

ANTHROPOLOGY OF POSSESSION AND THE CASE OF A NON-BRAHMINICAL DEITY*

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ABSTRACT

In this article I try to summarize the methodological problems involved in the ethnographic study of such phenomenon which are understood to be evil, supernatural or/and magical. I have tried to review the very limited source of ethnographic study related to the cult of a little known deity called Kuttichaathan or Chaathan in Kerala, in order to discuss my own ethnographic findings. While I argue that such phenomenon as understood to be evil form a religious practice in its entirety for its believers (Tarabout:1997), I also maintain a distance from theories which give such cults a heroic personage(Gough:1958). This article is also critical of the theories of Brahminization and Sanskritization which demarcate supernatural phenomenon or cults involving possession as marginal to the study of religion per se.

Keywords: Magic, Possession, Transgression, Caste, Parasite, Sanskritization, Kerala, Kuttichaathan, Velan.

Introduction

One of the most contentious and fraught areas of the study of caste has been characterizing the diverse forms of ritualistic practices of worship associated with possession. The manner in which it divides the practices of Hinduism into Brahminical and Non-Brahminical (or Sanskritic and Non-Sanskritic) as one can observe, for instance in anthropological literature on

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My field-work for this paper has involved several people, all of whom I would like to thank for the enormous help I have received from them in writing this paper. I would at least like to recall here the names of a few of them. Subbran Asaan, Mohanettan, Rajuettan, Girish, Aji, Pramod, Unnikrishnan are the names immediately coming to mind. Of course there are many more all of which would not fit in this space. I had to fit in several roles- friend, scholar, folklorist and even a chauffer - while accompanying them on programmes for the *kalampattu* of Vishnumaya or Kuttichathan. This was made possible by their token recognition of the fact that my interest in their work was genuine. I take this as an opportunity to thank them for this honor.

possession is perhaps one reason behind it. Frits Staal for instance says that “anthropologists commonly regard possession as a non Sanskritic form *par excellence*” (Staal, 1963: 267). While arguing that such distinctions arise out of the dichotomies envisaged in the conception of Hinduism as separated by little and great tradition or context and text, Staal cautions that they cannot be superimposed merely on the assumption that Sanskrit as a language has always been the source integrating the sub-continental spread of Hinduism. While looking at rituals such as those invoking possession Staal contents that there are elements of the little or the non-Sanskritic tradition that prevail over the great or Sanskritic tradition that it becomes difficult to make a notwithstanding Srinivas’ reservation regarding sanskritization that it “is a two way process, though the local cultures seem to have received more than they have given”(as quoted in Staal, *Ibid*).

The Anthropological Case of *Chaathan* as a Deity of Possession

Focusing on the anthropology of one deity called *Kuttichaathan* which is prevalent predominantly in the state of Kerala, a part of Southern or peninsular India, the devotees of who cuts across Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu or Kannada speaking states in the South, different castes from the lowest untouchable to the highest Brahmins this paper will try to explore this problematic in a little greater detail. Although its recent peninsular spread signifies only a random explosion in the number of devotees to *Chaathan* the cult as such remains localized to certain regions and certain ancestral temples in Kerala. It is a pastoral, Saivite cult with representations of cattle- buffaloes and cows – as the vehicles for *Chaathan* and *Karimkutti* finding a significant place in the rituals. The priests for this ritual called *Velan* abstain from eating the meat of either because of this. As such, this is the only form of a pastoral cult still remaining in the temples of Kerala. Even here, it is only in parts of the state, especially central Kerala, or the areas adjoining the district of Trichur where this property of this deity is emphasized through the ritual of *Kalampaattu*. Elsewhere for example in the north of Kerala (Payyannur) where he is worshipped in *Teyyam*, his vehicles- the cows or/and buffaloes- are not given due representation. Besides, as examined by Sontheimer (1997) in the case of pastoral deities like Aiyyanar (Tamil Nadu), Mailar (Karnataka), Mallanna (Andhra) and Khandoba (Maharashtra), *Chaathan* is depicted in stories linking the plateau or plains with the ghats or the forests. But things get more complicated in the case of *Chaathan* because he adds up to the role of a herder, also the role of an agrestic slave who works the fields of the Brahmin (*Bhattathiri* of Panchanellur, *Nambuthiri* of Kattumaatam are a couple of his masters). The issues arising from this combination of roles will be one of the themes of this paper.

The word *Chaathan* signifies a multiplicity of siblings all but one, born to Siva of which *Kuttichaathan* (born to *Vishnnu* and hence called *Vishnnumaya*) is the most popular followed by *Karimkutti* and hundreds of others the names of the entire pantheon it will be difficult to record. Folklore speaks sometimes of 400 and sometimes of 336 although the arithmetic of counting him in numbers or by names is a gain-less task¹. *Chaathan* here exudes divinity as a form of quasi-object that multiplies itself through possession. A quasi-object is another name used for a parasite in the philosophical explorations of Serres into the nature of human relationships in a post-modern world. Serres' ideas which lament the reduction of the human subject to the level of a parasite, seeks to redeem the subjectivity of human beings by claiming that human relationships can no longer be understood from a subject-centered world of meaning. It is only by means of a form of objectivity, known as quasi-objectivity that the subject position of individuals can be explained.

Chaathan's divinity is a quasi-object in caste society that defies the fixity of position which is often attached to Sanskritic deities. Although *Chaathan* is believed to have the power to assume any shape or form there are certain species of nature that is linked to him as agnatic and recording this I think will be a challenge for ethnology. They are supposed to be known merely to his priestly attendants from the caste called *Velan* and even for one of them to recall all these species of *Chaathans* by name could be right now impossible. This unpredictability in form and shape that he can assume in terms of entering into a relationship adds to his divinity perceived in the form of a quasi-object.

The nearest I could get in terms of understanding this multiplicity of forms was when in the midst of my conversation with *Aasaan* (a priest of *Chaathan*), an insect of the species of grasshopper was indicated to me as a *Chaathan*. A multiplicity of this sort represents a quasi objectivity which is far from the anthropocentric divinity of Sanskritic deities. An installation for *Chaathan* can be as simple as merely a *Peethham* which appears like a small stool with three legs. It is quite possible to think of *Chaathan* as a generic name given to all sons of Siva including *Murukan* (Tamil Nadu) and *Saasthavu* or *Aiyappan* (Kerala). In order to understand how critical the notion of multiplicity of forms is for a study of the worship of *Chaathan* one has to first dispel the rather blanket reduction of *Chaathan* to a malignant, non-Sanskritic deity executed by colonial and modern anthropology.

F.Fawcett (1901) was perhaps the first to describe *Kuttichaathan* as a devil who was worshipped alongside a lot of similar deities like *Gulikan* and *Karimkutti*. Though he does not offer in detail the description of the

practices associated with this worship he does give some details about the cult of *Karimkutti* but not adequately accounting for the agnatic relationship shared between *Karimkutti* and *Kuttichaathan*. Much later L.K. Anantha Krishna Iyer it was who made his foray into this domain saying “*Kuttichaathan* is supposed to be a mysteriously working mischievous imp in Malabar demonology” (Iyer, 1925: 197). He also gives them the description that was to stick on for years as “most willing slaves of masters who happen to control them” (Ibid). But Iyer warns about the repercussions of using the powers that accrue to the masters from the servitude of *Chaathan* as capable of bringing childlessness to themselves who have to cross through a lot of mental agony because of this. This fault as entirely due to the disturbance of *Chaathan* is something his ethnographic account tries to corroborate surreptitiously².

For a modern anthropologist like Kathleen Gough (1958) who follows a method of political economy in her approach the worship of *Chaathan* amongst the *Nairs* of Kerala as a practice was coupled with the lesser educated from the caste. She discusses the case of a young educated *Nair* male who visited her often without the knowledge of his mother deliberately for the fact that she would shun his eating Christian food with them. This man but would never argue with his mother or complain about her food which he did not find at times suitable to his taste. Except on one occasion when he had to arrange for a sacrifice for *Chaathan* a “minor, malevolent deity” upon his mother’s bidding because she thought her calf died because of the intervention of the spirit (Gough, 1958:456).

The reason as Gough tries to surmise behind this attitude among the lesser educated was that the worship of *Chaathan* was supposed to be originating from veneration of the spirits of lower caste men or women who happened to be slain by the higher caste *Nambuthiri* or *Nair*. Their spirits returned to trouble or avenge their deaths and hence were made into gods and necessarily propitiated by the upper castes in small temples or shrines adjacent to their main temples or in parts of the compound of their households (Ibid:466). While it may be gratifying to find that a certain semblance of justice is delivered and some form of secular balance of power is attained through such descriptions, as explanations for the worship of *Chaathan*, the heroic cult of martyrdom or the lack of education amongst his devotees are hardly sufficient.

Ontological Perspectives on Possession

Tarabout (1997) sums up the problem of possession in colonial anthropology in India as borrowed from the sense of religion in Europe where it was linked to the work of magic, sorcery or witchcraft, as something separate and distinct from what can be called religion proper. As Levi Strauss (1964) in

his study of totemism had summarized the failure of erstwhile ethnography and ethnology to understand the problem of totemism in Polynesia because of a vision or philosophy of religion that held human beings at its centre and the multitude of natural objects as tied to it, possession also as a problem in the Indian context owed itself to its antithetical role attributed to it vis-à-vis religion. From a social-anthropological perspective, Raheja (1988) was the first to introduce the problems of evil spells or possession through the critique her work makes of the concept of purity in the system of Hindu prestations known as *Daan*. Visuvalingam (1989) also emphasizes the importance of possession through the concept of transgression vital in decoding the diversity of religious experience which earlier was branded merely as evil, black or *Taamasik*. Tarabout (1997) has pointed out in his study of similar phenomenon which he calls magic that it was studied as speculative, following the logic of a ritual and as an antithesis to religion. Tarabout tries to overcome the separation of religion and magic on the basis of his study of the cult of *Kuttichaathan* in Kerala that such practices that have been termed magical constitute the religious life of the lower castes, and is distinguished by its patrons, their degree of violence and the officiating castes.

Tarabout follows an ontological framework in the only known existing ethnographic work that is devoted to the study of *Chaathan*. All earlier works discussed were fragments in the discussion of larger themes like caste system, religion or magic in ethnography of Kerala. Tarabout has certainly pitched it on to a level where articulation of a 'demonic' cult can at least claim to some amount of academic integrity. This he achieves by placing it within the framework of master- slave relationship of command and servitude, of ontology, of a theory of being.

Tarabout's framework although expository of the blindness to magic as a form of religion in Europe, does not speak much about the relations of hierarchy in which the cult exists. The form of religion assumed by Tarabout in the context of the worship of *Chaathan* can be understood only by invoking the lower caste, untouchable critique of society itself as a termination of all human relationships, any new relationship being a result of exclusion from society at large. I argue that this critique looks at caste system as a network of relations with no fixity of subject or order and that it functions through chaos and reordering. The lower castes use *Chaathan* as a metaphor for the unifying field notion of culture by which they are represented in Hinduism.

Parasitology as Anthropology of Possession

The fact that *Chaathan* represent a multiplicity (of siblings) is a syllogism of the untouchable lower castes' existence largely uncounted and unidentified outside the *Chaaturvarnya*. It is in fact a critique of the alienating caste

subjectivity itself to be seen here. *Chaathan* is therefore seldom alone. If not his siblings, he is always with a host. The host can be from different households, often prosperous if not of the upper castes. Two, even with a host he is not alone. He is many and lives off the host so long as willingly kept satisfied by the host and if not, stealing from the host. *Chaathan* cannot be chased away or killed because even if one tries to do it, he always returns in his multitudinal indestructible forms³. According to a popular proverb, it is the diffidence of *Chaathan* in spite of the efforts of his masters to assail or kill him for his mischief that instigates his return in numbers, not one or two, but many.

One needs a look at relationships sans obstructions of any of the categories of binaries of the good and evil if one were to get a fair idea of what it means to be possessed (*Baadha*) by *Chaathan*. It is a certain form of excluded-ness that is strung within a chain of relationships objectified in nature as caste. *Chathhan* is a reflection on the basic truth about human relationships. The form of exclusion practiced by *Chaaturvarnya* as that which essentially gave birth to the caste system is criticized by implication in the way *Chaathan* often rebukes the pedantism of his *Nambuthiri* hosts. *Chaathan* can move from host to host and is always present or accessible to anyone who is willing to solicit his services to dominate any position of disadvantage he or she may have fallen. *Chaathan* assumes the position of the excluded and plays on the very position to dominate the relations of the caste system which seeks to jeopardize his supplicant⁴.

As already mentioned Tarabout (1997) while trying to understand the cult of *Chaathan* links him to a relationship of master-servant which can be linked to an ontology or a theory of being. Tarabout highlights the initiation of a *Mantravaadi* into the worship of *Chaathan* as a spiritual quest involving meditation of a kind by which forces necessarily stored for a future incarnation in a person's life are released in the present. It is on the strength of these forces alone that a cult of *Chaathan* can be pursued and hence the significance of the *Mantravaadi*. Meditation is used by the *Mantravaadi* as a technique to augment the possession of his own self by cleansing it of the innermost recesses of the fear of the supernatural.

While providing breakthrough on many fronts, I think Tarabout's work still does little justice to the way *Chaathan* is always in a kind of surreptitious hegemony over his hosts thus allowing none to enter into a dominant or masterly position vis-a-vis himself. By spreading noises and nuisances in an otherwise structured order of things, *Chaathan* always dominates a relationship by assuming the role of a parasite that plays with its position or location. *Chaathan* is in that sense the complete contrary of what may be termed the subject that tries to affirm its position or its locus in a

relationship. *Chaathan* satisfies all the demands or requests of his hosts not in order to reciprocate the offerings made to him but to ensure that a certain domain is created for relations to exist independent of their locus.

As is well known for those familiar with it, the presence of *Chaathan* is always indicated by a disturbance or *Upadravam* as they call it. This is a parasitic order, a harmonious dispersion of things through a process of exclusion⁵. For *Chaathan* this is derived from the gradual exclusion from that order of *Chaaturvarnya* to which he is destined, nonetheless holding sway over the multiplicity of forms in which he can dominate all relations, including that of the *Varna*. The certainty that a domain would exist for relations independent of the *Varna* is because in *Upadravam*, *Chaathan* or his siblings do not transform the caste system as such, but they change its state, through a minimal action, neither revolution, nor reform.

The master-slave relation in the way it exists between the *Mantravaadi* and *Chaathan* if at all thrives, then it is due to the open challenge or competition to which such a relation can be thrown rather than one of order and obedience. As a dependent of the elder *Nambuthiri* of *Akavur Mana*, *Chaathan* had shown extraordinary brilliance to rid him of his sins of promiscuity and outshine his wisdom to prove that he was actually as much powerful a devotee of the same force or ideal called *Parabrahmam* that is worshipped by Brahmins. So much so that he could realize it in the form of a buffalo and command it to obey him (Sankunni, 2009: 42-59).

Chaathan is always powerful to intercept the career of his superiors with a histrionic of heroism. The myths centered on *Chaathan* have always been and still is today an industry that prospers on the strength of alcohol. Alcohol consumption is mentioned in the songs and also used as *Kalassam* or offering that is indispensable to the god. Its representative function is one of subversion and questioning the *Tandaayan* of the toddy –tapping and tendering caste of the *Izhava* the dereliction in the practice of his trade. This serves as a local criticism on the scale at which illicit liquor is imported and sold in the state but not without the connivance of the major hosts of the deity himself. Therefore as it goes in the songs of the *Velan* the *Chaathan* says to the *Tandaayathi* or the *Izhava* female who sells the toddy tapped by her husband that if you give us toddy mixed with water then you will get only rice mixed with chaff in return.

This proves that so much as the master is capable of parasiting his slaves, the slaves or servants are also capable of producing counter masters or slaves who will be masters of the master and not the slaves. This relation becomes the quintessential core of the spirit of class rebellion and martyrdom read into the story of *Chaathan* by modernist interpretations including that

of Kathleen Gough which we saw earlier⁶. This relation has to be what can be called a quasi-object a term that I had also earlier used to designate the kind of relationship that may be conceptualized between the 336-400 different species of *Chaathans*. For *Chaathan* and 335 of his siblings the arena is caste as a circulation of disturbances, where they are constituted as quasi objects and can never be permanently linked to any subject dead or living⁷.

The cult of *Chaathan* is often understood as a votive offering by his clients in order to realize particular aims or remedy specific illnesses (Iyer, 1925; Gough, 1958). This also lives on the predicate of a relationship of gift exchange or a paradigm of reciprocity in the caste system. But as a chain of circulation of objects the caste system takes count of only two positions, that of the donor and the recipient. The position of an excluded and the third that occupy the chain of exchanges sans position is not discussed anywhere⁸. *Chaathan* as a representation of the excluded multitude spans the material cycle of exchanges, of the relation of the donor and the recipient. He partakes of gifts or offerings made to him only to the extent they can be parasited through his host, irrespective of the host's position in the hierarchy of gift exchanges. *Chaathan* creates a system of the parasite out of such exchanges, beyond the donor and the recipient whereof he finds sustenance.

The caste system as understood in the context of the cult of *Chaathan* will have to be not only a critique of the donor-recipient theory of relations of exchange or that of the master-slave relations of command, but also the friend-enemy relations of the contract theories of society. Susan Visvanthan's ethnography on the Christians of Kerala (1999:88-91) revealed how a Christian family became believers of the *Chaathan* and in the process also began a propitiatory donation of food grains to a dependent *Izhava* family who were patrons of *Chaathan*. Interestingly her account makes no mention of the caste or other whereabouts of a 'man' who actually invoked *Chaathan* against the Christian landlord. This man was not fairly treated in the payment of his wages as an employee of the landlord. It is ideally in the form of enforcing a contract that *Chaathan* must have been invoked in this context as the author tries to conclude but stops short of explaining why only one family and not all the landlord's dependants should be reciprocated. As an explanation towards understanding the dynamic of inter-caste and inter-religious relations in this context it implicitly moves towards a contract theory of caste, the occasional renewal of which ensures the perpetuity of deities like that of *Chaathan*.

But the notion of subject crucial to a theory of contract⁹ and of rights is nonexistent in the cases involving possession of *Chaathan* as it is difficult to examine the field of his possession as involving merely human subjects. It

manifests sometimes as a person possessed and at other times as burning clothes, shattered lamps, flying roof-tiles etc. *Chaathan* as earlier mentioned constitutes a quasi-objectivity through his possession that encompasses relations engendered in objects through possession, which is always excluded in a contract.

Chaathan merely ensures that relationships continue despite caste conceived as a social contract which as a formation of relationships always tries to exclude him as a parasite¹⁰. It is the irreducibility of divinity to any structure, system or order, which is represented in the visitation or possession of *Chaathan* as a disturbance. *Chaathan*'s disturbance is an objectification of relations in the nature of human setting or habitation in a place. It forms a link between humans, his hosts such that *Chaathan* materializes his own divinity in the form of a quasi-object.

In this section we saw how the possession of *Chaathan* can be used as a heuristic means for criticizing some of the well known theories of the caste system although not on an exhaustive scale. This criticism followed a line of argument sans the distinctions of theory and practice represented as a disturbed set of relations. In the next section I will examine attempts to historicize the cult through writings which also point to reasons for its constellations around certain castes in Kerala.

A Historiography of the Cult

Historiography as used here means a study of the resources linking the cult to the mainstream devotees of Hinduism. Sontheimer (1997) has argued that the pastoral deities of Deccan like Khandoba (Maharashtra), Mallanna (Andhra) and Mailar (Karnataka) have traits of the pre-Vedic god Rudra, although the association with Siva is popular today betraying its Brahminical influence. These deities which are not traceable back to any of the Puranas of Siva, therefore find their stories narrated in folk religion, especially as tales of the pastoral heroes of communities like Dhangar and Gavli. Despite the several invocations of these gods by the popular Bhakti literature linking them to Puranic deities like Siva and Paravati, the roots of these cults remain pastoral and folk according to Sontheimer.

Chaathan, though may be likened to a pre-cursor to *Yama* because of the buffalo he rides and also because of the name *saastappan* (he who has the power to scold and correct wrongs in people, a power vested with *Yama* as the world's keeper of justice or *Dharma*), it is through his association with *Vishnumaaya* of *Padmapuraana* that the initial breakthrough was created for Brahminical Hinduism in creating foot holds in lower caste worship of *Chaathan*.

This emerged out of the rising popularity of the cult since the 1960s in the *Izhava* household of the *Aavanangotte Panicker*. Subramanya Panicker, scion of the family of the *Aavanangotte Panicker* wrote a book as early as 1963 claiming *Saastavu (Chaathan)* to be the same as *Vishnumaaya* of the *Padmapuraana* paving the way for its immense popularity today. The work of Panicker which was written as a *Kilippaattu* or the form in which the medieval Bhakti poetry was written has sought to club a folk and lower caste religion with the renascent culture of popular Hinduism dominated by the upper castes.

More recently Narayanan a scion of the *Kaattumaatam Mana* near Valanchery in Malappuram has claimed that the worship of *Chaathan* is a form of magic practiced by the *Nambuthiri* Brahmins of Kerala which is otherwise forbidden to them but coming in the form of *Vaishnavamaaya Durga* becomes acceptable in principle as a union of the elements of the Sanskritic deities Siva and Vishnu. In an article written for a popular weekly in Malayalam in 1991 Narayanan claims that it was also a source for knowledge of magic for the *Nambuthiri* households of *Kaattumaatam* and *Kaalakutam*.

All attempts at writing a history of this cult therefore will have to content with the claims of different castes in the authenticity of rituals performed for *Chaathan*. Yet at the bottom of things, it remains that this cult happens to be a distinctively, folk, pastoral and lower caste practice, into which many new castes including the Brahmins have been initiated only of late.

The restricted and rather upstart writing of history of this cult in the vernacular may be attributed to the shroud of secrecy that surrounds its practice till date. The scenario is also largely unlikely to change and the only possibility of a study that then arises is that of the manifestations of the cult in the form of possession at various places, which are reported as events. Kovur, a rationalist undertook an extensive survey of such reports and went on to collect first hand information regarding them in order to subject them to psychoanalytic interpretation as cases of psychic maladies. He even tried to ridicule the faith in such phenomenon as superstitious by claiming that he could actually heal many victims of possession by using film songs in place of the *Mantras* that are generally supposed to be uttered for these. Though popular as a form of literature for a considerable period of time when many of these stories were published in a serialized form in a Malayalam weekly called *Keralasabdham*, it failed to deliver the promise of emancipation from superstition with which it came and hence is verging on obscurity today.

Folklore had a better understanding of the legend of *Chaathan* that allows its historic contextualization in the form of a transformation of the kinship structures amongst the *Izhava*. It is the work of Kottarathil Sankunni on the

legends of Kerala in 1926, a first of its kind in Malayalam that created a niche for *Chaathan* amidst the modern literate public in Kerala. According to it the worship of *Chaathan* grew in Peringottukara village of Trichur district following a crisis that arose in the family of *Aavanangotte Panicker* when there were no successors in the male line. It was left with a lone male member who had no sons-in-law the system of inheritance being matrilineal. In order to find a successor for himself he married a woman and brought her home thus breaking the convention of matriliney which stipulated the residence of the wife after marriage at her natal home. Children born of this union retained the title from their father instead of their mother.

When they grew up they also learned *Mantravaadam* or sorcery from their uncle and so began a cult of *Ganapathi* to realize their goals. But they soon realized that the cult of *Chaathan* was much more powerful because *Chaathan* could be commanded to do things becoming only of slaves which *Ganapathi* could not. So they exchanged *Ganapathi* with *Chaathan* from the house of *Punchanellur Bhattathiri* in order to fortify themselves. *Aitihyamaala* says that they received in exchange 390 of the 400 *Chaathans*-10 were already given away to *Kaattumaatam Nambuthiri*- who were with the *Bhappatiri* and established it as the new family cult. The male descendants of these brothers it is who are believed to have brought the *Aavanangotte Kalari* to its prominence today (Sankunni, 2009:552-61).

This could not have been an easy task as songs used in the *kalampattu* (the ritual veneration of *Chaathan* performed by the *Velan*) say that they had to overcome resistance from their own uncle, or mother's brother's claim that *Chaathan* is his property asserting the avuncular rule of inheritance and also because he taught the brothers magic. This they did by claiming *Chaathan* not on their own behalf having actually procured *Chaathan* in exchange from the *Punchanellur Bhattathiri*, but by claiming that *Chaathan* was the dowry that should be duly given to their mother.

The point which could be taken from these accounts is that hybrid structures of family seeking redemption from tradition can give rise to new religious practices. That matriliney as a rule was once followed and later contested by a lower caste like the *Izhava* is what the legend of the *Aavanangotte Panicker* illustrates. Anthropologists have studied matriliney as structures of transformation which should not be observed as stationary or in isolation from patriliney (Levistrauss, 1969; Aiyappan, 1934). Insofar as the cult of *Chaathan* is concerned one can only surmise that one of the most respected and well known devotees of *Chaathan* were *Izhava* who changed from a practice of matriliney to patriliney. It is a pointer to hybrid structures of family and inheritance arising out of disputes amongst the patrons, the

preponderance of which has arguably risen to prominence with the contemporary popularity of *Chaathan*. This is a point the details of which have to be yet examined at length. It is also an indicator of how *Chaathan* as shown above dwells on the strength of a domain of relationships any consolidation of which into a specific locus or position is asking for trouble.

There is one more mention of *Chaathan* in this book of legends. This is in relation to an entirely different context and setting. The place happens to be *Akavur* and the patron household a *Mana* or *Nambuthiri* household. The legend forms part of a bigger legend famed as *Parayi Petta Pantirukulam* or the 12 lineages of *Parayi* or a woman of the *Paraya*, untouchable caste and *Vararuchi* a Brahmin saint. The children born to them are abandoned by them because born to exceptionally talented parents, they assume the children will fend for themselves. Eventually they are adopted by 12 different households and they absorb the skills of their foster parents and excel in them as basket-makers, priests, warriors, washer-men, salt sellers, nomads, agriculturists and brick makers thus bringing them together under the description of the singular lineage as born from the womb of a lower caste untouchable woman as *Parayi Petta Pantiru Kulam*. Of these 12 one is *Chaathan* who was brought up in the *Akavur Mana* as one of its dependants. Although the *Mana* has been made famous by legend there is as such no place to worship *Chaathan* here.

A survey of historiographic literature reveals that *Chaathan* has not yet been absorbed into Brahminical Hinduism fully. The account of Kottarathil Sankunni especially seems to suggest this fact. It gives importance to the specific, lower caste and hybrid nature of this worship in terms of accepting new forms of relationships amongst humans. This feature of the cult becomes even clearer when one looks at the story in which *Chaathan* is placed in the rituals of *Velan* as a neutralizing force between the Brahminical cults of *Saivism* and *Vaishnavism* and as a catalyzing force in the cult of *Sakti*, especially the way it is practiced amongst the non-Brahminical Hindu castes.

Mythology of the Cult

By mythology, I mean one of the different songs telling us the story of the birth of *Chaathan* and his siblings. It is usually told in the form of a performance- a song, as part of a ritual, held almost annually in different lower caste temples in the southern parts of Trichur district, i.e adjoining the areas mentioned in the *Aitihyamala* of Kottarathil Sankunni.

The myths of his birth of late have so overwhelmingly been taken over by the presence of the upper caste deities like *Siva*, *Visnu* and *Paarvati* whereas there is a whole array of elements into which it was initially dispersed

such as those of insects, plants, animals etc. Even within the terms of its mythology, sharp variations can be seen with respect to the lower and higher castes. The one version which I am going to now present belong to the caste *Velan* who is actually addressing a multitude of a species numbering 336 and not any one God.

The peculiarity of this account also lies in its iconography of the mother of *Chaathan*. Venerated in the devotional songs as *Kulivaaka*, the mother of *Chaathan* is herself neither a deity worshipped in or for herself with a specific place associated with the Hindu pantheon other than that of *Chaathan* himself nor is her name taken in ordinary or common parlance because it is in the songs alone that such a name surfaces if at all. Usually though people's names take after the names of gods and goddesses like for instance *Chaathan*, *Siva* or *Paarvati*, *Kulivaaka* hardly ever features in such a list. As we can gather from the songs to *Kuttichaathan*, *Kulivaaka* is a surrogate mother who conceives by consumption of a seed, a tuber into which *Paarvati* had transferred her fetus. This raises several questions as to why *Kulivaaka* is not being portrayed as the real mother of *Chaathan*.

Sontheimer's arguments that the pastoral deities of Deccan are always depicted as having two wives – one from the plains and another from the hills- can be also seen to be partly true with the birth of *Chaathan* who is born to *Kulivaaka* though conceived by *Paarvati*. The only difference is that it is in *Chaathan*'s mother, and not wife that merge elements of the tribal and the pastoral.

Lord *Siva*, once when he stepped out of his abode in *Kailaasa* for hunting came across *Kulivaaka*, a woman of such beauty that he was instantly in love with her. When he approached her she tried to save herself by requesting him to return from his hunt when she will wait for her. As soon as *Siva* departed *Kulivaaka* approached *Paarvati* and informed her of the incidents that happened. *Paarvati* upon hearing this took the matter to *Visnu* who suggested that *Paarvati* should take the form of *Kulivaaka* and wait for *Siva* at the designated spot. *Paarvati* agreed and when she took the form of *Kulivaaka*, *Visnu* himself was enticed by her that it led to the conception of *Kuttichaathan* by magic or *Maaya*. Later on in the rendezvous of *Paarvati* with *Siva* the rest of the *Chaathan* clan were also conceived by *Paarvati* in her form of *Kulivaaka*.

Kuttichaathan and his brothers though conceived by *Paarvati* was born to *Kulivaaka* and she took their care until time came for their naming ceremony. Sent to *Kailaasa* by their mother for this *Kuttichaathan* who grew up as a son of *Vishnu* challenges *Siva*'s step- fatherly attitude to not merely him, but also his brothers who were true sons of *Siva* . He asks for

ornaments at the time of initiation from *Siva* and refuses the plantain string with which *Siva* adorned his brothers. Not only that, he also asks *Siva* to choose a host to offer him and his brothers the daily hospitality of rituals and offerings. The *Bhattathiri* house hold of *Punchanellur* is then chosen by *Siva* of which *Chaathan* and his brothers become slaves but not before they have all taken the best of cows and buffaloes from *Siva*'s stable.

Velan who are the composers of this song are freelancing ritual specialists in performing the calendrical festivals for *Chaathan* in the ancestral temples of different families, of different castes and also the healing specialists in treating cases of possession. They can also practice the *Mantra* for the appeasement of *Chaathan*. There is a strong belief also among them that its use in public or for anything other than related to its object, i.e of healing possession could be dangerous to themselves.

Conclusion

To sum up, there are three points from which I have raised tenable perspectives to an understanding of the cult of possession in the case of the deity called *Kuttichaathan*. The ethnographic perspective points to its conception as a critique of the assumed notions of hierarchy ruling or governing human relationships according to the caste system. The historiographic perspective which becomes relevant because of the different attempts to historicize the practice of the cult in the twentieth century tries to compare and evaluate the perspectives which seek to combine the cult with other dominant traditions of Hinduism. These have been by and large attempts at Sanskritization, but with the clause provided by Staal (1963) added to it that it is also vernacularization at the same time. The mythological perspective tries to highlight the irreducible elements of a non-Sanskritic culture that dominates the cult in its performative aspect which is integral to certain ancestral groupings belonging to different castes- higher and lower- of which the sources yet remain unknown.

To conclude, I will begin with a point which has to be noted that those houses devoted to the worship of *Chaathan* desist from eating the meat of cows or buffaloes. This is for the reason that these animals, it is believed are the vehicles of *Chaathan*. Notwithstanding which they continue to make offerings of chicken-cock sacrifices to *Chaathan* for his propitiation and distributing its cooked meat as *Prasaadam* (offering) to be distributed amongst the devotees. A documentation of the tribes and castes of India by the Anthropological Survey of India cites on the contrary that the *Velan* do eat beef and they are not aware of the *Varna* system suggesting that the consumption of beef is a practice concurrent amongst all lower castes.

Sanskritization as an example of post-colonial anthropology has always maintained that let alone beef, all kinds of meat are becoming taboo to the lower castes, slowly emerging to the ways of vegetarianism generally followed amongst caste Hindus. Caught between the domains of colonial and post-colonial anthropology one can clearly see here a case of how subtle details could have been lost when they are employed with the tendency to generalize social phenomena.

This is a point that requires a little more elaboration in terms of the method of observation which fore-grounded the theory of Sanskritization as well as Westernization¹¹. Srinivas (1989:169) while commenting on the categories of the observer and the observed had earmarked for the anthropologists observation only human beings and not “rocks, plants or ants”. The world of objects existed only in so far as they were reducible to the subjectivity of the anthropologist himself without which no observation is possible. But his method lacked a theory of observation per se except for the exclusion of everything non-human from it. Such a theory falls into the assumption that the observer is perhaps the in-observable. He must, at least, be last on the chain of observables. If he is supplanted, he becomes observed.

One must be careful to notice that Srinivas though mixes up the notions of subject and object to eventually make it possible to reduce everything to the subjectivity of the anthropologist little does he permit any transgression or exchange in the roles of the observer and the observed. If one were to evaluate the role of the anthropologist in such a scenario, one can notice the method of observation itself turning from a scientific procedure to a cultural phenomenon, which is not without its implications for the scientific research that the anthropologist has set out to do. This nuanced area of the theory of observation could not be of more relevance to anything than the caste system.

Living in an era of information and recognizing the role of anthropologist him/herself as one of an informant the gravity of this conjuncture and disjuncture in the theory of participant-observation cannot be overemphasized “It might be said that the anthropologist helps to provide a background knowledge for the journalist, bureaucrat, and the information-seeking politician” (Srinivas, 1989:169).

The idea of subject is human for the theory of participant-observation emphasizing a panoramic view from the centre. It has no place for non-human or the excluded. This comes to the fore in the study of objects representing supernatural phenomenon, this being also a domain to the study of which participant-observation can never seriously be contemplated as a method. But the relevance of this cannot be ruled out also because phenomena that an anthropologist seeks to observe has to include all, without distinction

of good from bad or evil or natural from supernatural.

Here one must return to what has been accomplished by the literature on possession vis-à-vis the caste system. As an attempt to objectively understand the processes of its functioning, a binary of Brahminical and non-Brahminical ways or methods of possession has been already established. This was accomplished on the basis that the Brahminical methods are always intended to inculcate controlled states of possession through complicated and precise processes whereas non-Brahminical methods inculcated strategies for release rather than control (Smith, 2006:591). But like certain Brahminical rituals which have to be treated as cases of possession as argued by both Smith (op.cit) and Staal (1963), the possession of *Chaathan* is never calendrical or life-cycle based. It is more of a fleeting phenomenon in which aggrieved individuals can invoke the power of the deity to get compensated for disadvantages accruing to them because of the status quo. So the invocation of *Chaathan* is specifically an instance of domination that transgresses the distinctions of Varna imposed on caste.

NOTES

- ¹ Frederick.M.Smith (2006:549) stating that Chathan is a spirit indigenous to Kerala adds that it is a class (Gana) of Bhutas, specifically a Jangli Bhuta (primitive, undomesticated jungle spirit).
- ² *Karimkutti* a sibling of *Chaathan* was a servant in the *Nambuthiri* household of *Kaalakutam* in northern Kerala. He was punished for protecting the chastity of the wife of this *Nambuthiri* when he was away. *Karimkutti* being left to guard the house had stopped a suitor to the *Nambuthiri* woman in the house because his master was away. The fact that *Karimkutti* stopped the suitor without seeking the consent of the woman and had him sent away brought on him the wrath of the landlord or his patron who disliked his servant acting on his own to thwart the interests of the masters and punished him mercilessly. *Karimkutti* became vengeful and burnt down the whole household and according to certain legends its occupants went childless till he could be sufficiently propitiated and venerated as a deity
- ³ Metaphorically, the phenomenon of possession has been compared here to a parasitic movement. Chase the parasite- he comes galloping back, accompanied, just like the demons of an exorcism, with a thousand like him, but more ferocious, hungrier, all bellowing, roaring, clamouring (Serres:2007:18).
- ⁴ To play the position or to play the location is to dominate the relation. It is to have a relation only with the relation itself. Never with the stations from which it comes, to which it goes, and by which it passes (Serres, 2007:38).
- ⁵ It can be described in the metaphor of noise as Serres uses it. Claiming that communication only emerges from background noise Serres says, that dialogue is a game played by two interlocutors united against the phenomenon of interference and confusion, tied together by mutual interest in a battle against noise (Laura Salisbury, 2006).
- ⁶ Serres (2007) argues that the word martyr means witness in Greek and this cannot be a subject.

- ⁷ A quasi-object is that which creates inter-subjectivity in its circulation like a ball which circulates in a game (Serres, 2007). The one who plays or holds the ball is the excluded and the ball itself is the quasi object that defines the realm of inter-subjectivity between the players. There is no subject as such but only a relation of inter-subjectivity. The parasite or the excluded one in playing its position, dominates or plays the relation of inter-subjectivity.
- ⁸ It is interesting to see how Serres (2007) says such a paradigm is derived from the Greek word eucharist. As currently known in its plagiarized form its function has been substituted by a word called “thank you” in all languages. This word which is often reciprocated with a “welcome” brings the recipient into the donors’ position thus excluding every possibility of a third position. The response to eucharist in Greek meant Good or Holy Graces which includes a third, other than the donor and recipient, and which as a position is dispersed throughout the chain of relations.
- ⁹ “The social contract was thereby completed, but closed upon itself, leaving the world on the sidelines, an enormous collection of things reduced to the status of passive objects to be appropriated.....The subject of knowledge and action enjoys all Rights and its objects none. They have not yet attained any legal dignity. Which is why, since that time, science has all laws on its side” (Serres, 2008:36).
- ¹⁰ Michel Serres criticized the notion of contract when he said “The all-out war of all against all never took place, and will never take place.....All against one is the eternal law.... The result is always certain, and the war is asymmetrical” (Serres, 2007:228). The only link is the parasite to which all relationships are in fact clubbed to each other as in a chain. There is as such no relationship that can be conceived independent of the parasite, says he while adding that “the theory of being, ontology brings us to atoms. The theory of relations brings us to the parasite” (Serres, 2007:185).
- ¹¹ Srinivas saw in Westernization, a counterpart to Sanskritization as well as a strong commitment to ideals of British humanitarianism which also supposedly settles all problem related to egalitarianism in Indian society (Saberwal, 1979).

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