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## Performance of Religious Rituals and the Making of Histories : A Critique of *Muthappankalam*

### Introduction

*Religious rituals are a remarkable constituent of the spectrum of cultural performances. They are reflective and reflexive of the culture. Culture, as Richard Schechner points out, is a paradigm of process. It is hence fluid and multi-vocal. Academics from various disciplines, including ritual studies, addressed rituals as hegemonic instruments of diverse socio-cultural institutions. This function is carried out by creating mystic or fanciful events. The paper "Performance of Religious Rituals and the Making of Histories: A Critique of Muthappankalam" analyses the performance of muthappankalam, a religious ritual practiced among certain Hindu communities in Kerala as a means of ancestor worship. The article particularly looks into two instances of muthappankalam performed in two coastal villages in the Thrissur district of Kerala. Both of them were performed as commissioned by two families who belong to a fishermen community called Araya.*

### Objective

*The current study aims to examine the role that the performance of muthappankalam plays in the history-making process regarding the families or community concerned.*

### Research Methodology

*Ritual analysis from a performance perspective facilitates understanding the myriad effects of a ritual and the means of generating cultural paradigms since the major concern of performance studies is what a performance does more than what it is. The ritual's process, structure, and function are analysed using the performance lens.*

### Conclusion

*The findings indicate that while helping to maintain solidarity among the family or community, the practice of muthappankalam contributes to the construction of a mystic past for the family or community concerned. This mystic past is carried over to generations through the annual performance of the ritual. Consequently, it erases the 'actual' past or history of the family or community and constructs a new one that begins only from the Chera period. Moreover, this 'newly' constructed mystic past upholds social hierarchy. Thus, the ritual ensures the conscious or unconscious internalisation of social hierarchy and the lowered status of the community concerned.*

**Keywords:** Cultural Performance, Religious Ritual, Mystic past, History-making, Muthappankalam

## Introduction

Religious homogenisation among Hindus in contemporary India is on a faster track than ever before. Kerala also witnesses the same. Though it is more explicit and political now, it is undeniable that the process was always active at various levels. This process takes place through numerous elements such as homogenisation or standardisation of rituals and rites, restoration or renovation of old temples and construction of new temples at the spaces used for 'extra-temple' worship, employing Brahmin priests to regulate and guide temples and related activities irrespective of communities who own them, assimilations in ceremonies and festival activities etc. The long term impact of all these attempts is the reconsolidation of social hierarchy in accordance with the *Varna* system. Religious rituals have a significant role in the unacknowledged normalisation of this system.

Religious rituals are a remarkable constituent of the spectrum of cultural performances. They are reflective and reflexive of the culture. Culture, as Richard Schechner noted in the preface to Victor Turner's *The Anthropology of Performance*, is a "paradigm of process" (8). It is hence fluid and multi-vocal. Academics from various disciplines, including ritual studies, addressed rituals as hegemonic instruments of diverse socio-cultural institutions. This function is carried out by creating mystic or fanciful events. The current study analyses the performance of *Muthappankalam*, a religious ritual practiced among certain Hindu communities in Kerala as a means of ancestor worship. The article particularly looks into two instances of *Muthappankalam* performed in two coastal villages in the Thrissur district of Kerala. Both of them were commissioned by two families who belong to a fishing community called Araya and performed under the guidance of Mannan priests. The ritual is analysed from a performance perspective to understand the role that the practice of the ritual plays in the history-making process regarding the families or community concerned.

### *Muthappankalam*: Structure, Process, and Function

*Muthappankalam* is the *Kalamezhuthupattu* offered to the ancestor 'deities' in central Kerala. *Muthappan* is a general term used to denote an ancestor. The ritual is performed as part of annual events held at family temples or ancestor homesteads among certain communities of lowered status. Though different communities can commission the ritual, the right to perform it is vested in certain marginalised communities such as Mannan, Velan, etc. The whole performance is uniquely comprised of different art forms such as drawing, music, dance, and 'drama.'

The ritual begins with *koora kodukkal*. *Koora* is a long cloth, either red or white in colour, given to the priest by the eldest member of the family that commissions the ritual.

The priest spreads it above the *panthal* (canopy) in the east-west direction under which the *kalam* is to be drawn. *Kalam* is the image of the ancestor that is drawn on the ground using natural powders of five colours: white, black, red, green, and yellow. The artists may prepare desired colours by combining these powders. The image can either be a portrait (*roopakkalam*) or a symbolic geometric representation (*padmam*). If more than one ancestor is worshipped in a single *kalam*, then the *kalam* will be a combination of the two. Both the instances taken for analysis here are combinations of *roopakkalam* and *padmam*. An oil lamp with burning wicks is placed on one side accordingly. A coconut on a small heap of paddy in a plantain leaf is kept near to the lamp. A panicle of areca palm is placed on the coconut. The *panthal* is decorated with tender coconut leaves, garlands, mango leaves, and all. Once the drawing is completed, four more oil lamps are placed on each side of the *kalam*. Then eight small heaps of rice and paddy in plantain leaves are kept around the *kalam*. It is an offering to the Guardians of the Directions (*Ashtadikpalakar*). *Muthappan*'s possessions, cane stick and anklet, are also kept on small platforms (*peedam*) accordingly. Betel leaves, tobacco, and areca nuts are also offered.

The Second stage of the ritual is *kalampooja*. Once the arrangements are done accordingly, the priest gives a panicle of areca palm to a person from the family for a symbolic cleaning of the surroundings of the *kalam*. This person is the one who is supposed to be possessed by *Muthappan*(s). He is called *kalathil kaimal* or *komaram*. After getting the priest's blessing, he sweeps all sides of the *kalam* and sprinkles water to 'purify' the space. Then he performs the first stage of *pooja* as directed by the priest. The *pooja* is performed to give life to the image. After this, the *kalamkaiyyelkkal* is performed. It is the formal handing over of the *kalam* to the *kalathil kaimal* by the priest. Then he gives *dakshina* to the priest and the priest blesses him. Then the next stage of the *pooja* is performed using water (*theertdham*), sandal paste (*chandanam*), flowers (*pushpam*), incense (*dhoomam*), and lighted wicks (*agni*). *Thiriyuzhichil* is also performed. Instruments like *chenda* (native drum) are also played in the background.

The third stage is the performance of *Thottampattu*. The priest and his team sing the invoking song with the accompaniment of native instruments. Blessings of most of the major deities in the Hindu pantheon and their regional incarnations are sought in the beginning section of the song. Then the narration moves on to details of the context of *Muthappan*(s)'s birth, childhood, and education. After narrating *Muthappan*(s)'s naming ceremony, the *pooja* is repeated for once. Then they narrate *Muthappan*(s)'s childhood, his enthusiasm for learning, his journeys to become a master of occult science, his return to home, and the installation of various deities at their homestead as their family deities. Then the final stage of *pooja* is performed.

The final stage of the ritual is possession. Once the song comes to a closure by inviting *Muthappan*(s) to possess someone to accept the offerings and bless the family,

instrumental music gets intensified and the final stage of *pooja* is performed at once. During the *pooja*, the *komaram* (oracle) gets possessed by *Muthappan*(s). The possessed person erases the *kalam* and delivers a dance-like performance in frenzy and is called *Muthappanthullal*, meanwhile, he also dismantles the canopy and removes the *koora*. He may use the cane stick and anklet during the dance. The 'drama' part begins by this time. Men who gathered there settle him down by pouring water onto his head. They make him wear a new white cloth (*kodimundu*) on his demand. Then the person in trance sits on the ground. He is served with tender coconut to drink and betel leaves, tobacco, and areca nut to chew. When he attains a comparatively stable position, *Muthappan*(s)'s favourite dishes are kept in front of him on his demand. He calls the elder member of the family to talk. The family member presents their needs and worries to their ancestor. *Muthappan*(s) ensure them that they will take care of everything and their wishes will be fulfilled. They express their satisfaction with the arrangements that the family made for him. They distribute the *prasadam* (dishes offered to them) to the family members and some random spectators. With a final session of frenzied dance with the cane stick and anklet, *Muthappan*(s) leave *komaram*'s body. Thus the ritual ends.

In Schechner's view, ritual is “a way for people to connect to a collective, to remember or construct a mystic past, to build social solidarity, and to form or maintain a community” (87). He has also observed the functions of rituals as to entertain, to create beauty, to mark or change identity, to make or foster community, to heal, to teach or persuade, and to deal with the sacred and the demonic (46). Religious rituals often play multiple functions that can both be explicit and implicit. *Muthappankalam* is performed to make the family's ancestor(s) happy and it is believed that their satisfaction will safeguard the living members and usher prosperity upon the family. Members of the family gather for this annual ritual and unanimously work for the success of the occasion. This contributes to the solidarity of the family. The ritual provides a sense of security, both psychological and spiritual. It is the primary or explicit function of the ritual. The song, *Thottampattu*, serves as a reminder of the prosperous past of the family. Through this, a moment of pride is mediated to the participants. Being a backward community, this moment plays a significant role in their identity formation.

A temporary reversal of power hierarchy regarding caste can also be seen in the ritual. The families who commissioned the ritual belong to a fishing community called Araya and the priests are from the Mannan community. Araya is a backward caste and Mannan is a scheduled caste. In the ritual, the former has to seek blessings from the latter by touching their feet and the latter plays the most significant role in the spiritual and mindful existence of the former. The Dalit priest becomes 'guru' of the family. Thus the ritual temporarily empowers the Dalit community.

A crucial function that is carried out through the ritual is the construction of a mystic past. This mystic past is carried over to generations as a consequence of the annual

rendition of the same. This takes the form of a problematic oral history of the people which is 'recorded' in their memory. In effect, it replaces their 'actual' past from their memory and makes them believe that this mystic past is the real one.

### Historical Implications

The song(s) of contemporary *muthappankalam* has three parts. The first part is to invoke all the major deities of the Hindu pantheon and their regional incarnations, the ancestors, and the gurus. It begins with the Hindu concept of *thrimoorthi* (trinity of supreme divinity) who is in charge of *srushti* (creation), *stdhithi* (preservation), and *samharam* (destruction). All of the living creatures along with the sky and the earth are also invoked. During this session, each of the major deities is mentioned in connection with the present temples concerned in central Kerala. They include Kodungallur Bhagavathi temple, Mukundapuram temple, Thiruvanchikkulam Shiva temple, Thriprayar Rama temple, Palappetti Bhagavathi temple, Irinjalakkuda Koodalmanikyam temple, Thirunavaya temple, and Thirumandhamkunnu temple. Along with them, deities such as Veerabhadran, Kandakarnan, Vethalam, Anthimahakalan, Vettaykkorumakan, Hanuman, Kappiri, Nayadi, Brahmarakshassu, and Serpent deities like Maninagam, Karinagam, Nagayakshi, and Nagarajavu are also mentioned.

One of the two instances taken for analysis was performed at a homestead in the village of Padinjare Vemballur in Kodungallur taluk and the other was performed at a family temple in the village of Nattika in Chavakkad taluk. Folklorists and scholars opine that the roots of the ritual can be traced back to the Sangam period (3 BCE to 3 CE). During the period, the regions concerned were under Chera rule and the kings were followers of Buddhism. It is also noted that Buddhism prevailed in Kerala during the reign of Ashoka (264-227 BC). Hinayana Buddhism was in practice until the sixth century and by the seventh century it was transformed into Mahayana Buddhism. Later, Vajrayana Buddhism evolved. Being one of the most important port towns in the south-western corner of the subcontinent, Kodungallur is a significant place regarding history, culture, and religions. The region was a major centre of Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam in Kerala. All of the temples mentioned in the songs are as per their current status. Kodungallur temple is one of the major Bhadrakali temples in Kerala. In the song also, the deity is addressed as Bhadrakali, the daughter of Lord Shiva. At the same time, there is another prevalent myth regarding the deity – the Kannaki myth, which is closely related to the Jain-Buddhist past. Historians have observed that the temple was a Buddhist shrine and later it was integrated into Hinduism (C 32-33). Koodalmanikyam temple was a Jain temple and the Jain deity Bharateshwaran was assimilated as Bharata of the Hindu pantheon. Jainism was prevalent in South India until the seventh century. Shaiva and Vaishnava religions began to take over the position after this period (Panickassery 82). Ancestral worship and Mother (Goddess) worship have existed even before the flourishing of these religions including Shaktism in the region. Thirunavaya

temple was also a Buddhist shrine (Panickassery 94).

The second session of the song is the narration of *Muthappan's* birth and heroic life. Once the family achieves enough wealth, the ancestors wish to have an heir. Though both the families commissioned the ritual belong to a fishing community, nothing related to fishing or the sea is mentioned in the song. Instead, it is mentioned that they achieved prosperity through agrarian activities. The child(ren) was born to the couple(s) after several years of their marriage. Once they are born, the midwife blesses them so that they may see six Mamankam<sup>2</sup> and may live up to 128 years. Mamankam is observed as one of the contributions of Buddhism (Panickassery 94). One song is about one child (*Guru Muthappan*) and the other is about two (*Raman* and *Velappan*). There were three ancestors in the first *kalam*, but the narration doesn't tell anything about the life of the ancestors except *Guru Muthappan*. The parents celebrate their naming ceremony by inviting all of their relatives and the villagers. Before naming the kids, their father seeks suggestions from the elders, 'whether it should be Aryans' name, or Chozhans' name, or any other foreigners' name.' The elders confirm that what is most appropriate is to give them their own ancestors' names. Thus they name them *Guru* (first song), *Raman*, and *Velappan* (second song). This indicates that the people who lived in the region were familiar with Aryan, Chola, and other foreign people.

They are sent to an *ankakkalari* (school) at the age of seven. They were made to write "Harisree ganapathaaye" as an initiation ritual of learning. It is significant that in the early schools, i.e., during the Jain-Buddhist era, the initiation ceremony wasn't carried out by writing 'harisree' but with 'naanam monam.' It is the short form of 'namosthu jinathe'.<sup>3</sup> Kerala witnessed drastic social transformations during the sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries. That contributed to the formation of a unified Hindu religion based on the *Varna* system and the evolution of a hierarchical caste system during the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries. By establishing control over regional rulers, Brahmins became the sovereigns. Learning centres were set up in the model of Jain-Buddhist schools, but only Brahmins were allowed to learn. The lowered strata of society were restricted from getting educated under the Brahmin-centric rule. Hence it is obvious that *Muthappan* who belongs to the lowered strata got educated from either a Jain or Buddhist centre of learning. As per the song, *Muthappan(s)* learn the scripts of languages such as Aryan, Chola, Vattezhuthu, Neelezhuthu, and Malayalam. As they were not satisfied with the language learning, they learned *Kalarippayattu* from there itself. They return home after mastering the martial art. When their parents ask them about the lessons they have mastered, they sing the songs of Thirumandhamkunnu bhagavati, three deities of Thirishivaperur<sup>4</sup>, Thiruvanchikkulam Mahadevan (Shiva), Kali of Kodungallurkkavu.

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<sup>2</sup>Mamankam was a twelve-yearly medieval festival held on the banks of Bharathappuzha at Thirunavaya of the present Malappuram district.

<sup>3</sup>A closely related usage, 'naaneem moneem' still exists in the region which roughly means intelligence and consciousness. It is generally used to describe someone who doesn't know basic things.

<sup>4</sup>Vadakkumnathan temple, Thiruvampady temple, and Paramakkavu temple are denoted here.

Among the abovementioned temples, Thiruvanchikkulam Temple was built by the Cheras in the Kodungallur region. Historians have observed that Thrissur Vadakkumnathan temple and Kodungallur temple were Buddhist shrines. Kodungallur region was the capital of the Chera Empire and it was known as Mahodayapuram. Jain and Buddhist schools were also located in the region. Ilanko Adikal, the author of *Chilappathikaram*, lived in Thrikkanamathilakam in the same region<sup>5</sup>. He was a Jain and the work was originally written in Tamil. The language mentioned as Aryan here can be Sanskrit or Pali or both. The Chola/Chozha language is Tamil. *Vattezhuthu* was the ancient form of Tamil and Malayalam script. Later it was developed into *Kolezhuthu* and finally the modern Malayalam script in Kerala.

At the age of sixteen, *Muthappan(s)* expressed their enthusiasm to learn *mantra* and *tantra* for which they went to Pandya kingdom by leaving *Cheraman cherumalayalam* (Chera Empire). After mastering *mantra* and *tantra*, they met the deity Ottamulachi of Kalladikode (Palakkad district). They tell her that they are still not satisfied and wish to capture 21000 deities for special worship. She tests them to know whether they are skilful enough for that. Being happy with their determination and courage, she blesses them granting their wish. She instructs them to place the deities accordingly following *adhama* for those who are supposed to be treated in that way and *utthama* for those who are supposed to be treated in that way. In *adhama* custom of worship, liquor, and meat are used as offerings, and animal sacrifice is also performed. Neither liquor nor meat is used in *utthama* custom and sacrifice is performed symbolically. *Adhama* custom can be seen in Vajrayana Buddhism which was also known as Tantric Buddhism. Therefore, it can be argued that the tantric tradition of the lowered strata has its roots in Vajrayana Buddhism.

*Muthappan(s)* then visit pilgrim sites such as Pazhani, Madhura, Rameshwaram, and Gokarnam. On the way back, they visit Azhvanchery Thamprakkal to receive rightful honours. They return home and set up a sacred platform (*mullathara*) and a sacred grove (*kavu*) for the deities as directed by *Ottamulachi*. These deities turned out to be their family deities. Azhvanchery Thamprakkal was the feudal lord of Athavanad, and the titular head of Namboothiri Brahmins of Kerala. This indicates the community's submissiveness to the feudal system and the lordship of Azhvanchery Thamprakkal. It confirms the internalised social hierarchy based on caste. The hierarchical caste system in its modern form evolved after the decline of Chera rule and attained glory during the reign of Kulasekharas in the ninth century. The oral history of the family that is constructed and transmitted through the ritual doesn't acknowledge anything about either *Muthappan's* ancestors or their hereditary occupation. As per the narrative, *Muthappan*, the prodigy, was born and brought up in *Cheraman cherumalayalam*, but the conveyed image of the contemporary is as in the era of Kulasekharas. And it is all about Hindu and Hinduised deities, temples, pilgrim centres, and customs.

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<sup>5</sup>Thrikkanamathilakam is also known as Vanchinadu and Kunavayir kottam. The term 'kottam' is used to denote non-Brahminic centres of worship.

## Conclusion

The findings indicate that while helping to maintain solidarity among the family or community, the practice of *Muthappankalam* contributes to the construction of a mystic past for the family or community concerned. This mystic past is carried over to generations through the annual performance of the ritual. Consequently, it erases the 'actual' past or history of the family or community and constructs a new one that begins only from the Chera period. Moreover, this 'newly' constructed mystic past upholds social hierarchy. Thus, the ritual ensures the conscious or unconscious internalisation of social hierarchy and the lowered status of the community concerned.

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