

IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION THROUGH RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

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Abstract: Every society that have tried to construct and to renew its group identity in a continuous manner. Social scientists have proved that to create these identities the religious practices play a major role. The religious practices are always interrelated with the identities of cultural groups. It is a known fact that by bringing changes in the group identity, the culture can either be to the higher status or be the lower status. In such contexts how folk religious practices are understand in the Tamil society; how this has been used by the religious fundamentalist; And how the social liberative movements use it as a weapon of emancipation? These are the few basic questions. That will be addressed in the progress of the research. Though we have developed the theoretical knowledge on religion, only through fieldwork we will be able to understand many more aspects of 'religions in practice'. Religious hierarchy and the hierarchy of the caste are dialectic. Based upon the hierarchy of the deities, people who worship the deities are also classified and identified as upper lower within the social structure. Similarly, two processes of sanskritisation and reductionism are continuously happen in the society. This binary process not only made impacts on religion but also in other social institutions like economic, education, politics etc. Particularly, the identity construction of various socio-cultural groups and their relation to the changes occurred in religious practices.

IndexTerms – Cultural Identity, Folk Religion, Religious Worship.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades identity has become a widely theorized and researched subject in social sciences. Despite this vast interest there seems to be little consensus among social scientists about the ways identity should be conceptualized and studied. The proposed study is deals with the topic of identity. It seeks to understand how identity is constructed in the ongoing person-context interaction. The proposed project is theoretically oriented. It seeks to offer a conceptual model of identity and identity construction.

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EARLIER STUDIES

Max Mullar (1873) proposed that in ancient period religion was a bundle of believes. There was no idol worship. Only during the new ston-age religious practice of idol worship is evolved. Monotheism was the earliest form.

Herbert Spencer in his book, 'The Principles of Sociology' mentions that the growth of religion is similar to the growth of biological organs. He says that the growth of religion is from the simple state to the complex one. The fear of human beings developed in to the beliefs of God. In some society this fear is about ancestors and evil spirits. It is he who scientifically explains the relationship between the magical functions and religion.

According to E.B. Taylor, a renowned anthropologist concluded that the animism is the ancient worship in the world. The changes occurred in the religion must be on the basis of the changes occurred in the entire culture. In every period it was the religion which functions as co-ordinating element. He says that the growth of religion is evolutionary in nature; i.e., animism, totemism, polytheism and monotheism. He also says that animism is the ancient worship pattern and there is no society in the world without the thought of animism. Another anthropologist James Frazer explains the complex relation between religion, magic and science.

CLASSIFICATION OF RELIGION

Researchers classified religion into three categories-folk religion, classical religion and popular religion. Folk religious practices vary from place to place. Some of the examples of Tamil folk deities are Madan, Kazhi, Maari, Isakki and Iyyannar. Some of the characteristics of folk deities are celebrative localised and with simple ritual practices. There is no a written manuscript or philosophies. Folk deities are mostly ancestors, having the practices of interacting with the people directly and dwelling in both the earth and heaven.

In classical religions there are several rules and regulations based on Vedas. The worship patterns are symbolic in nature. Lord Shiva, Parvathi, Vishnu are some of the classical deities.

People belonging to various religions and castes coming together for worship is the major component of popular religion. Though these popular deities have their own significance and code of law, the place of worship is very much influenced by politics and trade. Tirupathi, Sabari malai Iyppan, Melmaruvathur Adhi ParaSakthi, Nagore Aandavar and Velangani are some of the popular deities.

SPECIAL FEATURES OF FOLK DEITIES

Mostly Folk deities are identified with the following eight characters worshipping place, characteristics, rituals, festivals, believes, vows, oral literatures about the deity, oral literatures about the place of the deity.

Place of worship: A folk deity whether situated within the village or without the village are understood with the help of the following traits. The worshipping place of the deity i.e. pond, river, tree, graveyard, hills; the structure of the temple i.e. roof, towers, pedestals, open space; the compound of the temple; the ownership of the temple like private, family, caste, government; sacred things like torch, sangu, javelin, sward, soolam, jewels, cloths, vaganas, musical instrument; permanent, temporary, heredity, priests, are all the criteria to understand of the folk religious practices.

Characteristics: Male, female, children, kanni, animal, spirit, tree, things, origin of deities, direction in which the deity is situated, numbers of the deputy deities, the metal used to make the deity i.e. bricks, clay, cement, flour, metal; kaval theivam, kula theivam, family deity, caste deity; the position of the deity i.e standing or sitting position are all the special features of folk deity.

Worship: the worship patterns are determined by the caste, time of worship, worshipping pattern, life cycle ceremonies and the worshipping group.

Festival: Festivals are understood by the following traits the time of the festival, organizing pattern, season, village restrictions, participating castes/villages; rituals like tying sacred thread (Kappukatuthal), posting, hunting, fire pot, head shaving etc; performing folk arts and the spirit possessed dancers.

Believes: Folk believes are identified as annual religious festivals, black magic, driving away the evil spirit, divination, sacred ash, believes about good and bad time and rituals.

Vows: Vows consist of offerings, fire walk, hanging, whipping, beating, cutting, tearing sacrificing, fasting and physical sufferings.

Oral literatures about the worshipping place: Worshipping places are identifying by the oral literatures and the explanation given by the folk to construct temple in the particular place.

Oral literatures about the deity: includes origin myths of the deity and the relation between other folk and classical deities, folk tales, ballads etc.

Changes: Changes occurs in the structure of the temple, origin of the deity, worship, rituals, believes also help to identify the folk deities.

FADING THE FEATURES OF FOLK DEITIES

The special features of folk deities are all fading away in course of time. It is difficult to understand whether a deity worshiped by the folk has the folk tradition or classical tradition? For example Kanji kamatchi amman- a classical deity, which is worshipped in villages without the Brahmin priest and with animal sacrifice?

Similarly Sudalai Madan- a folk deity which is worshiped by Bramins at Tirunelveli district. In this worship the core rituals like animal sacrificing, spirit possessed dance, hunting are not performed by the Bramins. In contrary to this Kumbabishekam is performed to this folk deity and vegetarian offerings are performed. This explains that the worship pattern is changing on the basis of the worshiping groups. In Sudalai madan temple the myth of sudalai is performed in the form of 'Villu paatu' and 'Kaniyan koothu'. In this performance the performers relate the deity Sudalai to Lord Shiva and Parvathi. through this the folk deity being sanskritized.

Similarly the deity Madurai veeran that is worshipped by Arunthathier community was born in the Arunthathier community. But in the course of time the myth of the deity changed and was explained that he was born to Brhamin and was brought up in Arunthathier community. Similarly Muthupattan's wives Pommaka and Thimakka belong to Arunthathier community. But in course of time it was explain that they were born to Brhamin. Thus the origin myths were changed according to the wishes of the dominant castes of a particular region.

Kolangiappar temple is situated in Coodalore district. Kolangi is a kind of tree. This kolangi worship was transformed in to kolanjiappar worship. In the course of time this kolangiappar worship transformed into Murugan worship. Through these examples we come to know that the folk deities are sancritized and the classical deities are parocialised in practice according to the majority community in the region.

CLASSICAL AND FOLK TRADITION – INTERACTION

Interaction between classical deities and folk deities. One cannot neglect the fact that folk deities absorb the characteristics of classical deities vis-a-vis the classical deities take part within the rituals of folk deities in Tamil Socio-cultural context. Can we prove scientifically that the folk group, which are considered lower status, change the folk deities into classical deities as their manifestation of raising their status?. Otherwise, can us able to say that these people who live in the higher status adopt the rituals of the folk deities of the lower stratum in assimilation.

PL.Samy says, in older day's pandits and kings were named as sathan or sathanar. Therefore it is clear that a deity named 'sathan' existed in sangam period. Maga sastha is the related term for Perun sathan or peri sathan; similarly, pasanda sathan is mentiond in Silapathikaram. PL.Samy in his research that the term pasandam refers to Buddhism which neglected the preachings of Vedas. Finally, he concluded that sastha worship is the fossils of Buddhism.

Early 20th Century Tamil intellectual Pandit Iyothee Thasar interprets that Amman is the fossils or remembrance of the ancient Tamil poet Avaiyar. He interprets, a traditional practice in Tamilnadu regarding Rangoli (Kolam), where people place a small alter made of cow dung and placing Arugam grass upon it. According to him this practice symbolically refers that after the death of Buddha his 'asthi' (ashes) was buried in several places on which small towers were constructed. In the course of time people belonging to Buddhism practiced the above said ritual during festivals as a representation of Buddha. This practiced passed the way for the worship of Aruga deity.

According to Iyothedhasar, the folk deities and folk religious practices of present day Tamilnadu are remnants of the Buddhist religion. Generally, the research traditions of folkloristics & cultural anthropology proposes the hypothesis to explain this process as Sanskritization. Sanskritization show the evolutionary path of folk deities becoming classical Gods. But Iyothedhasar proposes the process of Buddhisisation by which the classical tradition decomposes into folk traditional elements. This hypothesis of Iyothedhasar is also very important and is supported by the researches of scholars like P.L. Samy and Mayilai. Seeni. Venkatasamy.

Therefore, the problem of understanding the interaction between the folk religious practices and that of classical religion arises. This studies aim to analyse the differences between the processes of understanding the cultural identity construction by explaining the interaction between folk and classical religious practices as sanskritisation and as Buddhisisation.

For this study have chosen, a series of folk deities in southern Tamil nadu as its area of study. As the southern part leave a larger area the important four sacred sites, celebrated by larger group are chosen as the field of study. They are Chori Muthu Ayyanar Temple Papanasam, Irukangudi Mariamman Temple, Seevelaperi Sudalaimadan Temple, Marugalthalai poviludaiyar Sastha.

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