

Mutti-Mangalaya

A NOTE ON THE CULTURAL-ECOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

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The *mutti-mangalaya* is a ritual intimately related to the agricultural life of the Northern Dry Zone peasantry. It is important to recognize that such rituals do not operate in a vacuum; there is always a practical relevance to the on-going life of the community. What is necessary, therefore, is not so much to be concerned with the esoteric content but the practical relevance of the rituals within the social system in which they are rooted. This note aims at assessing the cultural-ecological significance of the *mutti-mangalaya* in the vava (tank) based *purana* (ancestral villages) of the Northern Dry Zone.

The Ritual Elements

There is reason to believe that the *mutti-mangalaya* dates back to antiquity. Ievers (1899) gives a vivid account of the ritual as it was performed at the turn of the century. It is pertinent to mention that the ritual as it is now performed by the Northern Dry Zone peasantry retains all the essential characteristics noted by Ievers; it has, however, lost some of its past vigour as more emphasis is now placed on the *yatikava* (address to the god) rather than on the dancing and drumming elements of the ritual. Hence, the ritual performances of much shorter duration now than at the time when Ievers presented his graphic account. It is useful at this stage to quote Ievers to indicate the essential characteristics of the *mutti-mangalaya*.

*“The god Aiyana presides over tanks which are supposed to be under his special protection. When a tank fills and is about to spill the elders of the village, chiefly **gamaralas**, proceed to the tank, and at the **mutti-namana** tree a salute is ‘offered’ to the god by the firing of two guns. The chief **gamarala** then steps forward and sends up a **yatika**, or an address, in which he announces to the god that the tank is being filled, and that cultivation will be begun, and that after the harvest is gathered the **mul-maugale** will be performed. At the same time a few copper coins—one or two **panams** in value are wrapped up in a piece of rag daubed in saffron. The piece of rag with coppers is then tied to a branch of the tree, closing the ceremony by commending the tank, village, its residents, and its cattle to the protection of the diety. This last ceremony is called **pandurubandinava**.*

*The harvest is gathered. The villagers assemble and appoint a day for the performance of the **mutti** ceremony. The nearest **anumatirala** (the mouth-piece or (?) oracle of god), is invited; the tom-tom beaters and the **dhobies** are noticed. The appointed day arrives, and the chief **gamarala** directs that every shareholder of the village should contribute towards the **mutti** feast. Rice, coconut oil, cakes and sweet plantains and betel and areca-nut are collected. At evening the assembled people are served with rice and curry, milk rice, cakes*

and plantains. The meal being over, the **anumatirala** accompanied by the whole village, proceeds in procession with two new earthen pots to where the tree stands on the bund. A raised platform, overhung with cloth and built under the shade of the tree at an early hour of the evening, receives the betel offering. The pots incensed and daubed with saffron are now placed on the platform, or **yahana**. The **anumatirala** sends up a **yatikava** or an address to the god, and then begins to dance. Dancing and tom-toming continue till dawn. At break of day the pots are carried upto the tree and laid on the stumps of two branches.

The god, through his **anumatirala**, makes known that the offerings are accepted, and that the tank, the village with its inhabitants, both man and beast, are taken under his protection for a certain period—one, two, or three years, according to the pleasure of his divine majesty. The people return to the village, and the **anumatirala** with them. The latter dances, and the tom-toms beat until the mid-day meal is ready. At noon this is eaten and the people disperse.

A somewhat similar ceremony is performed in the case of an epidemic among men or beasts.

The deity 'Ayanar' is said to be Tamil, and his proper name is 'Kai-yanar' so-called because he sprang from the head of Vishnu. He is said to have fifty names, and under each appellation he is possessed of a different power."

Discussion

It is evident that the *mutti-mangalaya* is conducted in two stages. The first stage of the ritual—*panduru bandima* is completed before the initiation of the agricultural cycle. The *panduru bandima* has both cultural and ecological significance to the vava centered communities of the Northern Dry Zone. The Dry Zone receives its rainfall in the *maha* (rainy season) from November to February; and high variability is a characteristic feature. The *yala* (dry season) extending from June to September is a season of drought and agriculture becomes a highly hazardous occupation. Indeed the peasant is required to resort to selective cultural adaptations to mitigate the effects of the drought hazard (Karunanayake, 1976). In Dry Zone peasant agriculture water and not land is the limiting factor. Hence, the importance of the vava in the life of the peasant communities of the Northern Dry Zone. This limitation requires an approach which provides for the maximization of the irrigation water supply available to the community. The tenurial system and the cultural practices relating to water management are designed to serve the above objective (Leach, 1961; Karunanayake, 1977a). In this ecological situation the *panduru bandima* takes on a real significance.

The completion of the agricultural cycle is usually followed by a period of inactivity. If the rains fail the period of inactivity may be extended at times by as much as two or three years. Therefore, at the initiation of an agricultural cycle, labour has to be mobilized and attention focused on the tasks

immediately at hand. The *panduru bandima* achieves just this; further, it instils in the cultivators a sense of urgency. Since the offering is to god *aiyana* who presides over the vava, the utilization of irrigation water is given an aura of sanctity. Irrigation water is scarce and it is the very life blood of the people. It is not to be wasted but used efficiently. It also signifies the need to keep to irrigation schedules and to the *sirit* (traditional rules of irrigation) practices. The adherence to the above ensures the efficiency of the agricultural operation and the just and equitable allocation of irrigation water within the *yaya* (irrigated paddy tract).

The *mutti* ceremony proper is held at the end of the agricultural cycle. Here again, the cultural and ecological considerations are decisive. The *mutti* (pot) is symbolic of the symbiotic relationship between the vava-yaya system. The contribution by the entire community to the *mutti* feast is symbolic of a community effort successfully completed. The competition for the scarce resource of irrigation water and the assertion by individuals of rights permitted by *sirit* rules generate a degree of tension and conflict within the community. In this sense there is always the potential for friction among the shareholders of the *yaya* (Karunanayake, 1977b). The pooling of resources in the communal cause acts as a safety-valve to ease tensions and restore group cohesion. The partaking of a common meal is an overt expression of unity and equality within the group. The *yatikava* is a symbolic expression of the interdependence of man and nature in the Dry Zone environment.

Conclusion

A careful and rational use of irrigation water is necessitated by the ecology of the Northern Dry Zone. It has also necessitated the adoption of socially conditioned cultural practices to optimize on water use. The scarcity factor relating to irrigation water provides the potential for division and conflict within the community. The *mutti-mangalaya* has to be viewed as a ritual which regulates an agricultural system based on irrigation water use; it also provides for the resolving of conflict within the group generated by the competition for the scarce resource.

References

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