

Onyam- An Anthropological Perspective on Male Initiation Ceremony Among the Pitaran

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INTRODUCTION

Van Gennep (1960:26) saw the dynamic process of ritual and social life as if they were projected on a stage set of static social and temporal categorisations yielding fixed boundaries much like 'a house divided into rooms and corridors'. According to him, there are three categories of rites of passage. First is the rites of transition, second rites of incorporation and third rites of separation.

Van Gennep associated the initiation ceremony of an individual with the rites of transition, which symbolically transfers an individual from one status of life to another, accompanied with a series of ceremonies. The ceremonies or rituals are only expressive, symbolic enactment which will not shift or physically transform an individual from one status to another. But these symbolic enactment have a strong control over the society as a whole so that it inheres from generation to generation. The present paper aims to describe 'onyam', the male initiation ceremony among Pitarar, the priests of saktheya kavu in North Malabar area.

PEOPLE

Pitaran are priests in Saktheya Kavu where mother goddess 'kali' is worshipped. Pitaran is the colloquial term for 'pudavar'. According to some, they are a group of people migrated from Bengal, where kali pooja is predominant to indicate the worship of mother goddess kali in Kerala. An element in which they resemble Bengal Brahmins is in the image of non-vegetarian food items in the diet. In Kerala they are distributed in the districts of Kannur, Kozhikode and Kasargod. Their population in Kerala is not sure as they are not included in the caste list.

Pitaran inheritance is patrilineal and monogamy is the most prevalent and recognised form of marriage. In olden days only the eldest member

was allowed to undergo 'veli' (customary and ritual form of marriage) and the rest of his brothers were allowed 'sambandham' with the neighbouring temple servicing caste called 'ambalavasis'. Like veli, sambandham was also a result of negotiation. Caste endogamy and illam exogamy are followed even today.

Priesthood was the main and primary source of income in olden days. Their economic status determines the grandeur in the life cycle rituals and other related feasts celebrated by the family. Moothapitarar is the supreme religious authority of Pitarar residing in one area. The other authorities following him are 'elayapitarar', pitarar, and 'shanthi'. The final authority for religious and social matter is vested in one and the same body the 'muthapitarar'. In the male initiation ceremony all the religious authorities participate together along with 'vadyar' the traditional teacher of the community.

ONYAM

Initiation rite for boys is called 'onyam' or 'upanayanam' which symbolically makes a transition from 'shaishavam' (infancy) to 'brahmacharyam'. The males of the pitaran wear then white cord composed of three strands of cotton, hung from the left shoulder and falling on to the right hip. This investiture of the tripple cord, called upanayanam, means introduction to knowledge, after it they acquire the right to study vedas.

Children at the age of 9, 11, or 13 (odd numbered ages) are invested with this cord. Group initiation is also a common practice among the pitaran. The astrologer ascertains the most auspicious day. If there is no muhurtham (auspicious time), the initiation is delayed.

Soon after the day is ascertained, all the pitaran of the settlement are invited for a feast. The special invitees among them include the muthapitaran, whose status in the ceremony is that of a Brahmin, elayapitaran who only has the right to perform the purificatory rite or punyaham,

four illam representatives and the spiritual teacher or the vadyar. The neighbouring service castes such as Barber and Chaliya are also invited.

The ceremony generally lasts for four days. During these four days, the child should confine himself to a fast that he is restricted from taking meat and fish. Traditionally it was the duty of the child to prepare his food. Now this is taken over by the mother of the child. During her periodical uncleanness the grandmother carries out this duty. No other boys either from his own caste nor from the other castes are supposed to touch him.

On the first day morning after the preliminary purification are over, the neophyte along with 10 or 15 male members are supposed to have their lunch around 10.15 AM as a customary practice. Soon after the lunch, the 'elayapitaran' prepares the 'punniahham' (holy water) in a vessel made of bell metal, in front of which a lamp with five wicks is lighted and 'illakkar' (representatives of the four illam) are seated in a semi circle. Each member takes a 'darbha' (sacred grass used for rituals) in the right hand, dips in the 'punnyaham' and sprinkles on the neophyte.

This purificatory rite is followed by hair cutting by the Barber. This is performed in the courtyard, in front of a lighted lamp, and near it rice grains are placed on a banana leaf. The neophyte then take bath from the pond, to avoid the touch pollution by the Barber. The father of the child gives the Barber, rice, in exchange for his service.

The spiritual teacher or the father draws a tantric design called 'swasthi' using turmeric powder, lime and powdered rice. This tantric design represents devi's power and is called 'bimba shakthi'. Around the 'swasthi', rice grains are put towards the outer side and the seeds towards the inner side of it. The child along with his father sits in front of the 'swasthi', facing east, and the child to the father's right side. If two children from the same family are undergoing initiation together, the father's brother plays the father's role. In front of them a lamp with two wicks is lighted, a banana leaf with two plantains fruits peeled and water in a copper pot with snout.

If the house is a 'naalukettu' (traditional tharavadu), this ritual is performed in the courtyard and if it is not, in the 'adukkala' (kitchen) of the house. On the 'muhoortham' (auspicious time) prescribed by the astrologer,

the father puts on the cord to the child dressed in white loincloth, who is on the 'swasthi' in the presence of the spiritual teacher or 'vadyar' who chants sanskrit mantras, which are written in Malayalam. Earlier it was the Chaliya caste people who brought the cord, and were paid for their service, either in cash or kind.

This investiture gives way to 'homam' called 'agnimukham'. The 'moothapitaran' has to sit in front of the sacred fire and his status is that of a Brahmin. When half of the 'homam' gets over, the father or the teacher dresses the neophyte in 'thattumundu' (a particular style of dressing for rituals). This symbolises that his status now in the society is that of an adult. The leaf of a medicinal plant called 'mekhala' is worn on the hip of the child. On the top of the invested cord, the skin of black buck is also put on. All these are done according to the instruction given by the Vadyar. These instructions are given in the form of 'mantras' (magical spells) and these are whispered in the son's ear by the father who in his new status has the right to know.

On this day, the performance of 'nitya karma' is also taught by the 'vadyar'. Nitya karma is a combination of two words, 'nitya' means daily and karma means duty. A Pitaran begins and ends his day by performing the nitya karma. This is to be performed daily from the pond. But since the child has not learned any 'mantras', he performs this from the courtyard of the house. Nitya karma is performed thrice a day, in the morning, sandhya (evening/ okku), and mid-day (upasthanam). He performs this by taking water in a metal pot with a snout and by chanting the mysterious monosyllable 'aum' or 'om', he sprinkles water as his eyes, nostrils, head and mouth. This is to be strictly observed by the child since the first day of the upanayanam. On the very same day, the book in which all the sanskrit mantras written in Malayalam is given to the child. A feast around 12.30 PM terminates the first day proceedings. Around 6.30 PM, the 'okku' is performed by the child in the courtyard of the house, which marks the end of the day.

Second day begins performing the 'nitya karma'. At 6.30, a homam begins in the presence of vadyar who chants mantras with the child by his side. On this day, the okku at sandya is to be performed in the pond, because by this time the child has learned 'mantras' necessary for performing the 'nitya karma'. When mantras are

learned by heart automatically, the 'tantras' emerge.

The third day is a repetition of the ceremonies of the preceding day particularly that of the homam. The ceremonial of the fourth day has a few additional peculiarities. All the invitees resemble as on the first day. After the repetition of the usual preliminaries by the child, a homam called 'chamatha homam', i.e. lighting of a sacred fire with the leaves and wood of 'Butea frondosa' is performed. This marks the beginning of the day's functions. The ember from the previous sacred homam is taken to another place, which is set ready for another homam. Since a large amount of smoke is produced, the place set is such that there is sufficient space for the escape of smoke. The raw materials used for the homam are raw twigs of Butea frondosa, wood of the jack tree and ghee.

The Barber arrives in the middle of the homam. In the courtyard of the house is set a lighted lamp, banana leaf whose tip faces east and the mundu worn on the first day, which is washed by the washerman. For his services is given certain amount of rice. Only the 'moothapitarar' has the right over the mundu. The Barber cuts his hair and places on the banana leaf. For his service, he receives a considerable amount of rice and paddy, raw bananas and two pieces of new mundu.

The young Pitaran next proceeds to the pond to purify himself after having been defiled by the Barber's touch. As on the first day, the neophyte wears the 'thattumundu'. On the top of the cord, a horizontally rolled cloth called 'uthareeyam' is also put on. This cloth after the ceremony is the right of the Vadyar. Now the boy is ready for another ritualistic observance called 'samavarthanam'. The child's father delicately pencils his eyelids, the leaves and flower of Aegle marmelos are stringed together and rolled thrice on the boy's forehead, which is then tied. The rod of jujube is hung on the child's ear. Water is taken in a shell, which is suspended on a white thread and is hung on the left shoulder. On the left hand an umbrella made of palm leaf is taken and then a stick as the right hand. He also wears a wooden sandal on his feet to avoid any sort of defilement. With all these ready, he stands in such a way that he is able to take seven foot steps. The belief is that the child is now set to go on a pilgrimage to Kashi and that all the above mentioned items are to be consecrated there A

feast 'samavarthanam'. It is only after the feast that the ceremonial dress and other items worn are removed.

At 7.30 PM after the performance of nitya karma the teacher points out to the 'young man', a star called 'dhravam' and chants mantras. This marks the end of the four days ceremonials. The next day, the young man goes to the kavu with a coconut, this after offering to the goddess is broken by hitting on the altar. This visit to the kavu is to pay reverence to the mother goddess as well as to inform that he has attained manhood.

CONCLUSION

According to their tradition, a period of one year is allotted for the child to study the mantras after which he attains the right to perform puja in the kavu. First, he should know the mantras necessary to perform the 'abhishekam' (sacred pouring). Secondly, he learns to recite the mantras involved in the performance of 'punniahm'. Finally, the mantras necessary for the performance of 'ucha pooja'. This is the hardest of all the three mantras. Once this mantra is learned by heart, these are to be recited in presence of vadyar and moothapitarar. If he passes this successfully, he is considered eligible for ucha pooja performance. Any number of chances are given to him if he loses the first attempt. Another criterion for a Pitarar to perform ucha pooja is that, he should be married. Once he perform his first ucha pooja, a vegetarian feast is served for the entire population of the settlement and the expenditure may exceed Rs 25000/- A person born in a Pitaran family become Pitaran only after he goes through the ucha pooja.

He then becomes the melshanthi or the chief of the Kavau.

From the above description of the initiation ceremony of the Pitaran, it is clear that this initiation ritual should be viewed as a social control system, a generalised medium of social interaction and a way of linking the individual to the community through symbolic mobilisation of shared life meanings. This initiation ritual may also create images expressive of order that provide external templates for its regulation in individual experience. For example the period after the investiture of the cord is looked upon as a time to study Vedas and of initiation into the rules and regulation of the caste. This is a

kind of individual order obtained through the relationship between the forms of particular ritual acts and daily social behaviour.

KEY WORDS Initiation. Ritual. Ceremony. Status

ABSTRACT Onyam is the male initiation ceremony practised by the Pitran caste of North Malabar area. This ritual symbolically makes a transition from infancy to bramacharyam, and only after this ritual they acquire the right to study vedas. This is a long ceremony lasts for four days, and requires expenditures. This is also a kind of individual order obtained through the relationship between the forms of particular ritual acts and daily social behaviour.

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