
8. A common dish of South India especially of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, made from leavened rice flour, fried on a frying pan and flavored with ghee.
9. In the Chemacheri Bhagavathy temple, Palayoor, Chowghat *taluk*, Tricuh district, Kerala state, special *pūja* is conducted for the well being of the domestic animals. Women of the locality purified with religious observance (*vritā*) and offering special prayers for a few days, folk together in the temple compound to make specially baked bread known as *Thendan ada* and offered it to the deity *Thendan*. By performing this ritual, it is believed that the deity will protect and keep all domestic and agricultural animals healthy and bless their homes with prosperity. This ritual is done on the day of *makarachōva* or the first tuesday of the Malayalam month, *Makaram*.
10. *Theyyam* is the common name for the gods and goddesses in the ancient ritualistic art form of northern Kerala. The similarity of *Mundiyankalaṣam* and *Theyyam* is in the materials offered - meat and liquor among other things in *kalayāmvella* or *afigure* and in the community meal served sharing the offerings during the late hours of night. Please see Unnikrishnan 1997 and Chandra 2004 for more details
11. When the aborigines turned to agriculture and cattle rearing, they almost left hunting and it became necessary only to protect their cattle and crops from wild animals. In northern Kerala, before such huntings, the hunters met in a cult spot known as *ūrpally*, where gods and goddess who are believed to relish meat and liquor were worshipped. Later, part of the hunted meat is offered to these gods and goddess.
12. Health treatment means a special medicinal food given to agricultural animals during the monsoon. It is prepared by mixing *gur* with pounded and powered tender chicken and *ayurvedic* medicines. This is forcefully administrated to the cattle with the aid of bamboo tubes.

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