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Re-Conceptualizing Culture in Contemporary Paradigm: A Literary Reconnoitre of the Selected Myth and Folklore of Aranmula

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Abstract:

Every culture is build up on a foundation that consists of a variety of stories that are passed from one generation to another. These stories popularly called legends, myths or folklores are believed to be facts from the distant past. The stronger the influence of these stories, the longer the culture preserves it. Aranmula is one such region that preserves all the traditional rites and rituals due to the impact its myths and folklores have created upon the inhabitants of that area. This paper aims to establish a literary dimension to the existing legends and rituals of Aranmula. The main objectives of the paper are; firstly to retrace the significance of the ethnography of Aranmula and to bring out its relevance by giving it a global impact, secondly a study of the cultural heritage, myth and folklore by researching the legends related to Aranmula Parthasarathy Temple, the Vallomkali (boat race), Vallasadya (feast), Vanchipaath (boat song) and Aranmula Kannadi (metal mirror) and lastly to analyze and bring into light how folklores and myths can be the carriers of art and culture and how effectively they hold out a strong message for the wider global arena where traditional art forms disappear in an era of rapid industrialization and globalization. In this era of modernization; culture, traditions and rituals are getting wiped away. What makes the region of Aranmula different is that, this region holds its culture and traditions closer to its heart even after thousands of years with its entire luster. There is a need to promote this type of cultures and rituals in order to maintain the authenticity of our past.

Keywords: Culture, Folklore, Ethnography, Ethnicity, Myth

When legends and myths are pooled up, new cultures arise. These cultures become the background for many civilizations. This paper aims at bringing out the myths and folklores of Aranmula and giving it a new meaning through literature thus bringing it to the global coliseum. The traditional legendary stories that involve events from the remote past that may or may not have proofs are called myths. These are maintained through the various rituals or religious practices that are practiced by several communities or people of a certain area as their culture is moulded on these legends. These myths retain their uniqueness and value as they can sometimes explain what other disciplines like philosophy and science can't explain. From time immemorial the creativity in literature has been created by the vivid use of myths and mythical symbols. To

go to the roots of any culture it is necessary to perceive and apprehend the myths and stories that became the foundations of these cultures. Myths preceded religion and religions have conceived their ideas from universal mythical themes. Similarly, folk literature or folklore also describes a tradition or culture that have been handed down from one generation to another verbally or in written form. These stories are the bearers of customs and tradition down the ages. They shelter noble thoughts of sublime metaphysical facts in the form of simple tales. Indian folklores are significant in the sense that they embrace eloquent and pertinent messages for a global community.

If we trace the history of Aranmula, it will definitely take us back to more than ten thousand years through its archeological evidence found in various parts of our country and mythological stories related to *Shiva Purana*. The Indian oral culture takes the help of *ithihasa* or *purana* which uses narratology to explain the creation, initiation and transformation of various cultures. Out of the many places of Kerala that are known for their heritage and cultural excellence, there is a place called Aranmula on the banks of river Pampa in the district of Pathanamthitta which was earlier a part of Travancore. It outshines due to its abundance of myths, folklores, legends, festivals and practices. Literature existed even before the discovery of written language and was passed down orally from one generation to other. Aranmula is not just a village but a saga due to the rich culture and ethnicity it exhibits. It is a place that should be widely known rather than getting restricted in Kerala. Each and everything of this place has something to offer literature as well as humanity. Cultural uniqueness makes every community ethnically civilized. This denotes the self awareness on the part of a particular group of its own cultural distinctiveness. Ethnicity can be a unifying as well as dividing factor. The heterogeneity of rituals, customs, traditions and beliefs' of Aranmula unify the people of this region. People of the region take part in all the festivities related to the temple forgetting all division based on caste, religion or creed.

Aranmula is famous for its ancient Sree Krishna temple dedicated to Lord Parthasarathy, the divine charioteer. The myths behind the construction of the temple, *vallomkali*, the *vallasadya*, *thiruvona thoni* and *Aranmula kannadi* which mirror the aesthetic richness of the traditions and culture of Aranmula will be explored here. Aranmula is famous for the communion of *Uthrittathi Vallomkali* (boat race), sports, devotion, literature, rituals and handicrafts which are indigenous only to this part of the world. According to the folklore, *Pandavas* after the Mahabharata War came to South India to install idols of their '*ishta linga*' (favourite deity). The legend says that Arjuna has installed the idol here. Arjuna installed the idol in a place called Nilakkal which was later transferred to Aranmula. Nedumpayil Kochukrishnan Aasaan in his *Aranmula Vilasam Hamsappaatt* writes that,

Keralathinkal vannu pandavarellavarum...maleykku sameepamenakilumakkalath
Nilakkal moovayiram kudikal vasikunnu.Kshethravum narayanathennathilakunidra
kshethrajan prathishtichennaitheehyam kettitund. (30)

This means that, ‘all the *pandavas* came to Kerala...even if Nilakkal was near the mountain, three thousand people inhabited the place, it is heard that Arjuna installed the idol here’. There was a Brahmin (Namboothiri) in a house called Mangatt Illam in Kattoor. He was a devotee of Lord Parthasarathy. This deity is popularly known as a ‘donor of food’. So the Bhattathiri used to feed a Brahmin boy every month on Thiruvonam day. According to the tale, once in the month of Chingam, he couldn’t get any Brahmin boy and lord himself appeared in the form of a *Brahmachari* and advised him to carry all the materials for preparing *sadya* to Aranmula Temple on every year on the Thiruvonam day. This gave rise to the ritual of the Thiruvona Thoni.

Once when the Brahmin left for the Aranmula temple with all the materials for the feast on a boat (*thoni*), he was planned to be looted by the chieftain of Ayiroor who was his sworn enemy. The news spread like forest fire and the villagers from all the ‘*karas*’ came to his rescue in their snake boats. They escorted the sacred boat carrying the materials to the Aranmula temple safely thus frustrating the chieftains plan. This was the beginning for the famous festival of the *Uthrittathi Vallomkali*-the boat race held on the day of Uthrittathi in the month of Chingam. This is the biggest and most unique water festival where tides of the river, strength and unity of the oarsmen and rhythms of *vanchipaat* or boat-song blend together into a harmonic whole sending vibes of positive energy all around.

The *Vanchipaat* can very well be called folk music as it is authentic to the particular region. Aranmula has unique boat songs that are different from the boat songs that are sung in different boat races of Kerala. The boat songs of Aranmula are mostly praises to Lord Krishna or the stories related to Lord Krishna. While the other boat songs of Kerala are exclusively *Kuchelavritam vanchipaat*, the *vanchipaat* of Aranmula is taken from *Nalacharitham* and *Bheeshma Parvam* and even holds *Kuchelavritam vanchipaat*. While guests are welcomed the oarsman and singers sing couplets from the great epics that praise gods and goddesses. It says,

Vanna Neram Ethirettu

Anandamode Pooja Cheythu

Vannathin Karanamellam Arulicheythen

Thei thei...thaka thei thom....(aranmulaheritage.blogspot.in).

This means that the guests are welcomed with full respect, happiness and rituals and then told about the reason for the visit. The singers’ rhythm goes up and down according to the speed that the boat should be rowed. The oarsmen repeat the lines and move their oars according to the rhythm. At a time, before the social divisions or stratification of the society occurred, the people of this area used to sing together at work to entertain themselves. Through the rhythms of *vanchipaat* these social division are wiped off and equality is promoted even now. The *vanchipaat* has become a vital part of the people of Aranmula. The harmony between man and nature at its best preventing all odds is seen during the *Aranmula vallomkali*.

Another uniqueness of the *vanchipaat* of Aranmula is the phonetic aspect of these boat songs. The *vanchipaat* of Aranmula is made in such a way that while sung, each line can be

broken into two parts by giving a pause. No other *vanchipaata* can be broken like this as they can destroy the whole beauty of the song by corrupting the meaning. Stress is given to certain syllables in the *vanchipaata* and as a result rising and falling intonation is formed. The *vanchipaata* can very well be compared to ballads as both of them are verses with musicality and contain narrative.

Snake boats from all the 'karas' assemble in the temple after the Vallomkali to enjoy the magnificent feast called the Aranmula *Vallasadya*. It is considered the biggest feast in the world with the most number of dishes. What is unique about the feast is that the boatmen have to sing for getting each and every dish. There are different songs or slokas made for every dish and they have to sing in the typical *Vanchipaata* style in order to get the particular dish. Dishes that have disappeared from the Kerala households years ago like *madanthatayila thoran*, *ambhazhanga achar*, *chembu upperi* and *thakara thoran* find its place in the Aranmula Feast.

The *vanchipaata* sung during the feast was originally in Sanskrit and was later converted to Malayalam. Each dish has its own unique *vanchipaata*. Dr. Nellickel Muraleedaran comments in his work *Aranmula Vallomkali; Charithravum Paattukalum* about the song for bringing rice as:

Pathram nivarthi vadivodiha panthithorum
Chithamkulirke vibhavam palathum vilambi
Vambarna parpadakamanpodukoottiunna
Nalloru thumbaniramulloru chortherenam. (125)

which means that the plantain leaf is spread in a perfect manner to serve several dishes and to taste big *parpadakam*, provide us with rice that has the colour of the 'thumba' flower. The *vanchipaata* for another dish namely *sambar* is "Vendakka vazhattiyitta sambar konduvaayo". This means, let the dish with fried ladyfingers be brought. For getting butter the recital is, "Naruney namukku venda, venna thane konderenam", with which they mean we don't need ghee, instead butter must be brought. For *cheerathoran* (spinach dish) the recital is, "Panchaliyude akshayapathrathile cheerathoran veratte" which corresponds to the Mahabharata legend that let the spinach dish of Panchali's (Draupathi) inexhaustible vessel be brought.

There is an interesting legend behind the beautiful Aranmula Kannadi also. It is believed that five centuries back, the ancestors of the present craftsmen of Aranmula Kannadi migrated to Aranmula from Nagarcoil for the construction of the temple vessels. They invented the metal mirror accidentally while they were creating the alloy for building temple vessels. The composition of the mirror is still kept as secret by the family. The Vedas and Puranas hold special references to this mirror and the mirror holds ritualistic importance. It is believed that the mirror has its roots in *ayurveda* which holds the view that the materials used to make the mirror is equivalent to the *pancha bhutas* (five elements). As a result it is believed to absorb negative and harmful radiations in the atmosphere and emitting it as positive energy which are useful to living beings. Another factor that makes it unique is its capacity to reflect images from the front

surface thus giving the perfect image. According to *The Travancore State Manual Volume III* by T.K.Velu Pillai,

Aranmula *Kannadi* is a unique example of bell-metal casting. Among the many curios in the world it deserves high place. The foreign travelers who see it would be prepared to pay any price to procure one. The process of manufacturing the mirror is an art perhaps as wonderful as mummification in Egypt (563).

Literature is often referred to as 'how we live'. All these myths and folklores are imprinted on the people of Aranmula. Their everyday life centers on these rituals and festivals that these stories have offered them. The *Vasthuvidya Gurukulam*, the art gallery, the Wall Painting Institute, the Metal Mirror, the Kathakali and the martial art of Kalari, still preserve its authenticity and importance to the people of this region. They have treasured these stories even when they were transported as literature orally from one generation to another. The region of Aranmula is the perfect example so as to how orally transported literature like myths and folklores can sustain a culture with its whole beauty and integrity. Each culture has its own unique folktales and myths that find its place in literature like the tale of Ulysses in Greek, Pangu myth in China, the harp of the Dagda in Celtic and the tale of the white buffalo woman in Native America.

Another peculiar literary outlook that can be given to the myth and folklore of Aranmula is its symbolic value. Each story or ritual associated with Aranmula can be given symbolic interpretations that are not restricted to religion but contain meaning that are to be followed for a global good. Folklores originally were orally sung and the art movement of symbolism first arose in poetry. Lord Parthasarathy is himself symbolic of how head or intellect can win over body. This same idea gets reflected in works of Indian literature like *Kathasaritsagara*. In Kannada folklore, Girish Karnad through his play *Hayavadana* explores the same concept of head's superiority over body. The same theme is chosen also by Thomas Mann in his work *The Transposed Heads*. Even though Lord Krishna didn't take any weapons in the Mahabharata war, his intellect and timely decisions made *pandavas* win the battle. The myth of *thiruvona thoni* represents how by giving food to others, we attain happiness and mental wealth. To give food to someone is like giving a new life.

The *vallomkali* or boat race also has its symbolism. This festival shows how the perfect unity of man, music and nature when joined together in the perfect composition can give rise to powerful vibes that charge the atmosphere with large amounts of positive energy where tiredness and laziness vanishes. The *vallasadya* or the famous Aranmula feast that is considered the biggest and best feast of the world shows how the coming together so many dishes with thousands of tastes can give rise to the best culinary combinations. The different dishes coming together in the same leaf during the *sadya* can be symbolic of how the hegemony of multiculturalism gives rise to a universal equality that can eradicate all divisions and evils. The Aranmula *Kannadi* or metal mirror also has its representation to offer. It is symbolic of how one

needs to project one's own real nature to the word. Human beings don't usually reflect their real nature and hide their inner selves within them. The mirror shows how the reflection from the front surface gives the most beautiful image. The mirror surface of the mirror is also symbolic of how perfect combinations or composition of materials can give rise to something so beautiful and unique. So it is not the material that matters but how it is judiciously used that matters. Symbols like these are found in literature of all cultures. For example; Shamrock (symbol of Christianity, faith, hope, love and spiritual development) in Celtic, Ankh(symbol of eternal life) in Egypt, Knot of Hercules(symbolic of a happy and fruitful marriage) in Greek etc.

All these myths and folktales of Aranmula have always been remained as folklores and there is a need to accept them as literature since they concentrate upon the dynamics of contemporary culture and heritage. Culture creates and transforms individual experiences and everyday life. Only because these myths and folklores imparted culture and ethnicity, this small village gained a place in the world heritage sites which is not an easy task. Embracing ones culture not only revives the morals but also creates equality and love for the past rather than jumping into the tornado of modernization. At a time when culture, traditions, beliefs and rituals are becoming a mere concept and are getting wiped off, Aranmula brings to daylight its culture, myths, folklore and tradition that they hold closer to their heart even after thousands of years with its entire luster. There is a need to promote this kind of unique and authentic culture to a wider audience so that it can revive the lost and forgotten traditions of every culture thus making it a global gain.

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