

RITUALS AND ITS EFFECTS ON GENDER ROLES IN THE URALI KURUMA TRIBE OF WAYAND

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Abstract: The study takes Geert Hofstede's anthropological approach towards culture and perceives how cultural practices manifest at different levels – namely, symbols, heroes and rituals. Cultural practices have a definite effect on gender roles and the construction of gender identities (West and Zimmerman, 1987) and the study aims to understand how cultural practices assign gender roles in the UraliKuruma tribe of Wayanad district of Kerala. Methodologically the study would use a combination of ethnographic data gathered through in-depth interviews supplemented with observation, and statistical as well as descriptive data available from government and other sources.

Keywords: cultural practices, gender roles, Urali Kuruma tribe.

Introduction: Geert Hofstede has defined it as 'the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes a set of people from another'. According to cultural dimension theory developed by Geert Hofstede, a society's culture affects the values of its members. A particular dimension in his theory talks about the difference between masculine and feminine culture and the emotional roles assigned to genders. According to Hofstede culture manifests itself at different levels with varying depth.

Symbols consist of words, gestures, pictures, artefacts, objects and such that carry a specific meaning which is understood and interpreted by those who know and share the same culture. Symbols are not consistent. New symbols easily replace older ones with the passage of time. Symbols are also easily copied and adopted by other groups. They can be verbal as well as non-verbal.

Heroes can be real or fictitious, persons from past, present or future. They may possess divine characteristics that are highly revered in the society. They also serve as role models in the society and their virtues and deeds are moral lessons for the community.

Rituals are considered as socially essential, but sometimes extravagant, collective activities that are configured to achieve desired objectives. The base for these practices is formed by values, which are related to societal norms. Values are broad tendencies, objectives, conditions or characteristics that members of the society find valuable.

Research Question: How cultural practices (specifically rituals) have framed gender roles in the UraliKuruma tribe of Wayanad?

Theoretical Framework: The study looks at the cultural practices of the WayanadUraliKurumas from the cultural anthropologist perspective. Thus for the purposes of the study, culture includes everything - a people's overall behaviour, way of life, the framing of gender and gender relations. Geert Hofstede's model forms the basis for data collection, categorization and

analysis.

According to Role theory, the role every individual plays or in another words his day-to-day activities is part of a socially well-defined category. Thus each social role is a set of rights, duties, responsibilities, expectations, norms and behaviour that has to be faced and fulfilled. Using this as the theoretical framework, the study looks at how such gender roles are assigned through cultural practices using symbols, myths of heroes from the tribe's origin myth and rituals.

The theory of social constructivism posits that we are born into an already constructed society with pre-existing signs and meanings that control our activities.

Research Methodology: Primary method: Personal interviews and field observation. Secondary method: Interview with researchers, journalists, data from research articles and books. A combination of personal interviews, supplemented by observation and documentation will be used to find information on the rituals, specifically, birth, puberty, marriage and death ceremonies. The study identified gender-specific patterns and practices prevalent in the UraliKuruma community, which affect their gender roles. Attempt will also be made to film/photograph rituals and other memorable events.

Determination of sample : The sample community for this observation study consists of UraliKuruma, from Pulpallypanchayat of Wayanad. Using stratified sampling technique; two colonies of the community are chosen where two male and female members are chosen for interview.

A short history of the clan: The accurate and exact history of Wayanad and its tribes has been obscure, as there isn't any documented trace of the history and other artifacts. However many scholars have done intense research to come up with various conclusions on the same. Many studies have highlighted the theory that Vedar Rajas primarily ruled the land. The numerical predominant tribal communities of the

region included Kurumbars, Kurichyans, Paniyans and Adiyans.

Edgar Thurston has mentioned about UraliKurumbars, (a classification of Kurumbars) as 'a caste of agricultural laborers' in 'Castes and Tribes of Southern India'. Apart from the Kota of Nilgiris, Uralikurumers are the only noted tribal community, which pursue an extensive variety of artisan occupations, such as blacksmith, pottery, basketry and carpentry. In addition, they are extremely skilled in playing flute and drums especially during festive occasions. They are mainly found in the borders of Karnataka and Kerala, and speak a mixture of Malayalam and Kannada. There is a well-explained reason why they were attributed as agricultural labourers. In a traditional tribal economy of Wayanad, Uralis were the only tribe that manufactured and distributed agricultural equipment to farmers of other clans.

The Travancore census report of 1901 described Urali tribes as residents of Cardamom hills. The chief of the clan is known as Kanikkaran. The legend says that they are the peasants of the ruler of Madhura. Anthropologists believe that during the reign of Tipu Sultan, they fled to interiors like thick forests and other mountainous areas of Kerala as a rescue from heavy taxes levied on them as well as the torture of the king's soldiers.

Analysis of Rituals: Customs, conviction and practices have become not less than a taboo or an imperative rule in the social life of these tribal settlements. These are astonishing social taboos ranging from constraints and prohibitions in conversation to freedom of movement. The most prominent among these taboos are linked with the concept of impurity or pollution associated with women during the time of delivery and menstruation.

(i) Birth ceremony: This is an occasion in which the taboo of impurity is strictly enforced by segregating the mother and the child in a corner. Even their belongings are kept out from the reach of others to ensure they won't pollute others. They are kept away until the pollution period is terminated. In UraliKurumar tribe, mostly a separate hut is temporarily put up for this purpose, which is burnt down after use.

Only the women community in the tribe attends the pre, during and post delivery stages. *Tambarakkan* (mid wife) helps the pregnant women during the time of the delivery. A special worship ritual called *ajjadath* is performed during complicated cases. The naming ceremony is always the privilege of the most respectable elder (mostly male member.)

(ii) Puberty: Childhood training period is very important to maintain the social integration and rules of the clan to the next generation. However the childhood training period is welcomed by a transition

as individual reaches puberty. In the case of a girl, this transition is strictly determined by the menarche. Just like any other tribe, Uralikurumas also observe the taboo with regard to the puberty and menstruation cycle associated with women.

A temporary seclusion hut is constructed about 30 kms away from their main house. The puberty ceremony, known as *Therandukaniyanam* comes to an end with the purification bath by the end of the segregation period.

(iii) Marriage: In Uralikuruma tribal community, child marriage is not an odd affair. In certain cases, the 'child wife' is supposed to start life with her adult partner, while it's not always strictly forced until the girl reaches puberty. *Thalikettukaniyanam* refers to actual marriage after a girl reaches puberty, while *Kettukaniyanam* (pseudomarrriage) happens before a girl reaches puberty.

Tali used in both these ceremonies are different from others. The girl is ceremonially bathed with special oil brought from temple. She will be adorned in traditional wear and is administered by the most respectable and eldest woman of the community.

(iv) Death: It's always a matter of astonishment that the Uralikurumer tribe has a deeper sense of grief for the death of women over men. The outstanding characteristics of tribal people to possess deep respect for the dead are quite noticeable. The body is placed on a bamboo bier after washing and covering with a white new clothe. The corpse is carefully lowered into the grave with head facing towards the south direction. A cellar is made on the side of the grave to store the body as it is pushed into it. Later on, the cellar is filled with soil.

It is important that women should bury a woman who had died during her menstruation or pregnancy as it is considered as a negative sign and henceforth men keep themselves away from this in fear of evil. A woman who was pregnant and met with death is buried far away from the common area of inhabitation.

Applying role theory in the above context, its evident that the rituals associated with women are discriminatory and vivid in nature. Right from the moment a girl is born, till her death, the concept of impurity is so much imposed on her, which forces her to limit herself in many aspects of life. It creates a barrier or stop in the fundamental freedom of a female born into the clan. For example, during the time of seclusion, they are not allowed to go for hunting or engage in their indigenous works.

Forcing a girl child to stay in a seclusion hut simply because she reached her puberty brings about drastic mental changes in her. Researcher's interaction with a girl, who is in her pollution period and had been kept away from her home, reaped findings, which are disturbing. These customary practices bring about

drastic changes in her psyche, where she tends to accept the idea that she is impure and unworthy in many situations. Throughout those days she is left alone in the hut.

'Child wife' is a not so odd term, and this custom mends the physical and emotional state of a child. According to research studies, it's between the age of 6 and 14, when child develops a sense of identity and begins to flourish as an individual. If they are trapped in customary practices, which limit their ability to think and act, it will definitely restrict their identity and the role they have to play in the society.

In the death ceremonies also, the death of women under seclusion period is considered as an evil and hence men folk keep themselves away from it.

The role associated with the women community is primarily about procreation and domestic activities, while its the exact opposite when it comes to men. Women are supposed to be powerless, inferior,

impure and weak while men folks are the wise decision makers, head of the clan etc.

Conclusion: A well-defined gender role, is clearly evident in their culture. The cultural practices, rituals in particular, convey how inferior women are subjected to in each occasion and the day-to-day life. The women folk of the community are never free from the concept of impurity and seclusion, which determines their submissive role in their social life.

With modernity and intervention of government and outsiders, their indigenous cultural and heritage are slowly diminishing. Inter caste marriages have become a common affair and hence in many cases the customs are not strictly followed. In addition, many of the youngsters from the tribe have settled down outside the clan, for educational purposes etc.

This has resulted in deprivation of their culture, which is crafting drastic changes in the gender roles and gender stereotypes in the society.

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