The Object of Madness: A Sexuo-Cultural Reading of Power in the Kodungallur Bharani Songs

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Abstract: *An assemblage of oracles, the Meena Bharani Festival of Kodungallur Devi Temple is home to a multifarious array of divergent customs. From songs wrought with the choicest of sexual slurs praising the goddess and her sexual organs/pleasures, to Kavu Theendal (making the grove/shrine impure), the traditions and rituals of this temple stand out in the cultural map of Kerala representing the height of its 'orgiastic mystification.' The paper analyses to form a cerebral map of sexuo-cultural imagination as told by these songs in particular and the rituals as a whole, given the man-made object that it is. This paper contends that contrary to popular dissonance, the language of these songs projects a sex-positive feminist (pre-dating the term itself) attempt to subvert both caste and gender dynamics, using a language which is prohibited in the cultural setup otherwise. The contrapuntal harmony of the sacred and the profane, here, disinters the sub-hierarchical use of songs as objects, appeasing a goddess who is imperfect and divine as well as mobilizing the feminine with a space of liberation. This convergence of a madness, which is religio-sexual, with the power of the body — both divine and human— appropriates the culture-scapes of a society immersed in goddess worship. The paper intends to cryptanalyze this espousal to sufficiently redraw the feminine religio-cultural anatomy of the temple, its rituals, and the songs written in a bawdy tongue which is otherwise "theirs/ another's" and subsequently, that of the feminine in this cultural context.*

Keywords: Madness, Power, Sexuality, Sex-Positive Feminism, Rituals, Songs, Goddess Worship.

"One way of defining diversity for India is to say what the Irishman is said to have said about trousers. When asked whether trousers were singular or plural, he said, 'Singular at the top and plural at the bottom.' This is the view espoused by people who believe that Indian traditions are organized as a pan-Indian Sanskritic Great Tradition (in the singular) and many local Little Traditions (in plural)."[1]
— Ramanujan

Rituals represent a primordial modality that articulates the radical alterity of lived experiences which may appear as aberrant or inscrutable to external observers. The tantric vernacular often intersperses with the psychedelics of religious ecstasy as bodies, and embodied subjectivities arise to meet their divine ideals. It is this euphoria of loss, of immersing oneself in the non-civility of cultural richness which the Kodungallur Meena Bharani festival represents with its kaleidoscopic nonchalance towards non-Shakteya[2] traditions of Goddess worship. The maternal body of the divine Mother Goddess, here, is out in the open to be played with, to be defiled, to be enticed, and pampered by her devotees, irrespective of caste, creed, and gender. The distinctive culture of worship, and propitiation curtailed to the premises of only a few temples in South India, the rituals of this particular temple escape the grand recit of the larger Hindu traditions and practices across the nation. It is this emphasis on the petit recits[3], the post-world rejection of grand-narratives, that this paper aims to decipher by analyzing the nuances of the Meena Bharani Festival and the associated rituals at the Kodungallur Sree Kurumba Bhagavathi temple. The paper also attempts to encapsulate and expand upon the definitions of a religio-sexual convergence of the power of the body — both divine and human — with the culture-scapes of a society which traditionally espouses the normative religio-cultural notions, visible through the quintessential fabric of this temple's customary rituals and practices. The anatomy of the temple, its rituals, and these songs written in a bawdy tongue attempt to evoke the enigma of a rich, feminine past again in the contemporary cultural context. It aims at reinvoking a feminine principle which is both fundamental and archetypal.

Situated in central Kerala, at the ancient seat of the Chera empire Muziris, the Kodungallur Temple belongs to a historical past of much contention. Of the many histories it claims for itself, one is that it was established as a shrine of the Jain goddess Kannagi by the Chera kings and was later appropriated by the conservative Brahminical Hindu fold. Another narrative imagines Ilango Adigal writing the Old Tamil epic Silappatikaram at Kodungallur, where the protagonist Kannagi comes to attain salvation, as well as a divine union with the goddess Bhadrakali, installed inside the sanctum sanctorum.[4] Yet another version has it that it was a Shiva temple originally, and later, Parasurama installed a Bhadrakali idol next to Shiva.[5]

The extant idol of the goddess represents a tantric goddess in the Shakteya tradition, holding weapons in her eight arms, and guarded by Ganapati,

Veerabhadra, and the seven mothers. There is also an installation of a minor deity of poxes and other contagious diseases, reminding one that this temple, like many others across the world, is strongly connected to fertility cults and subsequent rites. There is also a narrative that suggests that the primordial Dravidian mother goddess KotRavai, goddess of war and fertility, is the antecedent of Bhadrakali in Kodungallur temple.[6] Perhaps, there are even links to the ancient grain-mother rituals which developed simultaneously in the three major agrarian civilizations of the ancient world, including the Indus Valley Civilization. Another narrative about the temple's origin claims that the place where the temple exists now was home to warriors of past battles, and many of the temple rituals have their roots in the practices of these fierce, battling men. Regardless of this multitude of narratives, ordinary devotees converge in addressing the deity as Devi (goddess), Amma (mother), or Bhagavathi (goddess). A notable fact is that 'Bhaga' means 'vulva' in Kamasutra, and 'womb' in Shakteya tradition, in addition to meanings such as wealth, power, and prosperity.[7] In that sense, Bhagavathi is not only the goddess who can reward us with power, wealth, and prosperity, but also the most potent form of female sexuality.

The rituals of the Meena Bharani festival take place in March-April every year. They begin when a member of the goldsmith caste ceremonially pollutes the temple on the Bharani asterism in the month of Kumbham and culminate on the Bharani asterism in the next month of Meenam when devotees and oracles of all genders flock to the site with bawdy songs. Bharani, the asterism, represented as an earthen pot, is homologous to the yoni, female sexuality, and potential to give birth/life. Kumbham, the constellation and the name of the month in which the festival begins, also has a similar range of meaning potential. Another prominent festival in Kerala during the month, Attukal Pongala, in which female devotees of goddess Kannagi prepare food in an earthen pot, is however, devoid of the kind of divergent rituals of the Meena Bharani festival.

In March, the beginning of summer in Kerala, the earth gets hot and vegetation dries up; the festival prepares the source of life to enter a new phase, ritually cooling the heat, sexual heat, and the rage of the anthropomorphized goddess.[8] Similar festivals appeasing a ferocious goddess can be seen across India. For instance, the Cittirai festival in Madurai culminates in the marriage of warrior goddess Meenakshi with Shiva. In contrast, the rage and heat of Sree Kurumba goddess of Kodungallur is pacified and satiated without marriage, without transforming her to a docile wife, and instead by addressing and celebrating her sexual hunger through divergent sacred-profane rituals. These rituals include sacrificial rituals such as Kozhikkaalu moodal (cock-sacrifice and shedding their blood as offering to the goddess) – this was put an end to with the advent of modernism and social reforms—, and Kaavu Theendal (literally 'making the grove impure', non-Brahmin devotees running around the temple premises with a stick which is symbolic of the sword that killed Daruka, the demon, also

a phallic symbol). Alcohol is also an important part of the rituals, marking the clear distinction of tantric rituals where the so-called vices (liquor, meat, sex, and so on) are incited so as to propitiate the higher powers of the gods and goddesses.

The ritual of Kaavu theendal, the act of ceremonial pollution, includes velichappadanmaaR (oracles) storming into the inner quadrangles of the temple with sickle-shaped ritual swords (pallival), throwing objects/offerings (even live cocks) over the temple walls while singing bawdy songs to please the goddess. The songs talk about the goddess' desire to be gratified sexually, for instance, one such song goes on to say that the goddess wishes to have a pole thrust into her vagina, for she is in a maddening rage, wanting to be fulfilled. At another instance, the songs allude that the goddess desires union with wild animals and fowls, for the empty vagina without a penis causes her utter distress; the self-gratifying goddess that she is, the Kurumba Bhagavati finds pleasure in random objects such as bamboo sticks or even the clinging sickle-shaped swords the oracles hold. The following song, for instance, about the birth of Vavar, the mythological Muslim companion of Lord Ayyappa, begins with a profane salutation to the mother goddess and the minor deities in the temple.

"The deity installed in the temple,
Is the clit, who is the mighty lion, I bow before you!
In front of the Lord Ganapati's dick and Goddess Saraswati's slit,
I bow with love!"[9]

These songs do not seem to have a fixed structure, as they are freely refashioned and mixed with lines from other songs, or a fixed rhyme scheme, but they are in manjari metre, an ancient Dravidian metre, and interlaced with a meaningless rhythmic couplet that often begins with taanaro tannaram. Some of these songs narrate births of mythological characters, laced with ornate and hyperbolic descriptions of seduction and copulation, often of a forbidden nature, while some merely shower the goddess with praises/insults about her sexual hunger and licentious nature.

"If you have to fuck mother goddess of Kodungallur,
You need a dick as long as a flagstaff!
Since there was no dick as long as a flagstaff,
Borrowed the dick of Bhima!"[10]

Oracles pacify the lust and sorrow of the goddess who has lost her partner through these bawdy songs, offerings, and blood. They believe that the songs are integral to their devotion without which the angry/lustful goddess will not be satiated. This is well-exemplified in a paper that records the experiences of the women oracles of Kodungallur, an oracle named Revamma sings in response to the interviewer's query regarding obscene songs,

"Valla therippattum pachayil padanam/ illenkil devikku kopamane, taanaro tannaro . . ."

(We need to sing bawdy and obscene songs or else the goddess will be angry)[11]

Both male and female oracles let their hair grow to a length and let the long hair loose during the rituals. The oracle in trance, here, is the embodiment of femininity; they represent a madness which is considered quintessentially feminine, unrepresented in the mainstream Vaishnavite culture and rituals —a parallel to Shiva, but an inversion of Vishnu's traditions. This is an instance of Plato's 'divine madness' —a sense of divinity that engulfs the self and elevates it to a state of mystic psychoticism, one which Agamben believes the modern world to have lost.[12] This madness is one that, as Socrates opines in Phaedrus[13], has been passed on from the divine world, and is meant to sanctify through the catharsis caused by the eccentric nature of the offering.[14] The tradition of mother goddesses, including the Shakteya tradition, thus, is as much a counterculture as it is a parallel, and the Bharani site becomes a juncture in Kerala's genealogy of gender fluidity, much like the male cross-dressing ritual of Kottankulangara Devi Temple in Kollam. Devotees of all genders herd in front of the temple, screaming lewd abuses to the goddess, with bamboo sticks, beaded swords, chilambu and other objects of religio-ritualistic significance.

The reprehensibility and abhorrence of the verses with which the people of all castes enter the inner quadrangle efface the hierarchical leverage possessed by the brahmins, a suspension and subversion of purity and pollution. During the month prior to Meena Bharani, the Nambudiri Brahmins relinquish their ritual control and non-brahmin atikaL and oracles perform their rituals and forms of worship.[15] Hence, the songs are, in fact, only a part of the month-long liminal time of festivities, which operates as a temporary suspension of everything that is otherwise considered sacred— an act of profanation. The profanation, making available that which was divine for the free use of common people, is mediated by either touch or play.[15] In the context of the Bharani Festival, sacred/profane intertwined with pure/polluted in the caste-ridden Indian setting, the touch is initiated by the ceremonial pollution of a man from goldsmith caste and the play happens in multifarious manner, of which the songs are most significant. This ritual significance and shock value have made these bawdy songs central to the Meena Bharani festival in popular understanding. However, the significations upheld by these songs travel deeper — it is, in fact, the systemic denial of the normative; a re-acclamation of their sexualities as well as their selves. It is a disjunctive face-off between the outer and the inner worlds represented by the Brahmanical normative, and the raw, ethnic and indigenous realities.

The classification of akam and puram used in early Tamil poetics to distinguish between the interior and the exterior find its site of conjoining within the Bhakti tradition: "Tantra inverts...Bhakti subvert[s]; folk forms rework and domesticate the orthodox Brahmanical traditions".[17] It is to this anti-structural Bhakti tradition that the lewd, sexually explicit ditties sung to appease the goddess Kurumba could be collocated. The oracles who lead a normal profane lifestyle,

enter into vrata, involving abstinence and devotion, a sacred phase, in order to perform the sacredly profane rituals at Bharani festival that enables them to be one with the goddess.[18] The Great Mother culture of Bhakti is that of the ascending human goddess, and not of the unapproachable descending of the divine. The songs, with which the Kaavu theendal begin, which malign the sacred space with their profane presence, empower the feral goddess, while enabling the devotees to experience and embody the divine feminine. The goddess rises to greater power, liberating herself from the stagnant chains of routine life as the devotees with their songs bawdily delectate her, and her sexual propensities. This tendency of the Bharani songs to delineate the bawdy from the acceptable and by doing that, making the bawdy acceptable is what makes it a sex-positivist enterprise. This culture of explicit sexuation posits an anticipation of sex-positivism before its theoretical conception (or before its possibility, even). Such instances are salient to the Indian folkloric traditions, or the 'little traditions'; Sudhir Kakar refers to a few in the essay "The Engulfing Mother in Indian Mythology: Masculinity and Conflicting Desires", of which the story of the primal Goddess Adishakti wanting to sleep with her creations Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva is a distinct example.[19]

W. Crooke, in the 1919 essay titled 'The Cult of the Mother Goddesses in India', cites Bishop Whitehead as he remarks of the South Indian conception of the great mother goddesses, which refutes the normative idea of good or bad: 'they are neither exclusively evil spirits nor unmixed benefactors: they are of uncertain temper and very human in their liability to take offence', he quotes (300). The fertility cults, he observes, are prevalent in their more ecstatic forms, bordering upon hysteria, mostly in the Dravidian South Indian culture, and only rarely in the north or places within the ancient empire of Aryavarta. This hysterical space of the ecstatic within the confines of a temple, surrounded by the unholy combination of linguistic vulgarity, weaponry, and sexuality, permeates the surface of masculine power to radically associate with the great mother an idea of the Supreme. The mother goddess who is seen to be sexually indulging with the lay objects and creatures of her own creation is the ultimate example of an artist in play (lila, which the Vaishnavite traditions do not allow the woman to acquire) with her art.

The space of the temple becomes home to not only the goddess within (akam), but the human goddesses who enter from outside (puram) — it also refers to the peripheries and those who gain entrance to this ennobling or enabling societal space through the act of divine ecstasy. The women, the transgenders, the oracles, and the socially ostracized people with lowered caste identities, all revel inside the boundaries of a fortress which pushes the outside world off, instead of caving in those within. The bodily performance of this certain divine enchantment is, in fact, an attempt to culturally manifest sexuality, beyond taboos and stigmas. The emphasis on the sacramental artillery of language used to create these bawdy, odious innuendos which please only the goddess, the

woman, the mother, and not the men in her world or this universe for that matter, extricates the silent power, the inarticulate potentiality of the female body, and its bodily acts. The subversion, here, is an introspection into the familiar space perceiving its unfamiliar acts.

Notes and References (Endnotes)

1. Ramanujan, *Where Mirrors Are Windows*, p. 188
2. Shakteyam or Shaktism is the metaphysical cult of Devi worship, where the Goddess is the supreme divinity/ divine reality.
3. Lyotard, in his work The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (1984), opines that these little narratives remain "the quintessential form of imaginative invention" (p. 60).
4. The younger brother of Cheran Chenguttuvan – the ruler of Kodungallur—Illango Adigal was part of the Chera dynasty i.e., the Kulashekhara empire.
5. Since it is constructed according to the Tantric pattern of rurujit vidhanam, the Shiva idol, the seven divine Mother goddesses (Sapta Matrikas) and Ganesha are installed in this given order within the temple.
6. Babitha Justin and Meenakshi M.S, in their paper titled 'The Last Women Oracles: From the Land of Bharanipattu' (2022), quotes Sarah Caldwell (Caldwell, 2005) and Adarsh C (Adarsh, 2018) in this regard. See Binil Justin, and M. S. Madhavan, 'The Last Women Oracles: From the Land of Bharanipattu.' *Culture and Religion*, vol. 21, no. 4, 2020, pp. 371
7. Wisdom Library, "Bhaga, Bhāga, Bhāgā: 35 Definitions." Wisdom Library, n.d., https://www.wisdomlib.org/definition/bhaga#shaktism.
8. Mary J. Gentes, 'Scandalizing the Goddess at Kodungallur.' *Asian Folklore Studies*, vol. 51, 1992, p. 317
9. Nimisha K. Jayan, *Gender, Space and Performance: A Study of the Visual Narratives of Kodungallur Bharani Festival*. Doctoral dissertation, St. Thomas' College (Autonomous) Thrissur, 2020, p. 317
10. Ibid, 324
11. Justin & Madhavan, 371
12. Giorgio Agamben's "The Man Without Content" (1999) published by Stanford University Press, p. 7
13. Plato, Phaedrus, Translated by Benjamin Jowett, Project Gutenberg, 2008, para. 196-197, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1636/1636-h/1636-h.htm. Accessed 6 Feb. 2024.
14. Socrates classifies madness into four kinds: prophetic, initiatory, poetic, and erotic.
15. Gentes, Scandalizing, p. 301
16. Agamben, The Man, 23-25

17. A. K. Ramanujan, 'Where Mirrors Are Windows: Toward an Anthology of Reflections.' *History of Religions*, vol. 28, no. 3, 1989, p. 209, JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1062747.

18. S. Vijayakumar, 'Religion, Ritual and Liminality: A Study of the Kāvu Theendal Festival at Kodungallur, Southern India.' *International Journal of Humanities, Art and Social Studies*, vol. 3, no. 6, 2021, pp. 7-9, DOI:10.3121/IJHAS.2021.127.

19. Sudhir Kakar, 'The Engulfing Mother in Indian Mythology: Masculinity and Conflicting Desires.' *ANTYAJAA: Indian Journal of Women and Social Change*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2016, p. 63