Ilkogretim Online - Elementary Education Online, 2021; Vol 20 (Issue 5): pp. 8624-8633
http://ilkogretim-online.org
doi: 10.17051/ilkonline.2021.05.955

Faith Healing For Mental Illness: A Qualitative Study On Religious Centres And Ritualistic Healing In Kerala (India)

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Abstract

This paper explores the strange connections between divinity, mental illness, spirit possession, and faith healing in Kerala, a southwestern coastal state in India. The metaphysical correlates of mental illness in Kerala will be demonstrated using the legend of Naranathu Bhranthan (a folk-tale character) and also by narrating the indigenous healing practices in Kerala, where the state of possession/ trance becomes part of therapy. This study is primarily based on the data collected from expert interviews and field visits conducted in Palakkad and Malapuram districts of Kerala. Before the advent of colonial medicine, Kerala had a rich tradition of Ayurvedic and religious healing practices. Though suppressed by biomedicine at present, some of these indigenous healing centers and ritualistic art forms like Theyyam (a ritualistic art form famous in Northern Kerala) still enjoy popularity. Interestingly these centers become sites of religious pluralism, where people of all castes meet for a solution.

Keywords: faith healing; Kerala; mental illness; religion; spirit possession.

Introduction

Most of the earliest literature on the discourse of 'mental illness' in India was written by foreigners, interested in the exotic homeland. For example, Jan Meulenbeld (1992) examined the organization of the Sanskrit medical text's description of "mad states". Kenneth Zysk, (1985) looked at how 'mental distress' is addressed in Arthavedha. David Kinsely (1974) examined how and why "madness" was employed as a marker of divinity in Hindu tradition. Weiss (1987) also conducted a comprehensive study of mental distress in classical Indian texts. Kakar (1982) and Halliburton (2009) investigated the different ways in which Ayurvedic, Western and religious healing systems in India defined 'mental illness' and its cure. Many recent works written from anthropological and ethnographic perspectives examine the literary, political, and socio-medical aspects of mental illness in modern India. The present study is a qualitative inquiry into the discourse of divine madness and psychiatric pluralism, in the state of Kerala, India. Various studies have analyzed the diversity of treatment options for mental illness in Kerala from an anthropological perspective. However, most of them focused on the factors which influenced the choice of the patients between different treatment methods,

and the effectiveness of the treatment was analyzed based on the lived experience of the patient (through interviews). However, the present study does not emphasize the effectiveness/ outcome of the diverse treatment options. Rather, this study looks at the legends, rituals, and treatment options connected with mental illness as part of the rich cultural heritage of Kerala.

Divine Madness

The concept of divine madness can be traced to Hellenic origins. The Greek philosopher Socrates once remarked, "The greatest of blessings comes to us through madness, when it is sent as gift of gods." Divine madness has also its roots in Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sufism and Shamanism. There is a general pattern of celebration of 'madness' in Indian society through wild, ecstatic performances in the context of religion. The Gods (especially of the Hindu religion) "provide culturally valorized models of madness, for they break out of ordinary constraints of normalcy, do not consistently act in conformity to acceptable conventions, and appear as insane or intoxicated" (Fabrega, 2009, pp.524). These Gods are sometimes portrayed as wild, chaotic, frenzied, uncontrolled, and unpredictable. For example, mythological descriptions of [i]Lord Shiva present him as unkempt, untamed and living on the moral boundaries of society. Kinsley in his essay, "Through the Looking Glass: Divine Madness in the Hindu Religious Tradition" wrote that Lord Shiva can sing, dance, and laugh in ecstasy. He leaps, gapes, weeps, and speaks like a madman or drunkard (Kinsley, 1974, pp. 274). These and many other aspects of the behaviour of Lord Shiva and other gods are portrayed in hymns and popular literature. Thus, we need to consider the religious, spiritual, moralistic, and supernatural dimensions of psychological being, experience, and behaviour in India.

Mc Daniel in her work The Madness of Saints: Ecstatic Religion in Bengal studied the central role played by 'madness' in religion. Ecstasy and altered states of consciousness (states of dissociation) became important markers in the religious and 'mad' behaviour associated with ritual meditations of the saints that she studied. The so-called ecstatic states associated with spirituality included auditory and visual hallucinations, acts of a hostile and violent nature, laughing (for no reason), violent forms of singing and dancing, uncontrollable behaviour, etc (Mc Daniel 1989). Interestingly all these saints have led socially isolated lives and claim to have experienced visions from deities. "Even as children and adolescents they were considered mad and their parents sought help from exorcists and treatment by ayurvedic physicians. (...) Many collected strange objects, preferred the company of animals, and shared their meals with them" (Fabrega, 2009, pp. 527). Again, Feuerstein introduced the concept of 'crazy wisdom' or 'crazy adepts' in his work Holy Madness: The Shock Tactics and Radical Teachings of Crazy- Wise Adepts, Holy Fools, and Rascal Gurus. He wrote that "Holy fools in some ways fulfill a role in Indian society. Their real or legendary prototypes reject customary behaviour and criticize and ridicule the views of the orthodox religious establishment. (...) In India, they have not only been tolerated but sometimes deified" (Feuerstein, 1991, pp. 43)

The Legend of Naranathu Bhranthan

Kerala's history of holy/divine madness is exemplified through the folk character Naranathu Bhranthan, (The madman of Naranam). The past is not always unfolded through formal/written history. Elements of mythology, legends, rituals, etc also weave a picture of the past. The story of Naranathu Bhranthan is part of the famous aithihya (Sanskrit equivalent of a legend), Parayi petta panthirikulam (trans. Twelve Clans born of a Pariah woman). He was born as the son of Vararuchi, the famous astrologer of King Vikramaditya's court. Naranathu is believed to be the fifth child among the twelve sons of [ii]Parayi petta panthirikulam. These twelve babies were adopted by people of different kulams (clans) and they grew up learning the trade/skill of that kulam. They all grew up to be the best in their respective fields. The key learning from this legend is that all Kulams of ancient Kerala have a common ancestry and that regardless of birth, life skills and value systems are acquired through one's upbringing. Naranathu Bhranthan was brought up at Narayana Mangalathu Mana, situated at Chellathur in Palakkad. I visited this place to know more about the legend of Naranathu Bhranthan and was surprised to see that more than just being a folklore character, Naranathu Bhranthan holds a prominent position in the cultural history of Kerala.

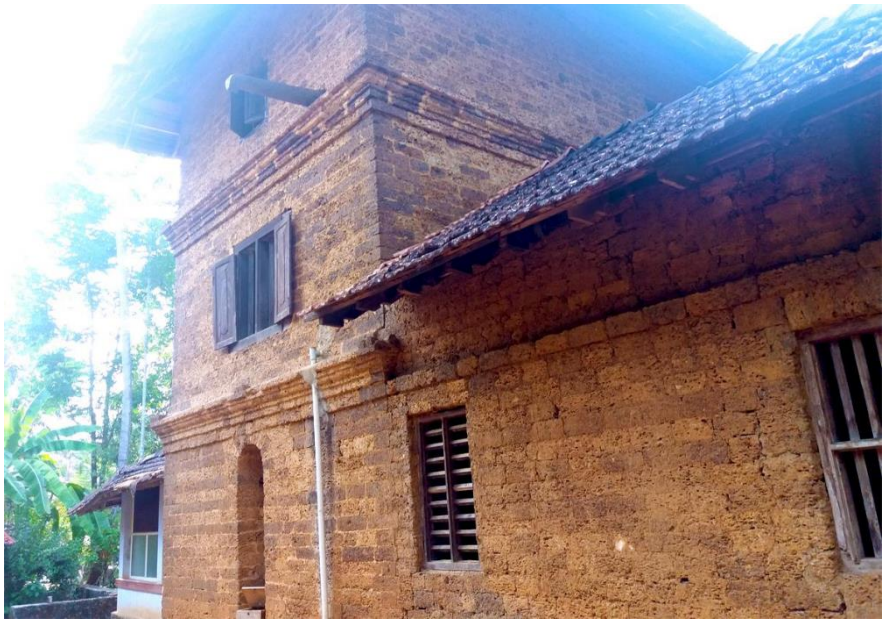

Figure 1. Narayana Mangalathu Mana, where Naranathu Bhranthan was adopted

During the field visit, I could interview the eldest member of the family. He narrated the tales of Naranathu Bhranthan. According to the legend, Naranathu Bhranthan came to Thiruvegappura (a village in Palakkad district of Kerala) for mastering the Vedas. During this time he visited the nearby Rayiranellor mountain, where he had the eccentric habit of rolling big stones up the hill and letting them roll down back, and laughing thunderously on seeing this sight. He was reluctant to learn the Vedas, used to wander about, collect alms through begging and eat and sleep wherever he felt like doing so. At Rairanellor mountain, Naranathu Bhranthan is believed to have had a vision of the Devi

(Goddess) and he enshrined Devi in the mountain and started his worship. This mountain has now turned out to be a historical place, with a temple of Goddess [iii]Durga and a statue of Naranthu Bhranthan. Devotees climb this mountain every year on the day when Naranathu Bhranthan is believed to have had Devi's vision (on the first of [iv]Thualam). Interviews with some of the devotees revealed the interesting fact that they worship Naranathu Bhranthan as a deity, present the statue with offerings and consider visiting this place as a remedy for curing mental health issues.

Figure 2. The statue of Naranathu Bhranthan at Rayiranellor mountain

Naranathu Bhranthan is also believed to have in him an essence of Lord Shiva and there is a Shiva temple at a place called Kaipuram Bhranthachalam, which used to be Naranathu Bhranthan's usual abode. This is a single-rock mountain where there is a Shiva temple along with some reminiscences of Naranathu Bhranthan like the place where he meditated and a tree with chains where he is believed to have chained himself. The devotees who climb the Rayiranellor mountain also visit this place, as part of their pilgrimage.

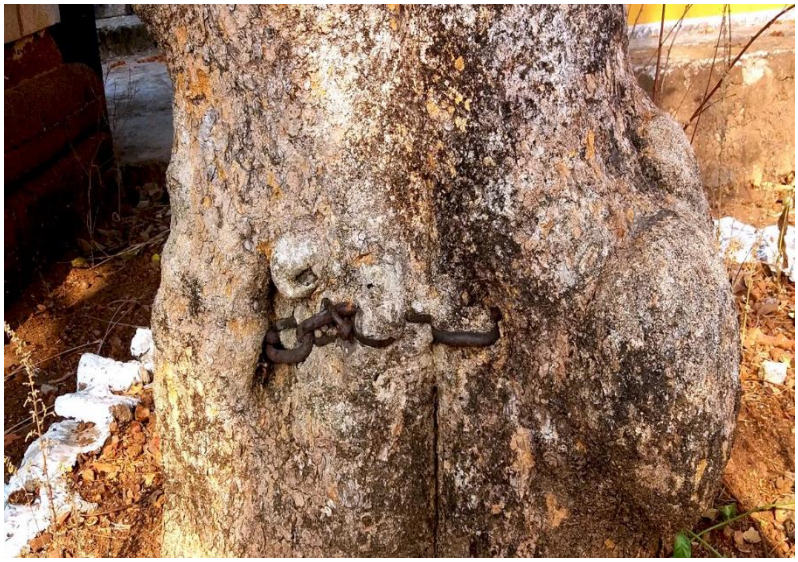

Figure 3: The tree with chain where Naranathu Bhranthan is believed to have chained himself

Due to his strange behaviour and odd activities, people perceived him as 'mad'. However, these acts are now considered allegorical and have been applied for social critiquing for myriad contexts. His act of rolling big stones up the hill and pushing them down is considered as a reminder of the temporary nature of human life and fortunes. It is believed that Naranathu Bhranthan defied the injustices of the existing social order through his wayward form of life. Being a figure of undefined anguish, rebellious in nature with a deep sense of alienation, his actions seemed aimless to everyone around. "However, his quest to conquer time drove him forward" (Nair, 2012, pp. 26)

Faith Healing in Kerala- A Blend of Religion, Rituals, Exorcism, and Ayurveda Therapy

Murphy Halliburton (a well- known anthropologist) in his essay "Re- thinking Anthropological Studies of the Body: Manas and Bodham in Kerala", examines the holistic understanding of the concept of the mind in Kerala, where the body, the mind, consciousness, and the soul become "a continuum of states" (Halliburton, 2002, pp.1123). These non- physical states like the soul or atman/ higher self, are closely linked to the spiritual aspects discussed in the previous section on Naranathu Bhranthan. Halliburton also observes that Sanskrit terminology from philosophical texts such as atman, bodham (roughly translated as consciousness) and manas (mind) exist in contemporary discourse in Kerala (Halliburton 2002) and this in turn proves that the psychological idiom in Kerala gives importance to the non-tangible parts of an individual. Thus the indigenous healing practices of Kerala (both religious and others) seem to be ritualistic in nature and the majority of them revolve around spirit possession. Quite contrary to Western psychoanalytic treatment, where the treatment and counseling are a private business between the patient and the analyst, in the traditional healing practices of Kerala, the entire therapy becomes a public spectacle. For example, in the Hindu tradition, the manthravadi (exorcist) is often assisted by the palmist/ astrologer, the pujari (the priest) and the velichapadu (the divine oracle). The astrologer through his logic deduces the cause of a person's problems. Often these reasons are traced back to the wrath of ancestors, possession by spirits, etc. In the case of spirit possession, the manthravadi gains the upper hand. He performs different practices of exorcism to drive away the spirits. Once the spirit is driven out, the pujari does rituals to protect the patient from further attack by the spirit. Finally, the astrologer is once again consulted to see if the spirit/ ancestor is satisfied. Thus, these practices are cyclic treatment procedures. Another interesting aspect is that all these practices are done in public and involve the entire family or community. "Since the traditional mental healing practices do not keep a prescribed form or a specified uniform system, they have left not many of artifacts or historical evidence so as to recreate the real ethnic healing practices in their traditional form" (Gopal, 2008, pp.153). So in order to understand the past, we have to go to the reminiscences of such indigenous healing practices, as practiced in the present.

Many families in the [v]Malabar region of Kerala, still practice indigenous healing methods for treating psychosocial disabilities. As part of my data collection, I visited two of these families in the Malappuram district of Kerala. The first one was Poonkudil Mana in Malappuram district, where we find a mix of religious and Ayurvedic healing practices. P. N. Namboodiri, the chief practitioner of the Mana, elaborated on their healing practices. They used both medicines and rituals. The medications involved a home-made tablet, home- made oil and a special type of ghee for the patient's intake. These medicines are believed to be "ritually empowered and it was often given together with sacred ash and a thread to tie around the wrist" (Sax and Harikumar, 2014, pp.209). All the patients were treated in the veranda of the Mana. There was a lit lamp with some pooja materials on a platter and the healer sat beside it. The patients along with their family members told their problems to the healer. This was interesting because, unlike the talking sessions in western therapy, there was no private dialogue between the healer and the patient. Everything was transparent and there was no room or wall separating an ongoing healing session from the rest of the patients who stood outside or sat on stools, patiently waiting for their turn. The healers of this family were high-caste Brahmins and as the Mana was located in the Muslim-dominated region of Malappuram, a large section of their clients were Muslims. The other sections constituting the Hindus and the Christians were fewer in number.

Besides Poonkudil Mana, Kaatumadam family, also located in Palakkad district of Kerala are well-known traditional healers of mental distress. Unlike the main practitioner at Poonkudil Mana who considered the healing practices as the primary profession, the practitioner at Kaatumadam family was a school teacher who considered such healing practices only as a hereditary practice of the family. The practitioner whom I interviewed claimed that they were the descendents of [vi]Parasurama who gave the Kaatumadam family the power to cure 'mental illness.' This family does a particular type of ritual practice known as sambradayi.

Other than these families, there are religious centres in Kerala, where healing practices are performed. Murphy Halliburton in his book Mudpacks and Prozac: Experiencing Ayurvedic, Biomedical Religious Healing, discusses three religious healing centres in Kerala, namely the Chottanikara Temple, the Vettucaud Church and [vii]Beemapalli. As their names suggest these centres belong to the three prominent religions in Kerala, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. The Chottanikara Temple is located in the Ernakulam district of central Kerala. Most of the people who came there were said to be "possessed", while some others were just said to have "mental illness" or "mental problems". Halliburton also writes that a majority of the people who came to this temple had earlier gone to psychiatric hospitals for treatment. Another interesting feature of this temple is that, it is not a secluded place that treats the "possessed". On the other hand, Chottanikara is one of the most famous pilgrim spots in Kerala. The devotees are aware of the fact that there are many "possessed" people seeking relief there. "The mentally afflicted are allowed to engage in emotional outbursts and erratic behavior" (Halliburton,2009, pp.69), while other devotees carry out their daily poojas. Thus, the temple premises become a liberated space, where the "mentally ill" are not restrained

from expressing their distress, and as these expressions are made in public, they become a spectacle. There is a smaller temple within Chottanikara which is known as kizakke kavu (the sacred grove of the east). This small temple is the abode of Goddess Kali, "who intimidates the spirits possessing the afflicted and helps drive them away" (Halliburton, 2009, pp.70). Though the healing practices at Chottanikara temple are mainly ritual oriented, the devotees are also given a particular kind of ghee (as in Poonkudil Mana) and bhrami (a herb used in Ayurvedic treatments). Special poojas for the 'mentally ill' are done every week at the kizake kavu (the Kali temple), where the sounding of drums induced these people into a state of trance to ward off the spirits. Thus, this ritual becomes a counter therapy where the state of possession is induced as part of the healing procedure.

Another such famous healing centre in Kerala is Beemapalli, located at Trivandrum. When the devotees at Chotanikkara temple worship Kali for a solution, the people who come to Beemapalli worship Ummachi, "the female saint who is interred at the mosque" (ibid. 76). Again unlike Chottanikara where the patients move freely and do poojas with other devotees, there are some cells in Beemapalli where 'violent patients' are locked and attended to by relatives. " People with less serious problems- those felt not to be a threat to other ill people or worshippers- wander freely on the mosque grounds" (ibid. 77). Unlike the organised ritual practices at Chottanikara temple, the 'afflicted devotees' at Beemapalli pray on their own. The healing procedures include prayers, eating jasmine flowers, drinking water from an underground source in the mosque (which is believed to have medicinal properties) and tying [viii]talismans around the wrist. Vettucaud Church, the third religious healing centre is also located at Trivandrum. This church is believed to be established in the sixteenth century, when the second wave of Christianity reached Kerala shores (Halliburton 2009). Halliburton observes that the number of 'spirit possessed' people reaching Vettucaud church are less in number as compared to Chottanikara and Beemapalli.The treatment procedures include prayers and talking sessions with priests, that resemble the talk therapies in western medicine.

Besides these religious healing centres, there are some ritualistic art forms in Kerala, the performance of which is considered a solution for 'mental illness.' Dr. Baiju Gopal in his thesis, The Concept of "Madness" and it's Management: The Kerala Scenario analyzes Theyyam (a ritualistic art form in Northern Kerala) and its connection with 'madness' and its management. The person who performs Theyyam personifies the deity. These performers mainly belong to the tribal group of Malabar region. Theyyam is a colourful spectacular performance often done in front of village deities or in houses as a form of worship to the ancestors. Dr. Baiju observes that most Theyyam performances are stories of oppression, and these people who were denied rights in their lives, become Gods later. Thus, through the theyyam performance " the 'power-less' human being who is subjected to all the worldly oppression and cheating gets a chance to resurrect as a mighty, powerful God who is above all these worldly boundaries" (Gopal, 2008, p. 212). Again, the caste hierarchy gets subverted in a Theyyam performance and the theyyam performer (from a lower caste) is allowed to perform even in a Brahmin's house and is accepted as

a God by people of all castes. There is a particular ritual called pena kodukal in the Theyyam performance. As part of the ritual, the possessed person consults an astrologer to know the right reason for them to get possessed. During the performance, the possessed person faces the relative of the spirit who possessed the particular person. The Theyyam performer acts as a mediator in this process and suggests remedies for problems (Gopal, 2008). Dr. Baiju also observes that most of the Theyyam performers are also known for their manthravada practice for 'mental illness.'

Kerala is also well known for its Ayurvedic healing practices. 'Mental illness is referred to as unmada in Ayurveda, caused due to imbalance of dosas. Accordingly, they are classified as vatotmadam, piitotmadam, and kaphotmadam. Vatotmadam is characterised by manic behaviour and hyperactivity, pittotmadam results in outbursts of anger and violence, and kaphotmadam is characterised by lethargic, gloomy, and passive behaviour (Halliburton, 2009). These 'disorders' can be caused due to a shock resulting from trauma, dietary problems, and other factors. The therapy includes snehapana (drinking ghee for the lubrication of the body and the removal of impurities), oil baths, sweating, panchakarma treatment (a five step procedure to remove impurities from the body), and talk therapy (Halliburton, 2009).

Conclusion

Thus, there is a complex existence of religious, spiritual, moralistic and supernatural dimensions of psychological being, experience and behaviour in the state of Kerala, India. Kerala's history of holy/divine madness is exemplified through the folk character Naranathu Bhranthan, (The mad man of Naranam). The indigenous notion of the mind transcends western Mind/ Body Dualism. Indian philosophy discusses the multiple layers of the self, where the body, the mind, consciousness and the soul become "a continuum of states" (Halliburton 1123) and most of these assumptions exist in the popular discourse of Kerala. The indigenous healing methods in Kerala become a public spectacle, involving the family or sometimes the entire community. Poonkudil Mana and Kattumadom are two families in Malabar region, where Ayurvedic practices are combined with religious healing techniques. Besides these families the Chottanikara Temple in central Kerala and Beemapalli and Vettucaud church in southern Kerala are famous religious healing centres in Kerala. Interestingly, these therapeutic regions become spaces that cross religious boundaries and people of one religion visit healing centres of other religions, to 'get cured'. Besides these religious healing centres, certain ritualistic practices like Theyyam also become important within the discourse of healing practices in Kerala. The Ayurvedic system in Kerala is mainly based on the tridosa principle, where 'mental illness' is believed to be caused due to the imbalance of the three dosas, vatha, pitta and kabha. The Ayurvedic treatment procedures like snehapana, talapodichil, etc, are found to be 'aesthetically more pleasant than the Allopathic procedures and this is identified to be one the reasons why people in Kerala still prefer Ayurveda, even at a time of dominance of psychiatry.

End Notes

[i] Lord Shiva is the supreme being in Shaivism, one of the major traditions within Hinduism. Shiva is regarded as the all-powerful god who creates, protects and transforms the universe.

[ii] Pariyi petta panthirikulam is a Malayalam phase translated as "twelve kulams (clans) born of a Pariah woman". This phase is well recognized as the title of an important legend in ancient Kerala. Pariah is a term for a member of lower caste in Southern India. The 'kulams' refer to the vocation based hierarchical ethnic groups.

[iii] Durga is a Hindu goddess associated with protection, strength, motherhood, destruction and wars.

[iv] Thulam is one of the twelve months in Indian solar calendar.

[v] Malabar region includes northern half of the state of Kerala and some coastal regions of Karnataka.

[vi] Parasurama is believed to be the sixth avatar of Lord Vishnu in Hindu religion.

[vii] Palli is the Malayalam equivalent of mosque.

[viii] A sacred thread believed to have magical powers

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