

Totemic Traditions and the Ant God: A Case Study of Urumbachan Kottam in North Malabar

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ABSTRACT

Religion is very important social institution that impacts various facets human life. Man not only, has biological, economic and social needs, but also, what is known as a religious need. While functionalist theorist argues religion has vital function in maintaining the social system as a whole critical theorist argues that religion has the power to maintain power structure. At the midst of various kinds of counter arguments on religion, globally people perform different kinds religious practices and as these practices give meaning to their life. Totemism is one of the earliest religions identified by sociologist, Emile Durkheim. According to him the totem represents more than just a divine or spiritual force, rather it embodies the collective identity of the group, acting as a symbol of unity and solidarity. This study explores the totemic religious practice that found in Kannur , in the north Malabar of Kerala where people worship Ant. This study explores the ritual practices, belief systems, and socio-cultural significance surrounding the worship of ants in this region. Devotees from nearby villages and even distant places visit this sacred site, offering prayers and tributes at the platform of the Urumbachan. The practice is not only a religious expression but also reflects the community's deep ecological consciousness and symbolic worldview.

Keywords: Totem, Totemism, Urumbachan Kottam, Religious Rituals, North Malabar

Introduction

Religion is an integral part of human culture and identity, shaping beliefs, values and practices that reflect historical, social, and environmental contexts. Religion is defined as a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden (Durkheim, 1912). Totemism as Durkheim stressed that is the most simple form of. Totems,

according to Durkheim, transcend mere artifacts; they represent sacred symbols embodying the collective identity of a social group a common object. Totemism is the belief that a group of people and a natural or cultural symbol, typically an animal or plant that embodies their identity and values are in a sacred relationship. Totemism is generally prevalent in tribal India. The Santhals have many totemic groups named after plants, creatures or articles. The Gonds have individuals view the Goat as their totem. The Kamar tribe sees Tortoise, tiger, snake and more as their totem, while the Todas worship buffalo as their totem. Émile Durkheim, Goldenweiser, Franz Boas, Bernhard Ankermann and Wilhelm Schmidt were few of the prominent sociologists and theorists who had their takes on totemism.

The Urumbachan Kottam, a local shrine dedicated to the worship of the Ant as a totemic symbol, is the focus of this article, which aims to investigate the totemic religious practice of the Hindu community in North Malabar, Kerala. In Kerala, the Urumbachan Kottam is a live example of totemic religious practice in which the Ant is feared and revered as a powerful being that links humans to the natural world and the divine. Ant is often seen as a very small being but to the people at Kuttikkakkom of Kannur district, ant is the symbol of a collective belief. They accept that revering Ants can save them from insect and other creature unsettling influences.

To explore the ritual practices and the historical and cultural aspects of the totemic traditions at Urumbachan Kottam, we employed a case study as a qualitative research method. This approach enabled us to gain in-depth insights into the community's beliefs, values, and the enduring significance of the Ant God as a totemic symbol.

Literature Review

The literature on totemic practices in Kerala is very rare. Narayanan (2019) observes that Pazhayanur Bhagwati Temple in Thrissur, Kerala, offers a unique example of totemic religious practice of worshipping rooster. Dedicated to Goddess Bhagwati, the temple is known for the presence of hundreds of freely roaming roosters. According to legend, the Devi once summoned roosters to defeat invaders, and since then, devotees offer live roosters and feed them as acts of worship. This ritual reflects a totemic belief in the protective and sacred power of the rooster. Rajagopal (2022) says in Kerala, the practice of snake worship is deeply ingrained in daily life and forms a part of the state's rich cultural legacy. Snakes are still highly venerated and worshipped in this state, both inside and outside of the sacred woods. Many Hindu households look after and guard the serpent groves in Kerala. Every grove has a protector family who performs infrequent pujas and lights lamps to guarantee that the kavu's flora and animals are not disturbed or destroyed. Cutting down trees and killing snakes in a sarppakavu are considered sins that trigger the serpents' curse. Sarppakavus in Kerala is rich in exotic flora and fauna, especially medicinal plants (Devika, 2020).

Chatterjee & Sharma (2018) state that in India, almost all tribal are having a blind faith in ghosts, deities and a spiritual power. They add that tribal have a faith that deities and supernatural power stays in different forests, mountains and also in rivers, ponds or any streams. Totemism has been important in the cultural and religious life of the Karbis. The Karbis considered a number of plants and animals as a totemic object (Kh. & Singh, 2016). Todas worship light, fire, mountains, trees, rivers, sky, sun, and moon, which are believed to be the major creations of their Goddess Thekershin (Walker, 2018). Yan & Zhang (2023) emphasizes that totems often take the form of animals, which are seen as spiritual symbols representing various qualities and characteristics. For example, animals like the eagle and bear are highlighted for their specific cultural significances, such as strength and wisdom. These animal totems serve as important identifiers within their respective communities and are deeply embedded in their spiritual practices.

According to Dumont (1985), totemism is an essential component of the religious life of the people in Malabar. The practice of totemism involves the veneration of a specific animal, plant, or object that is believed to embody the identity and values of a particular social group. Dumont argues that totemism in Malabar has a unique character compared to other regions. In Malabar, totemism is associated with the caste system, which plays a significant role in social organization and religious practices. The caste system is structured around the concept of purity and pollution, and totemism is one way in which the caste identity is reinforced. Dumont argues that the totemic animals and plants are associated with specific castes and that the veneration of the totem is an expression of the social identity of the caste.

Theoretical Foundation

Modern sociologists have been taken scientific efforts to understand and explain non-scientific social phenomenon that consists of beliefs and practices. Emile Durkheim, one of the functionalist theorist was first to apply the functional approach to religion in systematic way. He states that the totem is sacred but is also the symbol of society itself. From this fact Durkheim concluded that when people worship religion, they are really worshipping nothing more than their own society. Divinity is merely society transformed and symbolically conceived. Thus when people come together for performing rituals, the unity and solidarity of the community is further increased. They also help to transmit the cultural heritage from one generation to the next. The ritual Durkheim's view, totemism was not just a set of beliefs and practices but a social institution that played a crucial role in the cohesion and continuity of the society. His view is essential for the study of Urumbachankottam as the totem- Ant, is seen as a symbol of a group's belief and values have another function also. In times of distress or crisis rituals provide help and comfort.

The Totemic Practice in the North Malabar Region

The practice of praying to the totem, Ant at the Urumbachan Kottam, Thottada, Kannur dates back 1400 years back. The people of the village feel like the practice existed before time and could not think of a time when the totem wasn't prayed to. The history of the shrine dates back hundreds of years back when it was decided to build a Ganapathy temple at the site where the shrine now exists. As per the arrangement, the woodworker fixed a stick at the site where the Urumbachan Kottam presently stands. The following day, when the laborers came for construction, the stick was found very nearly a kilometer away from the underlying site. At the underlying site, presently stood an ant colony dwelling place. The admirers accepted this as a sign from Lord Ganapathy and a shrine for the subterranean insects was built at the site. The Ganapathy Sanctuary was later developed a kilometer away from the ant shrine where the stick was found. The underlying Urumbachan shrine was a gigantic stone where many ants resided later, seeming as though a shrine was recreated. The shrine was erected as a symbol of their totem, Ant.

Many rituals are followed at the shrine. Even though many in number, all these rituals are simple and do not follow the structure of a typical shrine. The offerings at the shrine are in the form of coconuts. Many shrines in the society erect a statue or a building to just receive offerings in the form of money. The Urumbachankottam is significantly different in this case. No money offerings are said to be presented by the worshippers or the devotees. Coconut that's been circled around a fireplace at devotees' houses is presented at the Udayamangalam Ganapathy Temple. The priests at the temple then present it at the shrine. Another ritual that's been practiced at the shrine is lighting of a lamp every evening by the priests of the temple. The people find this practice as a reminder of their unity. During the Mandalakalam a huge rise happens in the number of devotees visiting the ant shrine. The Ayappa devotees also pray to the Urumbachan. Jaladhara is another auspicious ritual that takes place at the shrine. A continuous pouring of water is done by the priests until they find Urumbachan is satisfied. This practice is done during the festival at the temple. As Durkheim elucidated, the totem represents a sacred object. In religion, the rituals are done to the object of worship and belief as their way of showing the faith. When people engage in such rituals the devotees will develop a collective solidarity. It is these rituals that bind and heighten the solidarity of the believers. This is an important social phenomenon that existed from the beginning of religion or totemism.

The Urumbachankottam becomes a unique shrine as the followers of the Ant God are not primitive tribal people. Totems are most common for the tribal people who interfere with nature more and find a spiritual connection with it. The followers of Urumbachan belong to the Shaliya caste of Hindu religion. People of all caste and religion are welcome at the shrine. The rituals however are strictly done by the priests belonging to the Shaliya community. They belong in the

Shudra community according to the Varna System. However they perform rituals at the temple and at the Gurusthanam like Brahmins do. The Balanga group within the Shaliya caste resides at Kannur and follows Urumbachan. The people of the village believe that this totem is a representation of the upliftment for the Shaliya caste against the Varna system which placed them at the end.

Media has had a great influence on increasing the number of devotees at Urumbachankottam. Several news channels have reported on this unique shrine which is dedicated for worshipping otherwise seen as a weak insect, Ants. This has received the attention of devotees who were suffering from animal or ant troubles. The number of people visiting doubled overnight after the media reports. As more people came, the shrine was modified from its original form which was a huge rock where the ants reside in the crack of it. Later the shrine was reconstructed to look like a typical shrine. However, many of the ants died due to this remodeling.

Lived Narratives from the Community

Rajendran (aged75), the temple board President explains the history of Urumbachan Kottam. 1400 years ago, it was decided that a temple for Lord Ganesh has to be build. According to the plan, the carpenter fixed a stick at the site where the Urumbachankottam now stands. The next day, when the workers came for construction, the stick was found almost a kilometer away from the initial site. At the initial site, now stood a giant ant hill. The worshipers took this as a sign from Lord Ganapathy and a shrine for the ants was constructed at the site. The Ganapathy Temple as later constructed a kilometer away from the Ant shrine where the stick was found. The initial Urumbachan shrine was a huge rock where thousands of ants lived later it was reconstructed to look like a shrine. "Karthika Vilakku" is celebrated in Udayamangalam Ganapathy Temple and follow up rituals are done in Urumbachan Kottam. Coconut offerings are done during "Sankramam" or the end of Malayalam month. The beginning of Sankramam festival is marked by offering "nivedyam" made at the Ganapathy temple to the Urumbachan or Ant Father. All the rituals done at the Urumbachan Kottam is done by priests of Shaliya caste of Hindu religion. Few Namboothiri priests are also allowed to do certain rituals at the Gurusthanam. Special fasts are practiced by the priests before the rituals begin. Coconut offerings are presented by these priests which are brought by the deities.

Rajendran states that ants belonging to different kinds live at the shrine. It is believed that devotees who suffer from any ant disturbances can come and present offerings to the Ant Father. Any disturbances from animals can be eliminated by praying to the Urumbachan. People across South India come to Urumbachan Kottam during the "Sankramam" festival to offer their prayers. It is also commonly believed that praying to Urumbachan can save themselves from chronic diseases. Ants are seen as a holy figure in this village and no people tries to harm ants in this

particular area. He adds that there is no generational differences in the worshipping of Urumbachan. However, during a brief period in 2017, few people were against the practice. Rajendran says that later they witnessed these people becoming deities of Urumbachan. He believes that the strong force of the Ant Father is what makes people his devotees.

Purushothaman (aged 55), is the senior priest or Poojaari at the Udayamangalam Ganapathy Temple says that if anyone is suffering from disturbances of ant or any other animals at their houses, an offering to Urumbachan can fix the problem. People across the state come here in the hope of relief from the animal troubles. The unique ritual of 'Jalandhara' is practiced in Urumbachankottam where all the villagers collectively participate. Coconuts are offered at the ant shrine by the priests for the deities. During the Karthika Vilakku, Purushothaman along with the junior priest, does the rituals at Urumbachan Kottam. The devotees who come to the Udayamangalam Ganapathy Temple during this festival, are most likely to visit Urumbachan as well to present their offerings. The media attention on Urumbachan Kottam has increased the amount of worshipers at the shrine. People, even from other states, come to pray at the ant shrine to fix their hassles. It is believed that people who are suffering from poisoning or toxin problems can pray at the shrine and the ant father answers to their miseries. According to Purushothaman, over 200 people visit the ant shrine in a month from faraway places.

Purushothaman points out that Urumbachankottam is one of a kind shrine and has its own unique features. The ants in the shrine do not harm anybody or even bite the native people. There are over 100 different types of ants at the shrine which typically are not found at this geographical location. The shrine does not force people to make offerings in the form of money. This is unlike many other shrines. He points out that people from any caste or even religion are welcome at the ant shrine and that Urumbachan does not discriminate between the people however the rituals are only done by priests belonging to the Shaliya caste and exceptions of Namboothiri priests for special rituals. He stresses how every people at the village collectively believe in this custom and are not against it. This rituals or customs do not harm or misuse the people at any level; hence people find no reason to be against this peculiar totemic practice.

Vasanth (aged 45) resides near the ant shrine at kuttikkakkom. The ant shrine is unique in its own way according to Vasanth. The shrine does not follow the traditional ways of how a shrine works or looks like. It's not mandatory that people offer any money for the Ant Father to bless them. People genuinely believe and worship this humble insect. There will be a lamp lit at the Kottam every evening. The amount of devotees visiting the Urumbachan Kottam increases during the 'Mandala kaalam' which is the period of over 40 days where deities of Lord Ayappa goes to Sabarimala. Worshipers all over the state come to pray at the shrine seeking help for hassles due to animals and especially ants. People who came once will keep coming because of the effectiveness of the prayer. The worshippers bring coconut from their own houses. This

offering should be circled around the fireplace at own house before presenting it to the Ant father. People find this ritual fruitful after the first visit itself. More people are attracted towards this shrine after the increased media attention. Vasantha states that the women participation at the shrine however, is comparatively lesser to the men's. Women are not allowed to enter inside the shrine during menstrual period. There is reluctance among the women for attending the rituals at the shrine. They believe that men are better suited for the offerings. However, the women strongly believe and worship Urumbachan. This reluctance does not reciprocate towards the younger generation. Their collective belief among the village as people belonging to all the generation wholly believe in this totemic religious practice.

Sreenivasan (aged 40), is a bakery owner a little outside the town of Kuttikkakkom. He had constant troubles at his bakery at Chala, a suburb town of Kannur district. The constant attack of ants at his bakery made it impossible for Sreenivasan to store anything in his store. Many remedies including burning the ant tracks were done with little to no success in getting rid of this insect. Several investigations were done by him to find help in the matter. This issue however was resolved when he got to know about the unique ant shrine- Urumbachankottam. Several rituals and offerings were done by Sreenivasan which ultimately fixed the problem of ants at his bakery. He did a total of 6 offerings at the shrine. The offerings were made in the form of coconuts. Sreenivasan found results right after the first offering at Urumbachan Kottam.

Heera (aged 30) lives across the Urumbachankottam. She is a faithful believer of Urumbachan Kottam. She explains the rituals at the Gurusthanam. During Sankramam, people from across the state come to present their offerings to the totem. People suffering from Ant troubles can offer their prayers to the totem to which he responds in a positive way. The ritual includes praying at the Ganapathy Temple, offering the coconuts at the temple to the priest, praying at the Urumbachankottam and the offerings at the temple will be then presented by the temple priests at the shrine in the name of the devotees. The believers find the ant hassle slowly decreasing after the offering is done. During the Sabarimala season, the visits of devotees of Lord Ayappa increases at a huge rate. Lord Subramanyan is also prayed to at the shrine. Many people who were suffering from chronic diseases found it resolved after praying at the Ant shrine. The shrine is seen as a symbol of unity. People do not have any sort of dislike towards the shrine. All generations, according to Heera are believers of the ant god and find no reason to deviate from the custom.

Ajith (aged 25), is a worker at the weaving center only a few meters away from the ant shrine. He explains his experience with the totem. Ajith says that there was an ant problem at his house. He tried every way to get rid of the ants. As a last resort, he went to offer his prayers to the totem. During the rituals, he moves out of his house which is done by the devotees who are facing ant troubles at their house. Coconuts from their own houses are collected then. Coconut

offerings not brought from their own house will not be as effective, Ajith says. The coconuts should be circled around a fireplace and around the house. This coconut is then given as an offering to the ants. Like typical shrines, people aren't supposed to offer the coconuts or break them at the shrine themselves. The coconuts are presented to the head priest at the adjacent Ganapathy Temple who then presents the offering to Urumbachan in the name of the devotees. Ajith came to the shrine 5 times when he was facing the problem. Even after the problem was resolved, he still is a constant visitor at the Ant shrine and offers prayer to the totem. Ajith himself belongs to the younger generation of people at the village. He and his group of friends who are of similar age believe in the totem as well. The totem is present at the shrine and people find relief in praying to it, so they find no reason not to believe in the Ant God. The festivals and celebrations are very inclusive, that is, people belonging to any caste or religion are allowed at the temple or to visit the shrine with no obligations. The Prasadam or the religious offerings is also shared amongst all the people and not just the Shaliya community.

Discussion

Totemism is often associated with primitive society. As a society becomes more modern or westernized people tend to leave totemism behind. This could be the effect of higher scientific thinking. However, such a trend is not visible in the case of Urumbachankottam. People from the age of 25 to 75 were interviewed for the study. All the subjects believed that there is no generational difference in this particular totemic practice. Urumbachan is seen as a symbol of unity among the people of Kuttikkakkom. As Durkheim reasoned, all the rituals and ceremonies done at the Urumbachankottam reinforce their solidarity. The rituals and ceremonies have been constant since the beginning at Urumbachankottam. This shows that the customs and practices have not deteriorated over time. The people have complete faith over the Ant God.

The main reason every subject pointed out as the reason for the collective solidarity is that the totemic practice does not pose any threat or negative impact on the people or the society. People find absolutely no reason to speak up against the totemic practice. Like other shrines, people are not meant to give any money at Urumbachankottam. This forms a positive outlook on the people. Another reason for having no inter-generational changes is because people belonging to all age groups pray at the Gurusthanam and find their problems resolved. So this reinforces the belief in all the people. Children born in the village from their childhood, takes part in the temple and ant shrine activities forming a spiritual connection with the totemic practice at an early age.

Through qualitative research methods like interviews and observations, we gained insights into the beliefs, values, and practices of the local community concerning the ant as a totemic symbol. Irrespective of generations people in the region are affiliated with the totemic practice at Urumbachankottam. The study also highlighted the history and rituals of totemic religious

practices, and also the influence of media exposure on the totemic shrine. The Urumbachan Kottam has been able to withstand the challenges of generational gap due to its adaptability and the collective belief of the community. The study also revealed the role of totemism in shaping the local community's identity, culture, and social relations

Conclusion

The case study on Urumbachan Kottam provides a glimpse into the totemic religious practice among the Hindu community in North Malabar. The ant as a totemic symbol plays a crucial role in linking the local community to the natural world and the divine. The study has revealed the historical and cultural significance of the Urumbachan Kottam and its role in the religious and social life of the local community. The finding demonstrates that totemic practices can remain resilient and deeply embedded in a community, even in the face of modernization and generational change. Contrary to the common perception that totemism declines with the rise of scientific rationality and Western influences, the continued reverence for the Ant God among the people of Kuttikkakkom, Kannur illustrates the enduring power of shared belief systems in fostering social cohesion and cultural continuity. The absence of generational differences in faith and participation highlights the shrine's role as a unifying force across age groups. Its non-commercial nature, spiritual efficacy, and early initiation of children into rituals help sustain this connection. The study signifies how totemism at Urumbachankottam not only shapes individual spirituality but also reinforces collective identity and social solidarity. Ultimately, the findings affirm that traditional religious practices, when rooted in community values and shared experiences, can adapt and thrive regardless of external influences.

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