

KANIYAN KOOTHU- AN IMPORTANT FOLK ART OF TIRUNELVELI DISTRICT

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Introduction:

Every district of Tamilnadu has unique culture and tradition, and hence, unique folk arts too, to represent the culture of the people. The southern districts of Tamilnadu like Kanyakumari, Tirunelveli, Tuticorin, Ramanad and Madurai - are rich in folk arts that form the basis for many classical arts of Indian culture. The folk arts are simple dances or musical performances executed by the people of rural villages to express their joy in every possible occasion such as arrival of a pleasant season and religious festivals.¹ Men or women in specific costumes, that are characteristic to the dance, perform some folk dances exclusively while in some other performances men and women dance together to put their steps to music.

Folk Arts

The folk arts, being tradition oriented arts of an area, offer peace and solace to the people's mind and represent the culture of the area, in the past and present decades, to reveal its social history too. They clearly affirm the tradition and mood of people who have been living in the area, say for example a district or state or a country. Most often the village deities are captivated by executing the concerned folk arts before their statues. Every community has its own performing martial arts which are executed at different situations to expose its customs and culture.² Without knowing the folk arts and folklores, no one can understand the culture of people in the community. The folk arts are aimed at entertaining the people during the vacation and rests to bring out joy and happiness in their mind, and at worshiping the village deities.

Kaniyan Koothu:

Tamil Nadu has rich cultural history. Tamil people had unique arts in the past. They had different techniques in dancing, singing. They had different types of musical instruments. The songs are classified

according to the mood of the singer. *Kaniyan koothu* is a sort of dance recital to songs accompanied by music performed only by the members of *Kaniyan* tribe, which seems to be a minority community in Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu, during festivals. It is believed that *Kaniyan koothu* is an ancient folk art which had originated much earlier than bow-song in Tamilnadu. Men from this community are known traditionally as experts in *koothu*, which consists of music, dance, singing, and narration. They perform *koothu* in the annual celebration to worship Sudalai a folk deity celebrated by the non-tribal communities in order to invoke the spirit of the deity.³ Men from the *Kaniyan* community also work as shamans in the worship of Sudalai. The shaman performs the core rituals of *kaivettu* (blood sacrifice by tearing his hand), *theralai koduthal* (offering food mixed with blood at the graveyard), *kaapu kattuthal* (wearing a sacred cord), and *vetaiku pothal* (“hunting” at the graveyard). All these rituals are enactments of myth and are still performed in Tirunelveli district.

Kaniyan Community:

In Tirunelveli district, a tribal community called the *Kaniyan* has occupied a low status in the social hierarchy and livelihoods because of poor education and poverty and hence most people cannot earn for their daily breads; *Kaniyans* were once considered to be untouchable by people of higher castes as they had failed to adopt modern culture, but the trend has been completely changed due to the enforcement of legislations through the constitution of India. Generally they are uneducated and live in poverty. They are considered untouchable and uncultured by the upper caste people. Other communities, especially those designated “forward” and “backward,” do not have any social relationship, such as marriage, with the *Kaniyan* community.⁴ The literal meaning of “*Kaniyan*” in the Tamil language is “to calculate.” Formerly, the *Kaniyan* were experts in astrology and the men of the *Kaniyan* community are traditionally experts in *koothu*. In the Tamil language *koothu* refers to a play or a performance, which consists of dance, music, and singing. The type of *koothu* performed by the *Kaniyan* community is known as *Kaniyan koothu*. There are typically several *koothu* teams in a *Kaniyan* community.⁵ The men of the *Kaniyan* community play a significant role in Sudalai worship. A team of *Kaniyan* men performs *koothu* in order to invoke the spirit of Sudalai, and a shaman who also belongs to the *Kaniyan* community performs the core rituals of *kaappu kattuthal* (wearing a sacred thread cord), *Kaniyan kaivettu* (sacrificing blood by tearing his hand), *vetaiku pothal* (“hunting” at the graveyard), and *theralai koduthal* (food offering at the graveyard) during the annual celebration.⁶ Their traditional occupation is to perform *koothu* during the annual celebration to worship Sudalai which is sponsored by the non-tribal communities. Apart from the *koothu* teams there are *Kaniyan* men who function as shamans in the annual celebration, where they lead all the core rituals of the worship of Sudalai.

Origin of Kaniyan Koothu

Adiyarkkunallaar, who was a Tamil poet and commentator belonging to 10th century AD, had clearly stated about sixty-four types of *koothu*, including *Kaniyan koothu*, in Tamilnadu. It would be most probably the ancient literature that refers to *Kaniyan koothu* for the first time, so that at this juncture it is concluded that *Kaniyan koothu* might have originated somewhere else between the sixth and tenth century A.D.⁷ Further, almost all the *Sudalaimaadan* temples thrashed out in the ballads are situated in Tirunelveli district, so that *Kaniyan koothu* could be originated from *Kaniyan* natives of Tirunelveli district, and doled out to other districts of southern Tamil Nadu. Even if it is difficult to assume the precise time of origin of *Kaniyan koothu*, it would be one of the ancient folk performing arts of Tamil Nadu. *Kaniyan koothu* has not been executed in cultural carnivals and other occasions because most ballads being sung in this performance are concerned with village gods.⁸ In recent years, some other ballads being sung in *Villuppattu* are also narrated in *Kaniyan koothu* for a brief time to entertain the people. In Tirunelveli district, *Kaniyan koothu* is performed primarily in *Sudalai Maadan* temples and in *Pechiyammaan* temples, as a substitute for Bow-song programs during fiestas.

Sudalaimadan worship:

Generally these shamans are older people who have generally retired from performing *koothu*. The role of the Kaniyan community in the worship of Sudalai is highly significant. Since *Kaniyans* are of the strong opinion that they were created by God to perform *Kaniyan koothu* before *Sudalaimadan* deity, *Kaniyan koothu* has been the traditional occupation of Kaniyans. They perform *Kaniyan koothu* before the temples or idols of *Sudalai Madan* while celebrating festivals sponsored by non-tribal people elsewhere in the district or other districts. Although the non-tribal communities worship Sudalai, the core rituals of the annual celebration of Sudalai are to be performed by the men of the tribal Kaniyan community.⁹ This means that though the Kaniyan community is socially backward, it occupies a dominant role in the ritual performances of the annual celebration. Thus, Kaniyans have brought the mythological legends before the people of modern society, which has so many electronic media for entertainment, for the worship of village deities.

Kaniyan Koothu Performance

The *Kaniyan koothu* artists say that their ancestors didn't have the tradition of telling jokes for entertaining audience while reciting their performance before the deity because of the reason that they had

performed it with full devotion to the God during the one-night festival which was mostly denied for other public, but now, the trend is changing and it is necessary to articulate some shaggy dog stories to entertain people, who are gathered in front of the temple during the three-days festival, as most mass communication media work for the society.¹⁰ The narration and singing of this myth in the *Kaniyan koothu* takes from two to three hours. During this performance the *komarathadigal (Samiyadi)* are possessed by the spirit of Sudalai and dance vehemently. They perform divination and offer sacred ash to the devotees. Generally in Sudalai *kodai* several people are possessed by the spirit of Sudalai and dance.¹¹ The myth of *Sudalaimaadan* story reveals that the first *Kaniyans* were created by the Lord Siva to perform *Kaniyan koothu* for propitiating *Sudalimaadan* deity in *Kailash* with the intention of sending him to the earth.

Role of Kaniyans:

The role of *Kaniyans* in the worship of *Sudalaimaadan* alias *Sudalai* is unavoidable during the annual grand festival which is conducted by many families together to praise the deity. It is worth to note that a team of six *Kaniyans* perform *Kaniyan koothu* to the folk ballad of *Sudalaimaadan* with the intension of invoking the spirit of *Sudalai* in the temple while an elder *Kaniyan*, who is dubbed to be *Shaman*, performs the core rituals such as *Kaappu kattuthal*, *Kaniyan Kaivettu*, *Vettaikkupothal* and *Theralai Koduthal* during the festival. The *Kaniyan koothu* team embraces six *Kaniyan* men- a lead songster, a chorus singer, two drummers who play drums called *Makudam* and two dancers dressed in female costume.¹² The songster, who is also known as *Annavi*, stands in front of the statue and sings and narrates the myth of *Sudalaimaadan* by cupping his left ears with left hand and extending the right hand towards the deity so as to invoke the spirit of the deity. At the same time the chorus singer gives some supporting voice to the main singer. The drummers play *Makudam* with a virile and vigour while the dancers make suitable dance steps to the music. At regular intervals, the songster stops the myth and the drummers beat the *Makudam* with a high pitch while the dancers make dance steps to the music of the *Makudam*.¹³

Conclusion:

Even though the performers play *Kaniyan koothu* in an aggressive manner for several years, it does not suite for old *Kaniyans*. In order to restore this art for future, the Tamil Nadu Government takes

some steps to teach it to anyone who is interested in that performing art irrespective of caste priority. Since it is a traditional dance of *Kaniyans*, there are no formal classes or coaching to learn *Kaniyan koothu*. People's attention towards *Kaniyan koothu* in temples has been vanishing year by year due to the advent of new media for entertainment such as radio broadcasting of songs, popularization of Tamil cinema and launching of TV programs. The interested persons accompany the performers whenever and wherever they perform *Kaniyan koothu*. While the opportunity arises, they take up the *makudam* and practice the music, those who are interested in singing stand near the lead singer and sing with him and those who are interested in dancing dance together with the performers during an actual performance.

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