

Reminiscence, Trauma, and Psychological Healing: The Role of the Folklore Alamikali in South Canara Region

Abstract:

Alamikali, a once-dormant traditional art form, and festival in the South Canara region of Peninsular India, particularly in Kasaragod (now part of Kerala), disappeared by the 1970s, resurfacing solely as a staged performance. This study explores how Alamikali, historically rooted in commemorating the Karbala War and the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, transformed its practitioners into healers. Through their performative portrayal of suffering and self-immolation, these practitioners, known as Alamis, were believed to possess divine healing powers. In a pre-modern feudal world order, Alamikali served as a remedy for various physical and psychological ailments threatening the region. Lower caste Hindu performers, adorned in a distinctive manner with black bodies, white patches, shabby clothing, and leading a nomadic existence, played a crucial role. The paper contends that the performative enactment served as a psychological therapeutic event, offering catharsis for the mental agonies of the practitioners themselves. (Keywords: Alamikali, Martyrdom, Trauma, Psychology, and Healing)

Introduction

Alamikali, a once-dormant traditional art form and festival in the South Canara region of Peninsular India, particularly in Kasaragod (now part of Kerala), disappeared by the 1970s, resurfacing solely as a staged performance. This study explores how Alamikali, historically rooted in commemorating the Karbala War and the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, transformed its practitioners into healers. Through their performative portrayal of suffering and self-immolation, these practitioners, known as Alamis, were believed to possess divine healing powers. In a pre-modern feudal world order, Alamikali served as a remedy for various physical

and psychological ailments threatening the region. Lower caste Hindu performers, adorned in a distinctive manner with black bodies, white patches, shabby clothing, and leading a nomadic existence, played a crucial role.

The Alamikali and its practitioners functioned as a cure for afflictions such as smallpox and epilepsy, considered demonic possessions or divine curses. Afflicted individuals, often tenants and wage laborers of feudal lords, sought healing from Alamis to maintain feudal harmony. The practitioners also performed divinations to heal drought and diseases in livestock, essential components of the feudal order. In return, healthy cattle were either given as votive offerings to the poor or sold, with the proceeds supporting the practitioners and organizers of the festival. Additionally, Alamis were perceived as the exclusive means to navigate natural disasters like floods, droughts, and famines. The paper contends that the performative enactment served as a physiological therapeutic event, offering catharsis for the mental agonies of the practitioners themselves. The Alamikali practiced community were the migrant Turkish Muslims.

Turkish/ Turkan Muslims

The majority of Muslims in Kasaragod followed Shafiite jurisprudence, while a minority followed Hanafi jurisprudence. The former is known as Byari Muslims and are mostly merchants, whereas the latter include Bohra migrants from Gujarat and Tamil Rawthar Muslims, as well as warrior communities such as Pathans from Pusthan regions in modern-day Pakistan and Afghanistan, Daccani Muslims from various erstwhile Muslim kingdoms of Deccan, and Turkana Muslims who migrated to the region as part of the administrative-military system.

During the Mysorean administration of Malabar, Turkan Muslims landed in South Canara. Their mother tongue is Urdu, and they have settled in Mangalore, Kasaragod, Chittari, Kanhagad, Uppala, and Kottikulam in southern Canara. The Decani Muslim Federation, located in Kochi, claims Turkish Muslims as its own, while Turkish Muslims deny this argumentⁱ. They are historically cavalrymen in Tipu's army. They eventually evolved into feudal guardians of established feudal households such as Echikkanamⁱⁱ.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, the Vijayanagar kingdom brought in foreign Muslims for military and administrative objectives. Devaraja II restructured his army and hired several Muslims. The Turkish Cavalry was extremely effective in Vijayanagara's empire-building effortsⁱⁱⁱ. The Mysorean emperors also imported Turkish army men for army and

administrative objectives. As part of the Mysorean invasion, Turkan Muslims went to South Canara, particularly Kasaragod. They also made their home in Mangalore^{iv}.

Tipo's numerous links with Turkey demonstrate that many Turks visited Mysore on a regular basis for political, economic, and social reasons^v. Hyder Ali brought 1000 Turks to maintain his army in 1755. They kept strong contacts with administrators in South Canara and worked in the Navy. Turkish soldiers had a long history of crossing the Arabian Sea to Malabar, as evidenced by their assistance to Calicut's Zamorin against Portuguese colonialists^{vi}. Pasha arrived with 70 ships and 700 troops to assist Zamorin. The Portuguese destroyed these forces in 1538. Mysore also made extensive use of Turkic soldiers. Turkic army men functioned as civil officers and in Tipu Sultan's army by the second part of the 18th century. They arrived and established themselves with families in Karkalla, Kundapura, and Udupi^{vii}.

Tipu Sultan frequently gave such southern Canara provinces to his Turkish cavalry and commanders, who guarded Tipu's forts and neighbouring villages. Many of the community's fort-building professionals relocated to Kottacherry, near Hosdurg fort in Kanhangad^{viii}. Following the British takeover of the region, they continued to struggle for a living, with many of them returning to Turkey or other parts of the Indian subcontinent by the early twentieth century

They settled at Kasaragod town, Kundamkuzhy, Uppala, and Kanhagad, Chithari, Kottikulam, Bekal, and Manjeswaram in modern-day Kerala. One of the descendent families, known as the Fakir Sahib family, was well-known across the region. He was given the title of Shahib for his ability in martial arts and was recognised as a warrior. According to oral legend^{ix}, Rasool Sahib, a member of this family who was the forest guard for the landowner of Echikkanam, arranged the final Alamikali. Unlike the majority of Muslims in Malabar, Turkic Muslims adhered to the Hanafi School of Sunni Jurisprudence. Turkana Muslims were Hanafi by training, but they also accepted several Shia rituals and iconography.

Many vernacular performances are done in society, and each art form expresses its own voice of resistance inside society. South Canara has its own community-tagged artforms that represent its own life. Koraga Nirtam, Yakshagana, theyyam, Mappila theyyam, and Alamikali are a few examples. Every art form helps its practitioners in their search for cultural defence and survival. Alamikali attempted to safeguard of Turkan Muslim's existence in its evolutionary fight with other Muslim groups.

Alamikkali was primarily practised as a folk art and festival in the present-day town of Alamipally near Kanhangad in the Kasaragod district. Chithari, Kottikulam, Kundamkuzhy, and Mangalore also practised it. However, Alami, the major performers of this art form, were largely from lower caste Hindu groups. Members of the Thiya, Mukua, and Dalit castes are included. The term 'alami' is taken from Arabic and meaning 'trusted one.' The animosity expressed by upper castes such as Nair, Konkani Brahmins, Magyars, and Marars demonstrates the caste nature and social rank claimed by this art form^x.

Myths and Practises of Alamikali

Turkan Muslims organised the Alamikali rites. Alamikali was celebrated to commemorate the Karbala conflict and the martyrdom of Imam Hussein (Al- Hussein ibn Abi Talib) on October 10, 680 CE, son of the fourth caliph Ali (Ali ibn95-96 Abi Talib) and grandson of the Prophet Muhammad (Muhammad ibn Abdullah). The 10-day march during Muharram (Ashura) commemorates Hussein's, his troops', and their families' suffering. On the 10th of Ashura, Alamikkali ceremonies are held. Tradition has two distinct Mythological aspects^{xi}.

Alamikali's principal object is Vellikaram, or the silver hand. The silver hand represented the severed hand of Imam Hussein, who was mercilessly slain and maimed by Yazid's soldiers, according to the Turkic Muslims who arranged and executed the rites. Before being incinerated, the body was disassembled. It is said that burying his damaged body in the sand is difficult whenever troops try to bury their hands^{xii}. They eventually abandoned his body and brought it to Yazid's camp as a battle prize. Turkana Muslims in southern Canara believe the silver in their possession is Hussein's severed hand, which has been passed down through generations as a treasure representing divinity and martyrdom.

Vellikaram, on the other hand, is related with a local mythology associated with Lord Vishnu in Hinduism for the lower caste Hindu Alamikali dancers. According to legend, it was a regular ritual for people, especially fishermen, to attend the coast in the evening, where they resembled a man drowning during a storm. Soon after, a commotion started out on the coast to save the man, and finally, the Turkish Sahib arrived. They swam through the waves, grabbing the drowning man's arm. They discovered, however, that it was merely a silver hand. However, it was seen as a heavenly relic, and the people on the beach began to worship it. The Turkic Sahib became the keeper of the silver relic they claimed to be Husain's hands^{xiii} from the first

hand-holding, while their Hindu colleagues began to revere it as Lord Vishnu's hand inhabiting the ocean of Palazhi.

Ceremonies

Alamikali is a ceremonial practice. It has a pattern of rituals. First they advertised the practices, and people came to participate in the Alammikali. Alamis wear a tie after which they become the performers, after that they worship vellikkaram, symbol of Hussein's hand. Alamis often travel from village to village and from town to hamlet, collecting stuff as alms from residences. The ninth day is the journey to Alampipally, while the tenth day is the final portion of the Alamikkali. For nine days, they ringed the area and continued to collect wood for the campfire. They followed a particular customary procedure, staying at the riverbank at dark, worshipping a stick enclosed by a tie, using a lit lamp and Jose sticks^{xiv}. They arrive at Alamipally on the tenth Day of Ashura. On the final day, chief Sahib arrives on horseback^{xv} and begins worshipping Vellikkaram and burning the fire pit, which Alamis put their woods in.

In the case of Alamis, through their performative portrayal of pain and self-immolation from the Ashura, Alamis became healers and acted as treatments for diseases and epidemics within a pre-modern feudal world order. when the alamis were practising their acts, they were self-immolating They were functioning as healers with their self-emotions and difficulties from the circumstances while remembering Hussein and his men, who had experienced torture and cruelty at the hands of the Yazid army.

The importance of creating a lighted fire pit is rooted in Shia traditions. Hussein's troops faced horrific punishment by the Sunni Umayyad king Yazid during the conflict, including isolating his forces by surrounding his camp with unrestrained fire. Sahib begins the construction of the fire pit^{xvi}, around which the art is centred. Alami's were self-immolation or march down or rolling across the firepits are intended to re-enact Hussein and his men's misery. Theeparal, or the flames of fire^{xvii}, is the name given to this fire pit ceremony.

The Alamikkali rite is part of Shi'i Islam's commemoration of Huseyn and his warriors' sorrowful demise. Alamikkali's ritual space is significant. The audience forms an arena, or stage, on which the ritual is conducted. The arena is a zone in which daily activities are forcefully removed^{xviii}, but outside of which a temporary market setup is constructed. Alamikkali flagellation was conducted in certain locations, which were encircled by people and revered as hallowed sites, a manifestation of Imam Hussein's fabled battle field and

martyrdom. Alamikkali practise produces a fearful location, a produced space that contemplates the idea of being in or seeing the epic battle of Karbala.

Flagellation ritual space is frequently addressed about the subject of ritual and space. A wide spectrum of notions, from territorial passage to frightening locations, address rituals and spaces. According to Van Geneep, rituals are used by humans to create passage through restricted regions and space. The role of ritual, according to Jonathan Z. Smith, is the association of scared locations. Ritual spaces generate temporal realities of ritual by providing a regulated setting in the environment^{xix}. There is an interplay between ritual and spaces that seeks to comprehend the function of ritual in regulating and formalising access to places, ritualizing locations, and demarcating territories. The link between myth and ritual, according to Levis Stratus, is that the myth exists on a conceptual plane while the ritual is one of action^{xx}.

South Canara region is a feudal- agrarian society. In that society land lords are upper castes of Hindu peoples. The lower caste community peoples are the workers of their land. In the period of British rule, the land system followed zemindari system. The lower caste community are efficient in rearing of cattle. They worshipped cattle as a god, during the poliyandra^{xxi} rituals. In the ritual time believers were giving special foods to cattle.

According to the report, the event of Alamikkali and its practitioners functioned as a treatment to different physical and psychological ailments that challenged the region's feudal world order on many levels. They were primarily conceived of as a remedy for smallpox and epilepsy, both of which were thought to be demonic afflictions or manifestations of divine anger/curse. The afflicted were frequently tenants and wage labourers of feudal lords with Alamis, the Alamikkali practitioners, healing illness for the sake of feudal peace and world order. Furthermore, draught and milch animals, which were important to the stated global order, were healed of different maladies such as cowpox, foot-mouth disease, Anthrax, milk fever, and foot worm by Alami divinations. In exchange, healthy or cured animals are given as votive gifts to the impoverished or sold, with the proceeds going to the festival's practitioners and organisers. On another level, they are viewed as the sole source for navigating natural disasters such as flood, draught, and hunger.

Capabilities of Theyyam

Theyyam became the healer in the case of Theyyam's practices, and the god conferred upon him healing talents and divinity. They rose to the status of gods, resolving people's problems at the time. represents the performer. The gods are teaching Theyyam spiritual

abilities. Vasoorimalan Theyyaam was respected as a smallpox healer by the people of south Canara. Lord Dhanwantraai Theyyam is renowned as a healer since he is well-versed in 96 main diseases and 108 medicinal preparations^{xxii}. Kalicheokan Theyyam is also known as the Cattle Protector and he saves cattle from epidemics.

The Alamikkali performance place or space provided a divine or terrifying environment. The alami rites and settings are infused with divinity. The deity of the performance is enacted by Alami practitioners, who self-immolated by rolling into the fire pit. They may roll into the fire pit alone or in groups. The divinity received from the deity is distributed into many kinds of light and benefits for believers throughout the performance of Theyyam. Theyyam therefore became the epidemic healer. The divinity and healings depicted in the performance scared Alamis away from the fire, and they were reminded of the suffering and humiliation suffered by Huseyn and his family at the hands of the Yazid army. Both audience members and artists are affected by Karbala's suffering and memories. Alamikkali practice has a structure of the Shia ritual format, they are as following below

1. The memorial service session:

Shahid advertising about the nada distribution, tals about Karbala War and believers came to take the nada and became Alami.

2. Pilgrimage to Karbala

Alamis were roam to villages and collect woods and graneries, and reach in Alamipally on the 9 th day of evening

3. Public processions

In the 10-day morning believers and Alamis reached in the battle ground of Karbala, The Alamipally place is considering as Karbala.

4. The representation of the tragedy in the forms of play: Alamikkali represented as the play.

5. Self-Flagellation or immolation.

In several places in India Shia practices followed self-flagellation or self-inflicting pain like in Hyderabad, Lucknow etc. But in alampipally Alamis followed immolation ways enacted pain. Alamis were self -immolation into the fire pit. Difference between Hyderabad self-flagellation and Alampipally, Flagellation considered as the form in Hyderabad individually

healings and in Alamippally a community healing. It took away women's fear and tension. Shahib hurled the firepit at the onlookers. It dropped on their bodies, and they prayed to the fire pit for healing. Following the completion of these ceremonies at 4 a.m. on the 11th day, Vellikaram purifying procedures for 108 medicinal preparations are performed at the Arayi River near Alamipally.

Conclusion

This performance is for practitioners and believers who got treatments from this Practice of Alamikkali. Alamis were immolated and felt the agony and torturesuffered by Huseyin and his soldiers from the Yazid army while performing the therapeutic abilities of the Alamikkali. The sick were typically the tenants and wage workers of feudal lords, with Alamis, the Alamikkali practitioners, curing disease for the sake of feudal peace and global order. Furthermore, Alami divinations treated dairy and draught animals of many ailments like as cowpox, foot-mouth disease, anthrax, milk fever, and foot worm, which were crucial to the proclaimed world order. In return, healthy or healed animals are given to the poor as votive gifts or auctioned, with the revenues benefiting the festival's practitioners and organisers. On another level, they are regarded as the only source of information for dealing with natural calamities like as floods, draughts, and starvation.

ⁱⁱ Mathur, PRJ., "Social stratification Among the Muslims of Kerala", Vinod.K. Jarirath, (ed.), *Frontiers of Embedded Muslim Community in India*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2001.146

ⁱⁱ Udyan Kundamkuzhy, Interview held at in His Home,2022

ⁱⁱⁱ Varija Bolar. R. "Turks in Karnataka." *International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanity Studies* vol.4 (1), 2012., pp.1-10

^{iv} Moyin Malayamma Hudawi, *Kasarkode Muslimgalude Charitram*, Disha Book cell, Chattanchal.2008,pp.176

^v Virija, loc. cit.

^{vi} KM Panikker, *Malabar and Portuguese*, Voice of India (Aditya Prakashan), India, 2007, p 117

^{vii} Moyin. *Kasarkod op. cit.*, Pp;170-180

^{viii} Balan, C. *Kasarkod Charitrvam Samoohavum*. Kasaragod District Panchayat, Kasaragod. 2001.Pp:99-100

^{ix} T, Choyambu. 2022. An interview is held at his home

^x Ibid,2022

^{xi} Peter J Claus, Sarah Diamond & A. Margaret. *South Asian Folklore: An Encyclopaedia*. New York: Routledge, 2003.P:324

^{xii} T, Simi. *Alamikaliyude Samoohika Iykyavum: Anustanaparamaya Alamikaliyepattiulla Padanam*. Kannur University, 2004.Pp:50-60

^{xiii} Ibid,2004

^{xiv} Chyomabu T, Interview held at in his home

^{xv} Ibid,2022

^{xvi} Pallava Narayanan,2022. An interview was held in his Shop near Kanhangad

^{xvii} Chyomabu T, Interview was Held at in his home

^{xviii} Raza Masoudi Nejad, Performed Ritual Space: Manifestation of Ritual Space through Self Flagallation in Mumbai Muharram, journal of ritual studies.2017, pp:1-5

^{xix} Nejad, loc. cit., pp:1-5

^{xx} Nejad, loc. cit., pp:1-5

^{xxi} Ambikasuthan Mangad, Poliyandram: ritual of great return, documentary, 2019

^{xxii} Chyomabu, T, Interview held at in his home