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**Author(s)** Sangeeth T. P.

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# Socio Cultural Narratives Embedded in the Kolamthullal Tradition of The Kanisa Community

**Sangeeth T. P.**
Assistant Professor
KBS Govt. College, Thalassery

Across Kerala, traditional art forms reflect these social structures. Northern regions are renowned for Theyyam and Thira, whereas southern Kerala is known for ritual arts such as Padayani. Folklore not only preserves cultural memory but also reinforces community identity, with certain art forms historically associated with specific caste groups (Peter & Frank, 1991, p. 25). Caste distinctions are also reflected in patterns of worship and ritual performance. Durkheim's understanding of religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices centred around the sacred helps illuminate the social role of these ritual arts, which bind communities through shared symbols and ceremonies (2001, p. 46).

Rituals in Kerala encompass a wide range of purposes—including worship, fertility, exorcism (uchadana), and evocation (avahanam)—and many of these practices have traditionally been performed by particular castes and tribes (Vishnu Namboothiri, 2007, p. 43). Communities such as the Malayan, Vannan, and Mavilan are closely associated with Theyyam, while Nairs, Thiyyas, Chaliyas, and Asaris perform Poorakkali. Muslim communities preserve arts such as Oppana, Kolkkali, and Duffmuttu, whereas groups like the Marars and Malayas uphold musical traditions like Chendamelam. Some ritualistic forms, such as Kolamthullal performed by the Kanisa community, show striking parallels with practices like the Sinhalese yaktovil and Kerala's own Padayani.

Together, these diverse traditions highlight the deep interconnections between ritual, caste, and community in Kerala. They reveal how folklore functions not merely as artistic expression but as a vital mechanism through which communities articulate identity, negotiate social roles, and maintain continuity with the past.

**The material culture of the Kanisa community**

Accoding to Tony Blackshaw nowadays the word community can be seen every where from the writings of communication philosophers to business communities in the market. Benedict Anderson define community as 'imagined communities' which emrged 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* on account 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 beacause 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 descented 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)[i]. The expenses of their marriage was met by the villagers because they were the masters of *koodippallikkoodams* and also 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 leves). L K Anatha Krishna Aiyer says that "when he set out on his wedding jorney,he is accompznied 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)[ii].It was because they were the masters of kalari.Lalithambika says that Most of the menfolk of the Kanisas uused 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 like 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 Compte'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)[iii].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)[iv] .The name varies according to their use. *Acharakkuda* was given by this community in certain temples as a part of the existing custom. At poomalakkavu in Payyannur ,Kottiyoor and Kakkothkavu are some of the temples they still follow this custom. These *acharakkudas* are made only by men by taking *vratham* like abstaining from eating non vegetarian food.

Astrology was another major way of living of the Kanisas. By analysing 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 jacosely 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)[v]. 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 17 th 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 castesystem was prevailing and the knowledge in Sanskrit were the monoply of the Brahmins. Eventhough the Kanisas were a polluting caste, they had great knowledge in astrology 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. So we can assume that thety might have been migrated from a society in which they were allowed to learn Sanskrit. They had followed *gurukula* system of education in learning 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* inorder to distinguish it from *poithukalari*. Instance of going to ezhthupallis can be seen in the *bhairavan thottam* of Panar "*arikondachoriyunnu Maakkurikkalu , ariyilezhthangane padichu kunjan".* (Vishnu Namboothiri 2007,p.121)[vi]. 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 snake bytes. Along with medicines they had also used *mantras* for the cure of disease. Performing ritualistic artforms like *kalampattu, Kolamthullal, pooppada, akanalneekku* was another major source of income for the Kanisas. *Kalampattu* was performed by both higher castes and lower caste people. 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)[vii]. Kolamthullal was performed in houses as a pregnancy related ritual. According to the belief of the people if a woman doesnot got pregnant after many years of marriage,it is believed to be due to the influence of Gandharva who resides in her body. So inorder 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 oversll well being 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 lamb. 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 symbolises 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)[viii].

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). He will be accompanied by his companion

(*parikarmi*) which will include the singer and those who plays the instrument. 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 start 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)[ix]

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.

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, emrald etc. which 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 this 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 inevitale in this ritual.

**Similar artforms**

Padayani is a ritualistic artform 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 upto medam 11 at Kunnanthanam Madathilkavu.

There origin of padayani is shrouded in a myth that a demon named Darikan got a boon from Brahmav that he could not be killed by men or gods . With this boon he challenged everyone including including the gods. Then inorder to kill Darika, siva created kali and after killing Darika she returned without losing her anger .So inorder 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 neighbouring nadus the armymen would take rest and this artform 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)[x].

Different *kolams* are performed in padayani. *Ganapathi,marutha,sundarayakshi, andharayakshi,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 livelyhood and protected them. This may also reprent the five metal there being in use like gold ,silver, iron,copper and led. Kadammanitta Vasudevan Pilla also says that "these kolams are drawn by the people belonging to the kanisa and paraya community"(Kadammanitta,1993,p.16)[xi].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 was used for the light.

Padayani can be regarded as an agricuture festival . After harvesting the crops the people celebrated their hardwork 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

The Kolamthullal tradition of the Kanisa community stands as an important cultural expression that weaves together ritual practice, social identity, and communal memory. Far beyond its performative dimensions, Kolamthullal embodies a layered narrative system through which the Kanisa community articulates its relationship with the sacred, the social order, and the natural world. Its ritual gestures, symbols, and stories preserve indigenous knowledge and reveal how communities historically positioned within Kerala's caste structure negotiate meaning, authority, and cultural continuity.

The parallels Kolamthullal shares with other South Asian ritual forms—such as the Sinhalese *yaktovil* and the Padayani of central Kerala—highlight the deep intercultural flows that have shaped the region's ritual traditions. Yet, the Kanisa community's unique interpretation of these elements underscores their agency in preserving and redefining their cultural heritage. Through Kolamthullal, they sustain a distinct socio-cultural identity, transmit traditional wisdom across generations, and maintain a sense of collective belonging despite historical marginalization.

Ultimately, the study of Kolamthullal reveals that ritual arts are not merely aesthetic performances but vital cultural systems through which communities narrate their histories, assert their place in society, and preserve their worldview. The tradition continues to serve as a living testament to the Kanisa community's resilience and its enduring contribution to Kerala's diverse cultural landscape.

## End notes

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