

## **Kuthuratheeb as a Performance of Sacred Pain: A Sociological Study on a Ritual among the Sunnis of Northern Kerala**

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### **Abstract**

*Ritual is always a significant element in the understanding of religion and culture. Question on the origin of religion was the primary ground for the discussions on ritual; its definition, content and practice. A ritual can be studied either as a static phenomenon within a context of time and space or from its dynamic characteristics during a period of time. Former explores the symbolic nature of the ritual and the latter analyses the historical dimension to it. The study on Kuthuratheeb, a ritual practiced by the Sunnis of northern Kerala, examines its performance through different stages/acts within a context. The paper details the ritual through its acts, people and materials and discusses how sacredness is evolved through its progression. Through the production, expression, communication and perception of the pain through different bodies of performers and the onlookers, the performance of Kuthuratheeb explains the meaning of sacred pain. Embodiment can be used as a methodological tool to understand the lived experience of the body. As against positions that treat body as either a physical entity or a social product, embodiment as a perspective addresses the complexity of the body and its experience. The paper argues that the presence and absence of pain embodied in this ritual nurtures collective memory and religiosity within the community.*

**Keywords:** Embodiment, sacred pain, Mappila Muslims, dikr, religiosity.

### **Introduction: Ritual Studies; of Self Infliction and Embodiment**

Generally, the term ritual is connected with religion and is explained as those practices of religious belief systems. This sacred attribute of ritual is always understood as a means of transcendence for individual or collective. Earlier studies on ritual largely focused on the origin and its formation within different societies. These studies either looked ritual as the causative social factor in the formation of other social systems or discussed about different social determinants of the formation of ritual. The former school, including functionalists like Durkheim (1995) focused on the beginning of rituals and explained its social function as collective effervescence. Studies based on this

understanding explained rituals as social expression. On the other hand, theorists like W. R. Robertson-Smith (1899) and Red cliff Brown (1964) looked at those social factors which determines the formation of rituals. They explained social bonding, ideological factors, ecological requirement (Rappaport, 1967) etc. as social causes which lead to ritual formation at certain point in time.

Apart from these two positions which is basically interested in universalising the origin and formation of rituals and its functions in different social settings, symbolic analysis looks at the content and meaning of the ritual. Here, ritual is addressed as a cultural expression of a particular society. Influenced by structuralist and linguistic studies, symbolic analysis detailed the form, language, meaning, and expression etc. of a ritual. Here, ritual is understood as a social system fixed in a particular time and space. Later studies has shifted the focus to ritual as a phenomenon by itself and engaged with the question of what ritual is meant and constituted. Recent works on ritual expands its identity beyond religious dimension and discusses its relation with social, political, psychological, ecological, and spatial and various other aspects.

Studies on ritual mentioned above can be put together as in its approach to place ritual in a particular period of time and space; either in historic origin or any specific time. Recent ethnographic studies on ritual looked at it from a different point of view. Ritual is approached as a moving or changing social phenomenon which has social, cultural, political, historical and personal dimensions. This shift in anthropology, Turner (1987) called it as a post-modern ethnography where 'processualisation of the space' and its 'temporalisation' is mode of analysis. Ethnographic studies based on this shift is largely based on understanding the changing character of the ritual tracing its different stages of development along with its engagement in a particular space and time with other social processes. Here, ritual is perceived as a social process and its performance as an engagement with time and space which is at the same time product and producer of time. Turner's (1974) postmodern ethnography on pilgrimage, Maurice Bloch's (1986) historical symbolic analysis on circumcision ritual among Merina people in Madagascar, Whitehead's (2002) cultural ethnography on Kanaima ritual among Amerindian in Guyana Islands and Abedi Fischer's (1990) deconstructive ethnography on Hajj pilgrimage and Shi'a Islam in Iran etc. are some of the examples. These studies elaborate the dynamic nature of different rituals.

The paper details a ritual called *Kuthuratheeb* practiced among Sunni sect of Mappila community in Kerala. For the purpose, *Kuthuratheeb* is contextualised in a single time and space. To elaborate this synchronic approach, the ritual is detailed through its stages of practice/enactment. That is, the ritual is divided in to three phases; pre-

ritual phase, performance phase and post-ritual phase. Pre-ritual phase is the preparative period of defining the purpose of the ritual and arranging both material and non-material requirements for the performance. It asks the questions of why, where and how the ritual is practiced within a specific time and space. It starts with an intention of defining the purpose of the ritual and then different modes of invitation to various actors involved in the ritual. This beginning phase explains different settings and various measures of organising those spaces. Second phase of the ritual details the performance at different levels. This area deals with the question of what is this particular ritual. It discusses the actors involved in the ritual, sartorial and piety materials appear in that space including musical instruments and weapons, textual and non-textual *baithand dikh* recited and finally it explains the order and progression of the performance. And third part of the ritual that is, post-ritual phase focuses on the collective actions followed the ritual within that particular space. It looks at the formation of sacredness to certain materials through the process of ritual performance. This area also analyses the social meanings of the activities of auction, micro financing and creation of local bazar. Thus, these three phases of the ritual elaborate the symbolic meanings of it within a particular context.

### **Kuthuratheeb: Structure and Context within the Community**

*Kuthuratheeb* is a collective ritual practiced among the Sunni<sup>1</sup> sect of Mappila community in Kerala. The word *Kuthuratheeb* is a combination of *kuthu* which means “to stab” in Malayalam and *ratheeb* which stands for “regular” in Arabic. *Ratheeb* is a routinized recitation of *dikh* (words of remembrance). Allah, Prophet Muhammad and different Sheikhs<sup>2</sup> are remembered with the recitation of *dikh*. Tringham (1971,194) understands *dikh* as an expression of Qura’nic piety. Based on the differences in the name of Sheikhs commemorated with *dikh*, there are different types of *ratheeb* like *Rifayiratheeb*, *Mohiyudheenratheeb*, *Shadiliratheeb*, and *Haddadratheeb* to mention a few. *Kuthuratheeb* is the local name used to connote *Rifayiratheeb* which is commemorated in the name of Syed Ahmed al Rifayi (1119 CE) from Egypt. His glory as a Sufi teacher and stories of his *karamath* had travelled to different parts of the world. Glorified stories about the spiritual power of the Sheikh are popular in every Muslim societies in the forms of folk songs, epics, poems etc. *Rifayiratheeb* is the ritual expression of this *karamath* of the particular Sheikh. In this paper, the term *Kuthuratheeb* is used to *Rifayiratheeb* for three reasons. Firstly, the term *Kuthuratheeb* is commonly used by a large number of people to represent the ritual. At the same time different local usages like *Kathi* (knife) *ratheeb*, *Kathi-kuthu* (literally, knife stabbing) *ratheeb* etc. are also popular. *Kathi* is a Malayalam word for any sharp weapon that cuts. But technically *kathi* is not the only weapon used in the performance

and so these particular local terms to represent the ritual are avoided. And finally, at the local level, self-infliction is seen to be practiced in other *ratheeb* performances like *Mohiyudheen ratheeb*. Thus the ritual does not always connote Rifayi Sheikh. So, the word *Kuthuratheeb* is used in the study to represent the ritual.

*Kuthuratheeb* comes largely under the *nercca*<sup>3</sup> tradition of Sunnis. It is the only *nercca* which involves self-infliction by different kinds of sharp weapons. *Kuthuratheeb* as a ritual can be looked at from its static and dynamic aspects. Static character of a ritual explains its symbolic meaning within a particular time and space. It discusses the form, content and process of a ritual by fixing it in a context. This does not ignore the “processual”<sup>4</sup> behaviour of the ritual, but attempts to describe the symbolic meaning of each act and event of the performance. So, *Kuthuratheeb* can be studied by pausing it within a context of a certain locality and then analyse its interaction with other social phenomena. On the other hand, the dynamic character of the ritual emphasis its historic development in different socio-political and religious times. In his study on circumcision ritual among Marina people of Madagascar, Bloch points out the importance of looking at historical development of a ritual to understand the change and consistency in its symbolic meaning (1986, 10). Similarly, historic formation and development of *Kuthuratheeb* is analysed to understand the trends in its appearance, disappearance and re-appearance in Malabar region during different periods. This dynamic character of *Kuthuratheeb* is related to the trajectory of Sufi movement in Kerala. Tracing the journey of Sufism and its interaction with local religious belief and practice systems will explain the historic development of *Kuthuratheeb* in that particular region. This dynamic character of the ritual narrates the history of performative tradition, institutionalisation of Sufism and ritualization of practices within a particular locality. Here, the community history, formation and development is explained through the ritual dynamics. But the focus of the paper is to look at the static characteristics of *Kuthuratheeb* by contextualising the performance of this ritual within a particular time and space.

### **Pre-Ritual Phase**

Before describing the details of the performance, the preparatory phase of the ritual needs to be explained. This pre-ritual phase defines the purpose of the ritual. It asks the questions of why, where and how the ritual is practiced within the specific spatio-temporal context. This stage explains different settings of the ritual, various measures used for organising it and different types of invitation used for the networking of different stake holders in the ritual.

### ***Niyath: Purpose of the Ritual***

The question of why *Kuthuratheeb* is practiced within the community explains its purpose and meaning. Like any other religious ritual, there is a *niyath* (intention) behind this too. *Niyath* is a religious decision or consciousness taken before every act of religious or non-religious nature in the life of a believer. It can be read as a religio-cognitive agreement of submission to a higher power. It can be a thought or invocation to self which emphasises the religious intention of the actor. For example, *niyath* taken before normative religious practices like fasting during the holy month of *ramzan*, *zakat* (mandatory charity for every Muslim) and *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) forms the means of asserting one's religious obligation to be part of the larger community. Another type of *niyath* can be preparatory in nature where an intention is made to offer a religious act as a part of making a wish. For example, believers keep a *niyath* of offering a *nerccaof* paying a *ziyarah* (religious visit) to a *dargah* (sacred sites of tombs of Sheikh) if any of their particular wish gets fulfilled. Similarly, the performance of *Kuthuratheeb* is conducted with a specific *niyath*. Here, three major intentions behind the practice of this ritual is discussed. Apart from the peculiarities with respect to the setting of the ritual and the nature of its patrons, *Kuthuratheeb* is unique in relation to its *niyath*.

Remembrance, purification and protection are the major intentions behind this ritual. *Kuthuratheeb* is a ritualistic way of remembrance and display of the *karamath* of Sheikh which instils collective memory and religiosity among the community. It is also a channel of transfer of blessing where Sheikhs mediate between God and the believer. Thus, through the practice of *Kuthuratheeb*, the spiritually exalted position of the Sheikhs and their *karamath* is remembered and is performed.

Purification is another *niyath* of *Kuthuratheeb*. In Islam, overall cleansing of mind, body, thoughts and actions are conducted through several normative religious procedures like *wuzu* (ablution) for cleansing of certain body parts, *dikr* that purifies thoughts, *zakat* which checks on bad deeds, fasting disciplines and bodily instincts. The idea of *shaitan/iblees* (Satan) is inherent in the religious imagination where the duty of a believer is to stay away from the influence of evil power and to orient one's existence entirely towards God. That is, the life of believers is based on the purification of the self in every aspect of their life. This *niyath* behind the practice of *Kuthuratheeb* is achieved through both material and non-material ways. Material purification is about keeping the surface of the performance clean, burning of *kunthirikkam* (a type of incense) to freshen the air and staying away from any *najas* (religiously impure substances). Non material purification focuses on intensifying the belief systems of an individual believer and

the community by emphasis on moral purity and physical discipline. So, through the conduct of this ritual, both the individual believer and the community is purified.

*Kuthuratheeb* also performs protective functions for the community. It is one mode of seeking help from the Sheikh by an individual/collective. This ritual acts as a shield against the negative influence of outside forces like diseases, natural calamities, evil eyes and social instabilities. It is believed that the performance of the ritual can save an individual/ family/ locality from their sufferings. It is also a precautionous action taken to avoid any further troubles in future. In earlier times, when a locality experienced natural calamities like flood or was afflicted by infectious diseases like Cholera, collective efforts went into conducting *Kuthuratheeb* within that locality. Similarly, for personal problems of financial, mental or familial nature, one offers *Kuthuratheeb* as a *nercca* for a solution. It is believed that after the performance, the negative forces around the person/family will be removed.

### **Mahal: Locating the Ritual**

It is important to know the space where the ritual is performed because it influences other factors like composition of the gathering and time and duration of the performance. How does a space get set for the ritual, what are the different forms of settings used for the performance and how does a space defines the ritual and is decided by it are some of the key questions to be addressed to locate this ritual. *Mahal* as a conceptual category can be used as an entry point to trace those settings. *Mahal* is a religio-geographical point of reference which is based around a mosque and the Muslim community residing close to it. There is no specific criterion for deciding the inclusion of households within the ambit of a single *mahal* but nearest mosque makes them part of it. There is a committee within a particular *mahal* consisting of select male members from the locality which takes decisions on the religious affairs of the community. It administers religious affairs such as the regular conduct of prayer inside the mosque, functioning of the madrasa (religious learning institution), appointment of *ustad* who offers religious instructions in madrasa, arrangement of religious rituals during marriage and death and monitoring the religious life of people within the mahal. So, a *mahal* constitutes a religio-geographical unit where household is the basic unit. The study locates different settings of *Kuthuratheeb* within a *mahal*. This division is not based on the differences in the *niyath* of the ritual; it was observed that even with the same *niyath*, *Kuthuratheeb* is performed in different settings. This division is based on the nature of the patron of the ritual whether it is conducted by an individual, family, group of families, *mahal* committee or trust of a *dargah*.

*Kuthuratheeb* performed in individual households could either be organised by a single family for personal reasons or a group of families arranging it as a part of annual *nercca* at any of their houses. Even though the setting is same in both the cases, they are different in their *niyath* and composition of people who are gathered. In the first case, *niyath* of the ritual is personal in that if an individual or his family goes through any unpleasant situation of health, finance or so, they organise *Kuthuratheeb* at their residence with the belief that it will save them from their miseries. *Majlis* (sacred space for religious acts) is arranged in the courtyard or inside the house. People gathered are limited to close relatives and immediate neighbourhood. In the second case where a group of families arrange the setting in any of their house, the *niyath* and composition of the people are different. Since the group organise *Kuthuratheeb* every year as *nercca* in the name of the Sheikh, they take turns in conducting it according to their convenience. At the same time, they share the financial, social and other requirements for the occasion.

Another setting for *Kuthuratheeb* is the *dargah*. *Dargah* becomes the site for the ritual as a part of the annual *nercca* conducted in the memory of a particular Sheikh in the locality or a popular Sheikh of the community. *Ziyarath* to these places is part of the religious life of Sunni *Mappilas*. Since women's entry to mosque for *namaz* is prohibited among Sunni sect, *ziyarath* is the only way for them to access such sacred places. Usually, the annual *nercca* is conducted in the name of Mohiyudheen or Rifayi Sheikh where in the local Sheikhs are also remembered and honoured on the same occasion. This spiritual order is a part of Sufism where a lineage of different saints within a Sufi order is arranged in a hierarchy. Here, commemorating one Sheikh is about remembering the rest of them and showing respect to each. So, when the ritual *Kuthuratheeb* is conducted as part of the *nercca* in a *dargah*, *niyath* is about both commemorating the spiritual leaders and demonstrating their *karamath*. *Kuthuratheeb* is scheduled as the final ritual during one or two days of religious ceremonies. Rituals like Mouldid<sup>5</sup>, wail (public religious speech), *qur'an* classes, collective prayer and programmes like *Qawali* are some of the common events happening during those days. Even though the *niyath* of the ritual in every *dargah* setting is the same, - that is, to commemorate the Sheikh - the patrons of the ritual vary. They could be a family, *mahal* committee or a religious trust, which are in charge of any particular *dargah*. Another setting for *Kuthuratheeb* is a public place, like a school ground or a hill top. Here, the performance is arranged as an annual *nercca* by a committee formed within that particular locality. Organisers in this setting include members from the particular *mahal* committee and families residing in the locality. Financial and logistic assistance to conduct this programme is arranged by this committee.

*Ratheebpura* (a house for the recitation of *dikr*) is another setting for *Kuthuratheeb* in some places. *Ratheebpura* is a single-storey building earmarked for the recitation of *dikr*. It is not like a mosque which provides space for *namaz*. Activities in *ratheebpura* do not have associations with the *mahal* in which it is located. *Nercca* is conducted annually in the name of Sheikhs from Lakshwadeep and other popular Sheikhs among the Muslim community where *Kuthuratheeb* is also performed.

### **Daewa: A Note on Invitation**

This section discusses how people are invited to the ritual. It looks at different modes of invitations by examining the composition of the people gathered in the setting. There are three groups of people involved in this ritual: patrons of *Kuthuratheeb*, group of performers of the ritual and the onlookers who participate in the ritual. Variation in the composition of the congregation is attributed to the differences in the *niyath* of the ritual. It is the first group, that is, the patrons including individual, family, *mahal* committee or trust who invite the other two sections of people. The group of performers including *ustad* and his *mureed*/disciple is directly invited by the patron. The patrons contact the *ustad* and fix the date of performance based on their convenience and priorities. They chose either a group which is familiar to the locality or groups which are known for their performance. This decision is also influenced by the fees charged by the group and their availability. Thus, invitation of performers is done formally and is a matter of choice for the patron.

Different modes of invitations are used for the third group, that is, the onlookers. The means through which they come to know of the ceremony or the manner of their invitation is important to understand different modes of networking among the community. Onlookers are constituted by both men and women (non-menstruating) of any age who are positioned separately in the setting. *Kuthuratheeb* is performed in front of this audience, irrespective of the nature of patronage, *niyath* of the function or its setting. So their presence and composition is crucial in the design of the entire performance. According to the nature of patronage, the audience are invited differently. It ranges from personal invitation to public call through different means of communication. The following section details this socio-religious interaction occurring within the community in the backdrop of *Kuthuratheeb*.

In the case of *Kuthuratheeb* organised by an individual/family with a *niyath* of solace for their personal problems, the onlookers consists of the family, their relatives and neighbours. They are invited personally by the head of the family. But in some cases, news about the programme is announced in the mosque of their particular *mahal*. This happens when a family member goes to the mosque to invite its *qali*



(religious head) to attend the function. So, if the organiser is willing, then the *qali* will announce it after *Isha namaz* and thus the invitation is extended to the people gathered in the mosque. Here, what makes the invitation closed is due to the personal *niyath* behind the ritual. Social stigma makes the concerned individual/ family to keep their personal problems to themselves. Even if people are invited personally, the purpose of the ritual may not be shared with them.

Invitation for *Kuthuratheeb* which is practiced in the public platform is done in different ways: oral and textual. Oral invitation has a long tradition relating to the culture and everyday life of the community. News about the ritual is spread by word of mouth within a locality and beyond. The knowledge thus disseminated about an annual *nercca* in a particular *dargah* is a public call for the people to participate in it. Except for popular figures within the religious community, there is no personal invitation for the common public in most cases.

Another form of oral invitation is seen in some parts of Malappuram (a district in Kerala) where a group of men performing duff or *arabana* goes to each house in a locality to invite families for the ritual. They include a group of two or three men from the same locality known to people owing to their frequent presence in religious spaces like mosque and madrasa. They usually wear white *mundu* (a long piece of cloth wrapped around waist), shirt and a skull cap which is a common religious attire among Sunni religious practitioners. They play musical instruments like duff or *arabana* and recite *baith* for almost ten to fifteen minutes and then share the details of the time and venue of the ritual, the group of performers and patrons. They engage in short conversations with the family members regarding local affairs. Also people donate some money to them which is a source of income for them. In earlier times, this folk art of going to each house to inform or invite for local programmes was common. But now, this tradition of invitation is fading in many areas. Presently, this type of oral invitation takes the form of public announcements. Announcements are made by a person in a vehicle using a mike and a speaker. It passes through every nook and corner of the locality in the process announcing the details of the entire itinerary surrounding the ritual. This facility is arranged by the organisers during the annual *nercca* in any popular *dargah*.

Textual invitation is another form of dissemination. Notices detailing the programmes invite the public for the occasion. It is distributed in the mosque which will ensure that it reaches almost every household in the *mahal*. Also, some people who are part of the organising committee go to every house in the neighbourhood to distribute the notices and invite them personally. This is done usually when donation for the programme is collected from these houses. Notices are also distributed in public places such as local bus stands and tea-shops. In some cases,

advertisements are inserted in local newspapers. News about the programme is spread through these different means to invite the general public for the events. Thus we can see that news about *Kuthuratheeb* is circulated through different networks according to the *niyath* and convenience of the organisers. Since *Kuthuratheeb* is performed as part of annual *nercca* most of the time, different means of popularisation and invitations to the *nercca* resorted to by the organisers are the channels through which information about the performance of *Kuthuratheeb* also reaches the public.

### **Performance of *Kuthuratheeb***

A sacred space called *majlis* is created to perform the ritual. *Majlis* is the central stage for performance where religiously important personalities are seated in one corner and weapons for infliction are displayed on another side. It is arranged in a way so that it faces the audience. Before describing the performance, a brief detailing of the group of performers, musical instruments of *duff/arabana* and various weapons used for self-infliction is given in the following section.

#### 1. *Ustad* and *Mureed*: Formation of a Spiritual Order

Any group of performers include an *ustad* and his *mureed*(s). An *ustad* is an expert in religious knowledge systems who leads his followers. *Ustad*(s) are followers of any Sheikh of their locality or other places from which they get their religious training. *Mureed* is a disciple of the *ustad*. If someone wants to be a *mureed*, he can approach an *ustad*. Then he has to follow a training session under the *ustad* for around forty days including learning of different types of *dikr* and other religious disciplines. Once this training is completed, he will be awarded *bai'at* and later on he becomes the *mureed* of that *ustad*. *Bai'at* is a religious degree conferred on a person approving his authority to be a disciple of a particular school of thought/order under an *ustad*.

An *ustad* does not belong to any caste/sect among *Mappila* community. There is no organisational mechanism for them to coordinate their activities. Their activities are based in a particular locality. The *ustad*, who heads the group of performers, is different from a *qali*. *Qali* is the head of a mosque, and is associated with the activities in the mosque like leading *namaz*, call of *azan* and coordinating madrasa affairs. They are appointed by the *mahal* committee. But the *ustad* mentioned here is not the religious head of a mosque. They are people who lead the group of performers of *Kuthuratheeb*. Apart from this ritual performance, they are involved in other activities in their life. *Mureed* is a disciple of an *ustad*. They belong to the second last ladder of the spiritual hierarchy just above the common believer. Spiritual hierarchy is built upon with believers at the base, the *mureed* occupying the next level who in turn comes under the *ustad*. The Sheikh acts an interme-

diary between the lower strata comprising of the believer, followed by *mureed* and *ustad* and the spiritually higher powers of Prophet Muhammed and then the God, Allah. This idea of spiritual hierarchy is an intrinsic part of Sunni religious imagination and their ritual practices including *Kuthuratheeb*. Now, *mureed(s)* are the chosen people who spread knowledge and wisdom from an *ustad* among common people. Earlier the system of *ustad* and *mureed* was highly functional in both religious and non-religious realms.

## 2. Duff and Arabana: Two Lineages of Folk Art

*Duff* or *arabana* is a percussion instrument used in *Kuthuratheeb*. *Duff* or *arabana mutt* (*mutt* in Malayalam means to beat) is a folk art form performed as a group. The Arabic *baith* is accompanied by the instrument. The basic form of this instrument is called *duff*; and there are different types of *duff* of which *arabana* is a bigger version of *duff*. It is made of five wooden pieces arranged in a circular frame. Dried goat skin is stretched on one side of the frame. In *arabana*, small holes are made on the wooden frame to attach *chilamb* (a thick anklet that makes loud metallic clatter) on it. Sound is created by tapping one's fingers on the drumhead.

Depending on the type of *mutt*, there are two forms of *arabana*: *ratheeb arabana* and *kali mutt* (playful tapping). The style of holding the instrument, the *baith* sung and the setting of performance are some factors deciding the type of *arabana* played by the group. In *ratheeb arabana*, which is a religious art form, *arabana* is held by the left hand and there are eight styles of *mutt* or tapping of the drumhead. The *baith* recited during the performance lauds Rifayi and Mohiyudheen Sheikh and these are orally transferred across generations. *Kali mutt* is more of a folk art performed during celebratory occasions. Here, *mutt* is made on both inside and outside the drumhead, with fingers, palm, elbow and forehead. Even though there is no specification for the size of *arabana*, in *ratheeb arabana* each instrument should be of the same size due to the use of more body movements and exchanges between players. *Kali mutt* is more popular in the community that it has become a competitive art form in school and college art festivals in Kerala. The *baiths* glorify events such as the victory of the battle of *Badr* and the epic love story of BadarulMunir and Husunul Jamal, and are recited in Malayalam and Arabi-Malayalam.<sup>7</sup>

Even though there is a clear difference in these two styles of *mutt*, they get fused in accordance with the setting of *Kuthuratheeb*. The practice of *kali mutt* is mostly seen before and after the main ritual of self infliction especially in the setting of annual *nercca*. It is mandatory to play *ratheeb arabana* during the performance of self-infliction in the ritual. Locally influenced improvisation of *mutt* and use of popular *baith* creates a celebratory atmosphere. People gathered for the ritual

do participate at this phase by singing along with the *baith* in the same rhythm and with gestures like tapping the fingers on the body and clapping hands. But, when the *ustad* takes weapons, the recital gets back to *ratheebarabana mutt*. While playing *arabana*, performers make sway their bodies towards left and right according to the rhythm of the *mutt*. There will be a main singer who delivers *baith* and others follow in chorus. Depending on the group, the main singer may be the same person who plays *duff* or *arabana* or someone specially assigned to sing. The popularity of one instrument in a locality and the tradition of following a single instrument influence a group to opt for that, either *duff* or *arabana*. But there are religious disagreements regarding the use of different types of *duff* where one school considers the use of *chilamb* in *arabana* as non-Islamic. These debates focus on unearthing from the religious sources of *hadees*, historical evidence for the usage of these instruments during and after the life of Prophet Muhammad. These differences in the Islamic jurisprudence do not influence the choices made by performance groups and they have been following their choices for many years. So, the difference in the usage of *duff* or *arabana* is more cultural than religious.

Another source of difference in the use of these instruments is related to different narrations on the origin and spread of *Kuthuratheeb* in Kerala. There are two local narrations prevalent regarding the source of this ritual in Kerala. One group claims that it has come from Lakshwadeep and the other traces its origin to Yemen. Malabar has a long history of social and religious engagements with Yemen and Lakshwadeep which influenced the community at various levels. Even though there is no historical proof for their claims, it is seen that the use of *duff* is more common among groups who trace the origin of *Kuthuratheeb* to Lakshwadeep and *arabana* among those identifying Yemen as the source of the ritual in Kerala. But this division is not concrete and people are less conscious about the differences in the use of these instruments.

### 3. Self-Infliction: Tools and Modes

Kuthuratheeb is the only *nercca* ritual where pain is inflicted on the body of the performer using different sharp weapons. It is believed that Sheikh Rifayi (1119 CE) had practiced the same during his times. Every group of performers possesses the same set of weapons. But the mode of using weapons, the number of people performing self-infliction, duration of the performance and intensity of the act of self hurting varies according to each group. The number of performers and the mode of self infliction is influenced by the nature of the group of performers. Some groups have exclusive members for performing weapons, playing *duff* or *arabana* and singing *baith*. But in other groups, this form of compartmentalisation of labour is not present.

Every member is involved in all the activities of the group, that is, the person who plays *duff* or *arabana* also does self-infliction. Intensity of the act of infliction also varies according to the group; some are famous for the intense use of weapons but some for their highly professional playing of the *duff* or *arabana*. There are different types of weapons used in *Kuthuratheeb*: knife, needle, sword, axe, *dubbos* and *kadir*. Each instrument has unique modes of usage and specific areas on the body to be inflicted like stomach, tongue, forehead, cheek, shoulders, hands and dorsal surface of the body. Each group has their own set of weapons which is kept at the *ustad's* house. They are kept along with other sacred texts like Qur'an.

### **Performance of the Ritual**

The performance of *Kuthuratheeb* has four stages: recitation of *dikr*, playing of *arabana* or *duff* along with the recital of *baith*, self-infliction using different weapons and collective prayer. The first stage of recitation of *dikr* starts with *Fathiha*, first *surat* (chapter) of the Qur'an. Then they recite other important *ayat(s)* (a piece of line in Qur'an) from different *surat(s)*. This is a collective recitation and those who are not familiar with the verses can say amen at the end of each sentence. The next is the main part of the ritual, recitation of *dikr*. *Dikr* consists of words of remembrance of Sheikhs, Prophets and the God. People use different *dikr* according to the particular Sheikh they are commemorating. A general *dikr* glorifying other popular Sheikhs are also recited on the occasion. At first, the *ustad* recites *dikr* and the rest of the group and the audience repeat the same. It goes on for about twenty minutes and then we enter into the second stage comprising of the performance of playing *duff* or *arabana*.

In this stage, the performers assemble in two parallel lines of equal number. They have their own Arabic *baith* to create the rhythm for the performance. Some of the members in the group sing *baith* and the rest accompany in chorus. They sway their bodies according to the rhythm of the *baith*. After some time, the *ustad* enters the *majlis* where *arabana/duff* is being played. He removes his shirt. He starts to move in between the lines of the players in a rhythm. He joins in the recitation of the *baith* in loud voice to encourage the players. It gives a celebratory mood which raises the tempo of the performance. In between they take a break to heat *arabana*. This is because after many rounds of mutt, the leather of the *arabana* loosens and produces softer sounds. So they heat the instrument over fire which made at a distance from the *majlis*. This will fasten the skin and retain the rhythm of *arabana*. Then they come back to the same position and continue to play the instrument. The *ustad* joins them again in the *majlis* to elevate the tempo of the performance and after some time he gets back to his seat. This playing of *arabana* goes on for an hour. When they get into *halirbaith*

which registers the presence of Sheikh in the *majlis*, the *ustad* is ready to enter the third stage of the performance, that is, self-infliction using the weapons.

At this point, the *arabana/duff* players leave ample space between their two lines to allow the *ustad* to perform self-infliction. The *ustad* approaches other religious personalities present in the *majlis* and hold their hands. It is a way of sharing blessings and getting permission to take weapons for self-infliction which marks the main phase of the ritual. Then he moves towards the *arabana/duff* players and hold their hands. This shows the collective bonding of performers involved in the entire ritual. The *ustad* wears a white cloth over the *mundu* to avoid shedding of blood on his costume. He takes two *dubbos* (small knife) from the table and moves towards a chair which is kept close to *arabana/duff* players.

Now the *ustad* is positioned at the centre of the *majlis*. He carries another white cotton cloth which he tears into small pieces every time he takes a weapon. He hands it over to an assistant before getting into the act of infliction. When he hands over each weapon after every act of performance, the assistant cleans it with that small piece of cotton cloth. This is done to avoid the weapons from getting rusted with blood stains. Now, the *ustad* bends his head down and protrudes his tongue wide open. He places the knives diagonally upon his tongue and begins to strike it down. He hits with the two knives, one after the other, in accordance with the rhythm of *arabana mutt*. Now the *baith* recital becomes louder and the pace of the *arabana/ arabana mutt* much faster. This act of hurting the tongue goes on for about ten minutes. Then he returns to the table and keeps the *dubbos* in one corner.

Next, the *ustad* takes a knife of the length of one hand. Then he walks towards *arabana/duff* players and moves in forward and backward steps and sways up and down in a rhythm. He keeps doing this for some time along with the loud rendition of *baith*. Then he pauses in the middle of the *arabana/duff* players to perform the next act. He stretches his tongue with left hand and begins to cut it with a knife in his right hand. After around five minutes, he stops the action and returns the knife to the assistant. He fastens the tongue tight with a white cotton cloth for some time. While doing this he, swiftly walks in between the lines. It is believed that holding the injured body parts or touching over it with prayers has the potential to heal those wounds without leaving any marks. This emphasises the *karamath* of the Sheikh.

The *ustad* next takes two sharp knives and moves towards the main area of *majlis*. Now the tempo of *arabana/duff mutt* would have reached its peak. The *ustad* makes a peculiar body movement by first raising his left leg up and then taking a step back by right leg. This is repeated with the left and right legs in alternating movements. This

brisk back and forth movement in the *majlis* brings the *ustad* to trance who is also loudly singing baith. Then he starts to hit his stomach using the knives. He performs this act for about ten minutes and when he stops, his assistant reaches him and touches his stomach while reciting prayers for recovery. The idea of touch is crucial here. It is through the act of holding hands and touching the wounded body parts that blessings and recovery is passed from the higher spiritual power to the believers.

The next act of infliction is by using long needles. The *ustad* takes a bunch of needles and pierce them into his cheeks, head, forehead and hands. During these acts, he keeps moving and utters “*sheik-ae*” in loud voice which means “*oh sheikh*”. It is a local manner of invoking the Sheikh. He raises his voice after every act of piercing upon his body and to every invocation of “*oh sheikh*”, the *arabana/duff* players responds with “*rallyallah*”, meaning “may he receive God’s blessing”. With the help of his assistant, the *ustad* slowly removes each needle from different parts of his body. Then the *ustad* moves with two swords in his hands and starts to strike his shoulders and the back of the body. This is done while dancing to the rhythm of *arabana/duff mutt*. He places one sword back on the table and puts the other over his head. The *ustad* bends his head down and starts to hit the neck as if he is going to cut his head off in sacrifice. This goes for three or four minutes. Then he takes an axe and swirls it over his head while walking around the *majlis* back and forth. He gets into a dance like movement where he raises his right leg while the left hand holding an axe moves towards it. This is repeated with in alternating movements of limbs for some time. Then he holds the axe with both the hands and begins to hit the back of his body. This continues for about five minutes and the *ustad* returns to the table. While he sits on the chair, his assistant touches his back side of the body. Throughout the performance, the *ustad* raises his eyes up as if he is in communication with a higher power. His assistant cleans up all the weapons with each piece of cotton strips given to him every time the *ustad* takes a weapon. Then the assistant displays the blood stains on each piece of cloth to the audience to ensure the intensity of *ustad*’s acts of self-infliction. *Arabana/duff mutt* also comes to a close when *ustad* concludes his performance. This marks the end of the acts of self-infliction.

The next stage of the ritual is collective prayer. It happens mostly after dinner. After food, the community gathers in the front yard to offer collective prayer. The *ustad* recites major *swalat* (prayer in the name of prophet Muhammed and Sheikhs) and others join them by responding with “amen”. It goes for about an hour. This marks the end of the ritual.

The events of collective *dikr*, playing of *duff* or *arabana*, performance of self-infliction, community meal and prayer constitute

the major elements of any *Kuthuratheeb* performance. As mentioned earlier, the duration of performance, the number of people involved, baith and *dikr* used may vary with each ritual.

### **Post-Ritual Phase**

Post-ritual stage of *Kuthuratheeb* engages with activities that create an idea of sacredness. Sacredness of *Kuthuratheeb* is based on the belief in the presence of Sheikh in the majlis. Reciting *dikr*, *swalat* and *dua* makes the atmosphere spiritual. Idea of purification is emphasised with the sense of smell. Objects like attar (scent), water, oil, honey and *kunthirikkam* (one type of incense) are common in any *majlis* of *Kuthuratheeb*. Attar is a scent usually pressed on clothes or over body which gives a favoured smell. Using attar during special occasions of Eid and Friday *namaz* is part of aesthetic life of the community. Asking for protection from a Sheikh is one of the major *niyath* of the ritual. It is a form of getting shielded against any attack of an outside force in the form of disease, financial crisis, natural calamities etc. This protection is extended through materials like oil, water and honey which gets sacred value through the ritual. Oil is connected with lighting lamps at *dargah* and during *ziyarat* a spoon of it is given to the believers which is either to be orally taken or to be spread over the head. Water and honey are believed to have medicinal value after it is processed through prayer by *ustad*. Idea of *shifa* (recovery) is a part of Sunni imagination which is based on spiritual hierarchy. *Ustad* and other religious personalities are believed to have this spiritual power to offer *shifa* to believers in pain and it is mostly done by offering sacred water to them. In the *majlis* of *Kuthuratheeb*, bottles of water and honey are kept to elevate them to sacred objects. These are contributed by the onlookers before the programme get started and they collect it back when the ritual is over. These sacred honey and water are consumed by family members in case of health issues. .

### **Collective Religiosity through Recitation and Feasting**

Recitation of *Dikr* is the major part of *ratheeb*. It is considered as the most spiritual way to reach close to God. It is a way of life and part of everyday religious practices. *Dikr* is practiced on every Thursday and Friday among the group of *murid(s)* gathered either at mosque or other social places like *ratheebpura* etc. *Kuthuratheeb* is the extension of this recitation of *dikr* with the performance of *duff* or *arabana* and self-infliction using weapons. During the recitation of *dikr* in the *majlis*, sometimes body also takes part in this. Involvement of body movements while reciting *dikr* is a common practice in many occasions of the ritual. That is a group of people including *ustad*, his *mureed(s)* and other important religious personalities of the location stands in a circle on the *majlis*. While reciting *dikr*, they bend their head down and make a circular movement with head beginning from left to right. This marks



the cleaning of body where the circular movements symbolically starts from heart and ends with the same. This is believed that it purifies the soul of the believer. Thus, a collective religiosity is formed through recitation of dikr.

Communal meal is another important part of the ritual. It is related with the history and practice of *Kuthuratheeb*. In earlier times when a region goes through a scarcity of food, people of the locality conduct *Kuthuratheeb*. During that time people get what-ever food they have in their homes and share it equally with those people gathered for the ritual. Now, serving *nerccachor* (rice as an offering) during every occasion of the ritual has become a mandatory part of the programme. Usually they make plain rice with beef/chicken and serve it for everyone who are gathered in the programme. People contribute for the meal either with money, rice, meat or other ingredients. Collective preparation and serving of it has social dimensions to create bond among the people. If the ritual is happening at a house, women belonging to the family and neighbourhood do the preparation of the meal. If it is conducted as a part of annual *nercca* and thus, due to larger number people gathered organisers assign a local groups to cater the preparation. On some occasions organisers distribute packets of meal to everyone but on another setting, they serve food on table arranged separately for men and women. It is the duty of the organisers to ensure that everyone is fed and if not, it is considered as inauspicious. This community feasting creates a collective religiosity which is based on sharing for the well-being of the community.

### **Formation of Local Bazar and Micro-Financing**

Local bazar are formed around many *dargah*(s) during the occasions of annual *nercca*. It is a local fair created according to the peculiarities of a particular *dargah* and its particular locality. These kind of bazars are formed in different places during annual *nercca*. Annual *nercca* also become a platform for auction of local items like hen, goat, pine apple etc. which constitute a micro-economic transaction within the community. Sacredness is attached to those materials and thus it become a religious desire for the people to collect them. Those who buy through auction consume them with this sacred intention. For example, they will not throw the food items and make sure it is consumed fully. Another form of micro-economic transaction is conducted through micro-financing. It is a way of arranging financial requirements by the organisers to conduct the ritual. How does these micro-economic transactions effect the socio-economic and cultural life of the particular locality is an interesting area which needs to be explored more with primary sources.

## Conclusion

*Kuthuratheeb* is a ritual among the Sunnis of Kerala where pain is inflicted on the body. It is a group performance where pain is experienced and expressed at different levels of presence and absence of it. Through this performance of sacred pain, the community belief on the *karamath* of the Sheikh is recreated, experienced and established. It is through this channel that the blessing of the spiritually higher Sheikhs is transferred to the community. Hence, *Kuthuratheeb* is a performance through which collective memory and religiosity is instilled within the community. But, meaning of *Kuthuratheeb* for Sunnis cannot be completely understood through this symbolic analysis of the ritual with in a context. Historic development of the changes in symbolic meaning should also be explored. It demands a keen historic analysis of the socio-political events in the community in the background of the visibility/non-visibility of the ritual. For example, Mujahids, who are called as reformers in Kerala, has created a new religious self against the Sunnis through different embodied practices. This has influenced the disappearance of *Kuthuratheeb* in many localities. But recent re-appearance of the ritual can be read as an identity assertion of Sunnis through their sacred self. Thus, further studies on these historic developments will unfold the changing meaning of the ritual and its importance to Sunnis.

## Notes

1. Kerala Muslims are all Sunnis and based on the religious schools of law they are divided into Sunni Mappilas and Mujahid Mappilas. Mujahids are reformative groups influenced by *Wahabi* movement. Even though the basic principles of Islam like belief in Allah, prophet Muhammed, Quran as the sacred text, five time *namaz*, and role of Hajj and practice of Zakat are same for both, they do differ at the level of practice Namely with respect *toshirk* (attribution of partners to God, idolatry), *bidah* (innovation in worship) and *taqliq* (blind following). *Nercca*
2. Religiously higher person who are considered as saints. They are called by different names like *pir* in Northern India or *thangal* in Kerala.
3. *Nercca* is a ritual for commemorating the spiritually exalted personas who act as the intermediary between a believer and the God. It is a religious act of seeking protection, thanks-giving for expediting wishes, remembering the legacy and lineage of the spiritual order, vowing to the power, prayer for the good etc. It is delivered either individually or collective. *Nercca* by an individual is the delivering of a defined number of *dikr* or recitation of certain *ayat* (chapter) of Qur'an with an intention for something in the future or as a way of acknowledging an already fulfilled need. On the other hand, the collective practice of *nercca* involves the performance of different types of rituals within a particular time and space. *Moulid*, *Kuthubeeyath*, *Kuthuratheeb* etc. belong to this category. Some of the *nerccas* in Malabar are known after its location; Kondotty *nercca*, Malappuram *nercca*, Thekkupuram *nercca* and Ponnani *nercca* are some instances.

4. V. Turner (1987) understands ritual both from its social and effectual aspects. This starts from the understanding of society as in a process of becoming and not as a world in being. His study on rituals of Ndembu community in North West Zambia and his anthropology of symbolic meanings of pilgrimage exemplify this approach.
5. *Moulid* is a ceremonial reading of a short treatise celebrating the birth, life, deeds and words of Prophet Muhammed or popular Sheikhs. An *ustad* or a religious leader is called upon to read the treatise, part of which is in verse. *Mohiyudheen Mala* (verses) composed by Qadi Muhammed al Kalikutti in 1607, which is very popular in Kerala is the *Moulid* of Abdul Qadir al- Jilani.
6. It is a local language used by Mappila Muslims in Kerala. This language uses the Arabic script but the grammar and syntax of Malayalam. Vocabulary is shared by both the languages. This derivative form of language played an important role in the spread of religion and development of vernacular textual forms within the community. This form of language is used in the madrasas of Sunni sect

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