

Rituals, Beliefs, And Social Bonds: A Durkheimian Study of The Malamuthan Religious Structure

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Abstract

This research paper explores the religious structure of the Malamuthan community in Nilambur, of Malappuram district in Kerala, utilizing Emily Durkheim's theoretical framework on religion as a lens for analysis. Durkheim's theory, which views religion as a social institution that fosters collective conscience and cohesion, helps to explain the Malamuthan people's traditional and changing religious practices. Furthermore, it investigates how this religious structure which involves beliefs, rituals, rites, ceremonies and social organization, is impacted by a variety of elements such as socio-cultural, economic, and external influences, as well as the community members' long-standing religious connection to their culture. Preliminary analysis of the collected data reveals four prominent themes underpinning this connectedness: Land, Deities and Ancestors, Taboos and Morals, Transference of Knowledge, and social cohesion and ritual dance. Methodologically, this research employs a qualitative approach incorporating ethnographic techniques such as participant observation, semi-structured and in-depth interviews with community members and the analysis of religious rituals. The research findings reveal the enduring religious connectedness of the community members amidst prevailing situation and the role of religious structure and society in fostering the individual growth and thereby the communal bonds as well.

Keywords- Malamuthan Community, Communal consciousness, Religious connectedness, Sociology of religion, Durkheim.

INTRODUCTION

Every individual in this universe grow up in a particular cultural setting and that setting gives them a cultural identity of their own along with various certain compactness as persons. As human beings, we are not born into a space where we get nothing, but into something that we would like to call 'cultural archetype'. Ultimately, this has so much bearing on our personality, identity and individuality that even if we change places and go to live in communities whose culture is different from our own, we tend to carry with us our own cultural backlog and try to duplicate it in the new setting. Even if the solutions are hostile to its practice (Basil Pohlong, 2004). It is quite intriguing to reveal that, the new cultural patterns only take the deviation without demolishing the old one and the latter takes the role of the precedence through time. As numerous scholars have posited in the previous research that culture is not a single entity but an umbrella term for different aspects. Edward B. Taylor, in *Primitive Culture* (1924), offered a comprehensive definition of culture. In that he explained culture as, 'that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society' (p.1). Whereas Clifford Geertz provided more thoughtful, interpretative and symbolic approach to culture through his work *The Interpretation of Culture* (1977). He described culture as a 'system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life' (p.89). Though many scholars and philosophers like Taylor, and Geertz have put forth numerous numbers of definitions for the term 'culture', it has finally concluded rationally and logically as a 'way of life' for a group of people living in a particular community in a particular time. It works and acts as a system or framework of symbols, behaviour and meaning for the whole human community. It is the whole way of life – material, intellectual and spiritual – of a given society (Pohlong, 2004, p. 15). As previously stated, culture is a way of life; it has the unusual ability to be pervasive and to impact all facets of life. Hence, in such a context, as many philosophers has propounded that, religion is also an important part of culture and it functions the same way as culture functions in a society. This particularly emphasizes the universal truth that religion influences the 'way of life of people'. But like culture itself, the term 'religion' and its definitions also were vague and was a much-debated concept in the literary canon. Once cannot argue that the discussions and debates are not over or was it not well explained. Before arriving at a well explained definition of religion, it is very much needed to observe some of the fundamental concepts that are closely related to the problem of defining the religion as put forth by a few religious thinkers. Emily Durkheim very well

explained that the scholars approach the definition of religion from two different perspectives which eventually led to two broad categories namely; those who deny the possibility of defining the religion and those who advocate its possibility. In addition to it, Wilfred Cantwell Smith's criticism on the same provided an extension to what Durkheim posited. He argued that while many have attempted to define religion, such attempts have been rejected by the scholars as insufficient by merely suggesting the absurdity of seeking a static and one definition of it. He emphasised that, religion should be understood within the cultural context and ordinary languages, rejecting the idea of a universal definition.

James. H. Leuba (1912) provided 48 definitions of religion, emphasising that defining religion is merely futile due to its inner complexity. His analysis concluded that, as religion is influenced by numerous perspectives, a singular, all-encompassing definition is unattainable. Moreover, all the religions are constantly in evolution, none of them is static; they change, branch off, and transforms, sometimes, almost beyond recognition (Mahmood, 1997, p. 10). Because of this versatility, religion may continue to have significance for its adherents across borders, contexts and periods.

Throughout the ages, there has been a deep relation between religion and society, fundamentally reliant on human existence for their development. Not long after civilization, it took its final shape, reflecting the thoughts and ideas of the ancient people. It was quite a difficult situation for the primitive beings to group and unite others using a unique and rational concept in amidst the era that follows 'survival of the fittest' notion. This concern for the entire humanity can be said to have united them and gave birth to social nature amongst them. (Hoque, 2017). It has been discovered that a purely pragmatic, social, scientific and humanistic perspective is what gives rise to the religion in the present day. The pragmatic view of religion in the present day holds that we should all be free to think for ourselves. In Jiddu Krishnamurti's words, religion is not about the pursuit of truth; it is a state of being in which truth is all inclusive. (Fisher, 2008). And it is a state where one is purely aware of one's inner state and also are deeply connected with it.

Besides finding a suitable definition, a functional approach to it is essential, as it defines the core characteristics and essence of the term more effectively than the essentialist definitions. Various religious thinkers including Carl Gustav Jung shared a common understanding of religion's purpose in society. For them, religion addresses fundamental questions of human existence and offers solutions to various challenges whether apparent or real. This highlights its significant impact on personal experiences within the religious contexts. Charles B. Jone's book 'Introduction to the study of religion', defines the functional definitions as 'semi- arbitrary definitions specifying how a given term is used in a finite context' (p.6). These definitions are purely functional because they explain the role a concept plays within a specific social or psychological system. By focusing on what religion does for individuals or society, functional definitions help to understand religion's practical impact rather than its essential nature (Swartz, 1991). On the other hand, some theologians and philosophers have defined religion by its 'essential elements' and what constitutes its main elements. Such a notion proposed the cross-cultural study of various religious structures globally including the comparison, analysis, analogies, and logical reasoning. The inter- cultural and inter- religious analysis also helped in finding out, comprehending and theorizing the essential elements that forms the foundation of all religion. A substantive definition qualifying the true meaning has been put forth by Peter L. Berger (1967), which evaluated the religion with reference to the essential elements such as God, gods, and supernatural beings. It is apparent that throughout history, humanity has possessed notions of a supernatural force superintending their universe. Man has always held the belief that there is a transcendent or immanent being that possess the key to unlocking the secrets of existence, regardless of cultural background. F.J. Imaekhai (2010) stated that,

Religion is essentially about how people perceive themselves and their relationship with supernatural forces, which they consider necessary for a purposeful existence. It is intricately linked with the human mind and lot more complex than it seems.

The analysis of religion individually from both the side has its own limitations as neither side provides entirely satisfying or complete understanding. Ideological influences shape these perspectives, making an integrative approach essential. Anamul Hoque (2017) submits that a religion has immanent and transcendent, natural and supernatural, observable and non- observable, phenomenological and metaphysical, empirical and speculative, practical and intentional aspects. Excluding any one of them would lead to the incompleteness and biased representation of the complex nature of religious experience. However, Linda Woodhead (2011), in *Five Concepts of Religion*, categorized five major concepts of religion. Religion as culture, as values, as discourse, as identity, tradition and memory emphasising 'live religion' and individual engagement with practices, particularly in relation to the gender, power, and

identity. However, this approach may overlook the communal aspects of the religion that are essential for a thorough understanding within societal contexts. And hence an analysis that takes into consideration the religion as a whole has utmost relevance here. Because religion is a part of the society and social institutions as well. Amrit Barla (2019) describes social institutions as systems of interrelated behaviours and relationships that persist within a society, shaped by the normative features of individuals and groups. This concept aligns with Émile Durkheim's theory on religion, which highlights religion's vital role in influencing society and its members. Durkheim's ideas remain pertinent in contemporary discussions about social structures.

As this research paper is on the Malamuthan religion, and the changes happened in this structure over the years, Emily Durkheim's theory on religion helped us to a great extent to widen our perspectives about the religion, its function, and the different perspectives about the essential elements and how these functions in society and its individuals as well. His framework helped us to comprehend religion as a source of social cohesion, connectedness, belonging, collective identity and also the application of concepts like 'sacred' and 'profane' distinction in this research helped us to navigate and provide nuanced analysis of how this unique religious structure contributes to the identity formation, individual development and, social cohesion.

Through this theoretical framework, we also understood how the socio-economic and political transformations and challenges impact the religious structure. It focuses on religion as a unifying force amidst these changes and also further analyses the importance of the rituals in upholding Malamuthan's moral framework and social order. This study is particularly significant in elucidating how the religion moulds the socio-cultural life of a community undergoing rapid cultural shifts.

METHODOLOGY

This research employed a qualitative analysis with ethnography as its major method. This method is chosen due to its effectiveness in providing a comprehensive and intricate understanding of the cultural and religious structure, rituals and other aspects of Malamuthan community of Nilambur district in Kerala State. The fieldwork was conducted over a period of about 13 months from, 2 July 2023 to 5 August 2024. This thirteen-month fieldwork was conscientiously chosen to ensure that the research covered the full spectrum of religious activities, including seasonal rituals, daily practices, major religious ceremonies or festivals. Palakkayam, Nayadampoyil, Kandilappara, Valamthode, Kakkad, Mankunnumal, Peruvampadam, Karachil, Thannikkuzhi, Vazhakkunnu, Kalluvary, Madam and Veetikkunnu are the different settlements that are chosen for the study and also comes under two major panchayaths, that is, Chaliyar and Mambad.

The study involved a sample size of 100 people, who were carefully chosen to represent the cross-section of the Malamuthan community. The participants were stratified into four age groups, (18-30), (31-50), (51- 70) & (71- 85). The data was collected through participant observation, semi- structured interviews, and focus group discussions. As part of the fieldwork, the researchers lived with the Malamuthan community members, participating in their daily activities, religious rituals, and ceremonies. This method gave the researcher first- hand knowledge of their religious life and enabled us to watch the practices on their natural settings. As the interview was guided through the semi-structured questions, more questions that are providing deep answers and insights were formulated during each interview.

All the participants were made aware of the aim and purpose of the research, the procedures that would be followed, and the right to withdraw from participation at any moment without facing any repercussions. Additionally, all the participants gave their written consent as well. The interviews were audio recorded and, with the participant's consent, the dialogue was either transcribed to text, or completed using notes given by the elders. As Malamuthan speaks a mix of Malayalam (common language in Kerala) and Muthan bhasha, the difficult tribal terms were explained and clarified either by the participant or the tribal promotor who accompanied us throughout, who was also a Malamuthan community member.

The transcribed data were interpreted using an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), whereby categories, patterns, and themes, were extracted from the transcribed interviews using NVivo 12. In addition to this, triangulation, or cross- checking the data from several sources (observations, interviews, focus group, and available documents), were used by the researcher to appropriate the validity and trustworthiness of the findings. Furthermore, the researchers clarified and validated the correctness of the interpretations by discussing any inconsistencies with relevant informants.

Table 1 shows the features of study participants

Age Group	Number of Participants	Male	Female	Key characteristics of participants
18-30	25	12	13	Representatives of younger generation, who are more exposed to the external influences, and education
31-50	25	17	8	Middle aged adults, who are more often the participants of all the rituals, and ceremonies, and also possibly holding the leadership roles.
51-70	25	11	14	Older people, who have extensive knowledge of these traditional practices and have tracked changes over time.
71-85	25	7	18	Elders, who are highly respected in the community, and also have a vital role in preserving and transmitting the religious knowledge.

Religion in Detail

The Malamuthan community is an ethnic group residing in the northern fringes of Malappuram district and eastern areas of Kozhikode district in Kerala. They are also known as Malakkar or Muthan. Though officially recognised as “Muthuvan”, this name also refers to another culturally unique tribal population in Idukki, with whom they have no lineage. They have occupied the Nilambur forest range for about a century and historically served as labourers for the local aristocracy at Manjeri Kovilakom.

For any community, religion is part and parcel. For a tribal community like Malamuthan, it fulfils several functions in terms of upholding the community members, bringing people together, and promoting healing. One of the reasons that the community is different from others in the entire Malabar district is the numerous deities that they worship. Though they have many deities to worship, they all have a point of origin according to their belief. The god, and the goddess named Pottanthiruvadi and Pullali are their main deities who are worshipped by the entire society including the animals as well. Because, before the deity, there is no difference between humans and animals. During the younger years of these deities, all people, including animals, are summoned to Chekkunath kota (a common meeting place). All groups of people who have gathered there were equally given different portions of the land by these deities. People who wear stone and pebble necklaces become members of the Paniya community. People who wrapped cloth around their heads became Muslim. Those who purchased fish baskets become Mukkuvan (fishermen). Those who already came from the hills become the Malamuthans. Along with it, all the animals also received instructions from God about where to live. In the past, Mukkuvans, the fishing community, and Malamuthan were regarded as one and the same. Following their fighting, two groups of people separated, with one moving toward the hills and the other toward the sea. Those who have moved to the seaside become the Mukkuvan fisher community, while those who moved to the hills become the Malamuthan community. This story which forms the foundation of Malamuthan community is putting forth how the entire society is formed and divided by the principle deities is a part of their religious belief. This formation is pointing towards Durkheim’s statement that the society and God functions in same ways and that there is no distinction between both. Both the deities are perceived as superior to them and are one who they believe they depends. It's the collective force of the group, perhaps society as a whole, that is functioning cohesively and possesses everything that is needed to evoke a sense of the divine.

The Malamuthan people revere several deities, with Maladaivam being the most prominent. Other significant deities include Thekkenkariyathan, Kannikuruvan, Kennarbhagavathy, Karinkutty, Muthachi, Pottanthiruvadi, and Kartathanmar. Each deity embodies a unifying force or natural element, and the community's worship of these figures reflects their respect and desire for blessings that foster communal harmony and cohesion. Though many rituals, and ceremonies are there in the Malamuthan’s religion, the most important is the Maladaiva pooja (deity worship) and ancestral worship. For them, among the numerous deities and personal deities that they worship, Maladaivam is the most superior. Although the ritual is primarily for Maladaivam, all the other deities will be worshipped equally. In the community, chemmimuthan, who is a socio-political functionary, holds a very special place. Not only an elder member, but also a person who is wise enough regrading every aspect of the community and also a respected person

as well. He is considered as the only person who is eligible to conduct all the rituals and ceremonies in the community. No other member in the community is allowed to perform any of these and they believed very firmly that the violation of the rules and in appropriation of any rituals would bring the wrath of their deities. Hence the selection of a chemmimuthan and his wisdom holds ample significance and place. Chemmimuthan officiates as the priest on this occasion (Maladaiva pooja) and chant the mantras and conduct the associated ritualistic practices. Its mandatory that, all the mantras should be chanted in their own Muthan bhasha (official language) and each deity has their own specific mantras, that cannot be used for other deities.

Before conducting Maladaiva pooja, certain procedures must be adhered to. Every pooja or worship is conducted in specific places in the forest, that are rarely visited by the community members and maintained in a clean state. Chemmimuthan initiate the process and give approval for others for site preparation, which involves, cleansing the land with chithalputt (remains of ant hill soil) with dried leaves. It is very important to say that, land like the creator of the people, has ample significance in their lives. For them land or the space that they are living in and also the place that they are locating for conducting all the rituals, or any occasions, is not just a spot but a sacred space that gives them identity and help. The people consider themselves as a part and parcel of it not apart from it. (Longchar, 2000). This involvement of people in the process is directly implying their firm beliefs, the communal strength and participation. It is required to perform the Maladaiva puja at "madhyamam," and ancestor worship at Uthamam. Madhyamam and uthamam are two distinct worship times. For this, coconut, which is an indispensable thing, flowers, aval (flattened rice) malar (puffed rice), water, and banana should be put in the plantain leaves. This pooja is required to be attended by every member of the community. And the violation of these rules leads to the severe punishments or proper compensations. It is part of their belief that people who attend the puja should make an offering to the family deity. The offerings include anything that is available in their surroundings and money as well. Subsequently, everything used for worship ought to be taken out of that spot before 'madhyamam.' Chemmimuthan offers back aval, malar, and water as prasadam (a consecrated meal offered to the deity) following a prolonged prayer and mantra chanting. All members should make a financial contribution to their Maladaivam in the end only. This share of money will be decided by the members of the rest of the settlement and put the balance amount in theyyapetty (a box for keeping the collected money). It is not mandatory to put the exact amount, but those whose financial condition is better can give the amount and others can give what they have with them. This money is treated as a compensation for solving the disputes and would also utilize it for the next Maladaiva pooja, especially for the feast.

Maladaiva pooja and ancestral worship are usually conducted on the same day, but different times. They are seeking the blessings of their ancestors by performing this ritual. They believe that not only do the deities protect them from adversity, but their ancestors also play an important role in all aspects of their lives. Paina is the term used to describe their ancestral spirit, which includes both male and female spirits. These painas are invoked during calamities as well as in the social ceremonies. Rituals involve four cleansed coconut shells symbolizing four generations of ancestors. Chemmimuthan pours toddy in these coconut shells (since it is mandatory to use only coconut shells), the corresponding rituals are conducted, and then it is offered as prasadam to the community members. Only chemmimuthan has the right to distribute this. Following this, prayers and mantra chanting take place. It is said that when participants in this ritual open their eyes after the prayer, the souls of their departed ancestors might have entered the body of the chemmimuthan. The ancestor who has entered Chemmimuthan's body grants darshan (the meeting of devotee by a soul or a deity) to its people. It will make predictions about events that have already occurred and those that are going to happen in the future. If members of the community have made mistakes, they are informed and alternatives are proposed. Following the predictions, Chemmimuthan and others pray to Maladaivam and their ancestors and declare that 'we can only perform this pooja at this time next year. Until then, please shield us from the wind, rain, and wild creatures.' Followed by this, everyone returns to their house, leaving the coconut shells behind. It is observed in some settlements, the paina is given a feast followed by this puja. In those settlements, it was done not just once a year but also on special occasions. In accordance with their beliefs, ancestors would eat whatever was offered in plantain leaves and appear as ants, birds, or other creatures. The worship of all the deities is also held in the same regard by them. It is performed by both men and women equally in the community. On this particular occasion, they provide only vegetarian food that is made by them. It is important to note that the toddy is offered for the worship of ancestors rather than deities.

After Maladaiva puja and ancestral worship, the sacred groves or kavu hold a significant place in their rituals. The community members make a visit to these groves only once in a year and also as part of the punishments. It is considered as a restricted area on other times and every visit happens. The people who visit these groves observe a strict fast. This fasting needs to be observed for seven days. During the course of this fasting, they are forbidden from seeing women or consuming non vegetarian food items. Food and clothing for the seven days should be brought along. Two individuals are permitted to the groves for carrying these items. It is mandatory that, the items and objects used a day cannot be reused on the following days. It is believed that any mistakes committed during this course would affect the whole community. Not only that, traditionally, people tread cautiously when entering the sacred groves. They are afraid to anger the deities when damaging the vegetation as it is strongly believed that the deities will punish by bringing illness, deaths, or misfortune (Notermans et al., 2016). Due to this reason, in some of the settlements, they have stopped visiting the groves and left the place without disturbing. Since community members have seen the presence of snakes representing their deities, they believe it is guarded by them and does not want them to face the wrath of their gods.

As we can see that, Malamuthan's three different ways of worshipping is quite different from each other. And each one of these ways, shows their utmost admiration, faith, commitment and belief towards their deities, ancestral spirits and towards the whole community itself. From being a figure of faith, to being something that is instilling their minds with fear, the deities and ancestral spirits became the major element of their dependence. In every society, there will be certain norms and regulations that should be obeyed by the people. Likewise, in Malamuthan community, specific norms exist, accompanied by the punishments for violations within their religious framework. Right from Maladaiva pooja itself, it is very clearly stated that, a person who has the title 'chemmimuthan' has the sole responsibility of performing the rituals in appropriate manner, without committing any mistakes. He is a person whom the community members respect and has the power to take all the decisions. It is very much obvious that violating any rules, be it decided by the chemmimuthan or the rules that is common for the whole, would result in severe punishments. The role of such an intermediary in any community is very crucial, as they are the ones who are preserving the traditions that are bounded by the laws and rules and also transmitting oral history and knowledge of community. Besides all this, we can see that, every Malamuthan ritual demands four important things. 1) The mandatory participation of every individual, that includes chanting mantras and prayers. 2) The proper annual gatherings and gatherings during the time of calamities and crisis. 3) The offerings that the chemmimuthan and the members are giving to the religious figures 4) The collection of money at the end of each ritual. 5) The feast that is prepared by the community members for the deity and ancestors, and the consumption of the rest by the people gathered in the ritual. Fear, the common emotion that is similar in all these, is the foundation of Malamuthan community. The influence that it exerts is the reason for its stability. It is an obvious question that why Malamuthans are following it throughout in their rituals? The answer would be simple to explain. People adhere to societal rules not only due to the awareness of consequences, but also because they genuinely respect these rules and believe in their fairness and morality. This respect is rooted in a belief that they are just and beneficial for the collective wellbeing. In the community, the practice of collecting and contributing money based on one's financial condition exemplifies social unity and fosters a sense of belonging. It also helps to dismantle the economic barriers within the community, promoting social cohesion and conveys that community's religious and social life is a shared concern, not just the responsibility of a few.

As stated earlier that, the Malamuthans in some settlements have stopped visiting the sacred groves. Two crucial reasons are there, behind that. Firstly, the violation of rules results in destruction of the sacredness of the deity and the place. Second, based on the after effects of that violation and their identity. The fasting, that lasts up to 7 days and the restrictions regarding the consumption of non-vegetarian food, the mere sight of women, suspension of daily life activities, and long walks to the sacred site became impossible tasks to some of the community members. But this change in perception happened only after the external influences encroached into their community. As a result of this, they became more aware and conscious of the identity of their community, which ultimately is a part of the preservation of their culture. Here Durkheim's concept of sacred and profane is quite important. Visiting such sacred places highly demands abstaining the normal life activities. A person who cannot enjoy the normal life and make a visit to these places. As Durkheim puts it;

Religious and secular life require distinct environments, necessitating dedicated spaces for religious practices. This gives rise to the establishment of temples and sanctuaries that are exclusively reserved for sacred activities, thus preserving their sanctity from secular influences. (pp.313)

These practices, being a part of this ritual, is ultimately capable of giving positive capacities to the individuals, which eventually is increasing the religious zest of the community members. Why the majority of members in the community is following this ritual throughout these years is evidence for this. Every person who is committed to these practices are submitting himself before the deity and is gradually getting introduced to the spirit world. And they have an understanding that all these are part of living that religious life in its most intensified manner. When it comes to breaking a taboo, prohibition or any rules, in the case of religion, is believed to result in automatic physical ailments or disorders. These ailments are perceived as a form of divine or supernatural. The people are not only afraid of these effects, but also the punishments that they get through the human involvement. In such a context, the authority and the decisions of chemmimuthan are significant. The fines, blame, shaming, etc are all part of this. All these contributes to the internalization and respect towards the religious values and the person who is guiding them.

Table 2 Shows the supernatural deities and related details

Aspect	Details
Principle deities	Malatheyym, Malathampuratty, Malabhadrakali, Theekkuttichathan, Kilungan, Malavilli, Niringali. Malakuttichathan, Pottantheyyam
Number of Supernatural Deities	18 identified prayikkanmar (deities) with unique traits and each denotes specific colours
Possession term	Pidielkuka- possession due to norm violations and forest encounters
Symptoms	Vomiting blood, self-harming the body, and erratic Behaviour
Identification of possessed deity	Detection of colour test through mantras, rice and turmeric power, and sometimes, the shamanic healer entering the trance state
Healing methods	Offerings, trance dance, & prayer

Apart from the firm belief that they have towards these supernatural entities, their notion that these restrict mobility or induce possession, implies that these spirits are actively involved in their activities enforcing borders and keeping order within their own territory. It's very crucial to state that the community was once following certain taboos and were keeping a strong boundary from other communities in the area. Hence, the belief in the restrictions were acting as a boundary to protect the community from perceived dangers that exist beyond their immediate environment such as people outside, unfamiliar terrain and wild animals as well. Moreover, it can also be seen as protection of the holy sites from invasion, by ensuring their land's sacredness and maintaining authority and supervision. In total, these supernatural entities are safeguarding and their faith as a whole is promoting the social cohesion as well. Their Chemmimuthan's dual role here clearly shows what Durkheim said about a magician. As he puts forth that, a magician, can invoke both official and regular deities. And hence there is no differentiation between magic and religion. And it is quite impossible to separate them and define the one without the other. There is no distinction in how the community perceives deities and entities. Both are venerated and respected equally, and they are of same nature.

Besides all these deities and supernatural forces, they also worship a deity named Ponmoolam. This worship holds great significance, as it is annually celebrated by offering three measures of paddy placed in a plantain leaf, symbolizing a request for fertile soil and good harvest and a protection for crops against adverse situations. This event also involves the engagement of children, who participates in clearing the land, offering prayers, and sharing the responsibilities related to the cultivation process. Before distributing the harvest produce, a feast is first offered to the deity and then to the chemmimuthan, highlighting the community's deep kinship with the land through their reverence and gratitude.

For Malamuthan community, like the other rituals, their ritual dance also has a separate time and manner. Since their ancestor's time, the only ritual dance that they used to perform systematically without fail is their Chavittikali. This is believed to invoke their supreme deity Maladaivam. It was held between the months of March and April. The chavittikali begins in the afternoon and continues till the morning of the following day. Both men and women in the community participate. They form a circle, place a large

stone in the centre, and then gather around it to sing and dance. These songs included subjects like their community, earth, soil, forefathers, and Maladaivam. Objects used for the representation of God was replaced by mortar and pestle later. It is a rule that the simple attires that they wear for this dance should not be used for any other purposes. It should be saved for the next year and permission from the chemmimuthan should also be taken beforehand. As it is celebrated once in a year, all the community members should gather and participate in it. Followed by the ritual, everyone gathers and prepare vegetarian food with toddy as an offering for the ancestors and coconut for Maladaivam as well. Later, it will be distributed equally to all.

In fact, a clear analysis of Malamuthan's religious rituals and festivals, reveals that feasts are a crucial event that is intertwined with their socio-cultural life. There is not a single event, where we cannot see the offerings and food preparation together with the whole community members. Offerings to ponmoolam, toddy to ancestors, Coconut, flattened and puffed rice, banana for Maladaivam, and the vegetarian food at the end of ritual dance is a proof of that. Additionally, during hunting, the animal meat, after cleansing will be offered first to the deity only. And, they refer the leftover food as prasadam, as it is sanctified every time by chemmimuthan. Prior to festivals, community members gather forest products, which are presented to the deity and ancestors before sharing. These acts illustrate the pervasive influence of religious beliefs in their daily lives and they are also linked to the necessity of food for survival. A study on Polynesia, observes the identity of a feast as a social rite, which brings about social contacts rather than serving a simple function of a meal (Bell, 1931). Not only in Malamuthan community, but also in Hinduism, sharing food is a customary practice that fosters kinship among the participants, even if they are not biologically related. In a religious setting, sacrificial meals serve to unite worshippers and deities, enhancing the sense of community through a shared physical experience. It is believed that, this food becomes sacred, once they offer it and the people also become sanctified through it. This is the thought behind the transformation that one attains after the consumption of prasadam by the chemmimuthan or any priest. The whole process itself is very thought provoking and magical as it seems, because the process of a food item from being profane to sacred is through different steps. As the hunted animal is viewed as a pollution, it must undergo a process of cleansing, which is accompanied by the prayers and anointings, and afterwards declare it as sacred. This sacredness extends to those who partake in the meal. Similarly, submitting the vegetarian food in feasts after festivities signifies sacredness and Malamuthan emphasised the necessity of preserving this sacred element in everything. The inclusion of every community member, and consumption without any division in food items reflect their commitment to equality and unity among the them. Through this occasion, the people attempt to instil in themselves the belief that every member in the community is equal and conscious (Gopi, 2021). For them there is no difference between the food and deities. Every single food item was considered as an essence of their faith. Offerings were perceived as submitting themselves fully before their god. A community elder (informant) said that we don't cook for ourselves. Rather we cook for our deities, ancestors and the supernatural forces that we are believing in. And this is the reason behind the participation of every child and every person in all the rituals. We believe that, our deity is our strength.

These perspectives highlight the transformational potential of ritual actions and the symbolic significance of food in religious ceremonies.

One of Durkheim's statements about God is that religious forces are transfigured collective forces, that is emerged from the ideas and feelings that the spectacle of society awakens in people, but not of sensation from the physical world (p. 327). In all the rituals, most particularly, ritual dance, we can see that, a stone, and later mortar and pestle, and even a possessed chemmimuthan are also considered as representing their deities and ancestors. By the passage of time, this representation also changed, which itself is evidence for that, their (forces) actual power do not stems from these objects. The term 'superadded' (p.326), by him implies that, these forces are added on top of these physical objects or symbols. But the idea of such a representation is that it evokes a sense of unity among the individuals assembled during these rituals. One cannot deny the effect of these representations, but the workings of effective effervescence (p. 326) should be emphasised equally as well.

Rituals, be it for different purposes, creates an intense emotional experience among the spectators and performers. In Chavittikali, when people perform together and move their bodies in a homogenous manner, evokes a wide range of emotions, including sadness and vengeance as well as joy. The point is that they are collectively felt. When people witness Chemmimuthan's possession as a shaman, as healer, as mediator of their belief systems, these emotions resonate equally with the audience. And this connection transforms his language and actions into something more powerful, enhancing their energy

and presence. Both attains a commanding and elevated quality, resulting in heightened energy in performers or speakers. The intense energies that he arouses return to him, increasing his dynamism. He is no longer speaking as an individual, but as a group incarnated and personified (p. 212). The real that emerges from the rites and rituals is always a result of collective activity and is not always dependent on individual belief (p. 328). The power experienced by the people is genuine and permeates both its mental and physical selves. It is experienced in the collective 'conscience' and 'consciousness' of humankind.

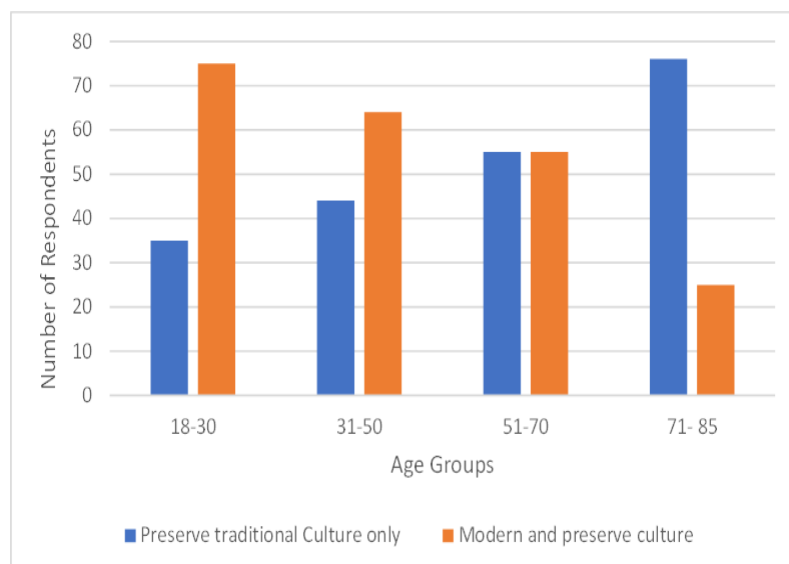
Changes

One thing that distinguishes always in tribes' case is that they were left in solitary confinement. But, like in any society, this solitary confinement was completely destroyed through the encroachment of rulers of Nilambur Kovilakam, the then rulers of Nilambur. They made them and other tribes in the area as their slaves and utilized their potential for hunting, extracting forest products which were known for Malamuthans only. This gradually resulted in educating them in using various tools, and gave them labour works. Eventually, the rulers transformed some of their land into plantations. Through this very act of taking control of their area, the lives and future of Muthans have transformed on a large scale. The foundation of the community was the taboos that they were following since ages. The untouchability was a remarkable feature of the community and changes in terms of, their communication with people outside their community tremendously increased due to the wage labour. Men in the community, started going outside for work and other purposes. The change in habitat due to these rulers, the forest laws and other governmental approaches, restricted them from utilizing their land in their daily lives. Along with this, the perceptions of people also changed and that affected the autonomy and transmission of knowledge, values etc as well. The death of the chiefs of Chemmimuthans motivated people to take decisions on their own. The intensity of inter-caste marriages, domestication of animals, beef consumption (small scale) etc have started occurring occasionally.

Amidst these happenings, the most noteworthy thing is that, ancestral and deity worship, ritual dance, the visits to the sacred groves remained unchanged. Only in settlements like, Madam, and Veetikkunnu, the frequency of these pujas decreased tremendously and sacred grove visits also stopped. But their faith was unwavering and firm. The younger generation in these settlements took initiative to revive traditional practices, even donating their land and money for worship. This effort exemplifies how collective feeling and work can foster social cohesion and its preservation.

But on the other hand, not all the people in the younger generation, at least some of them are hesitant to accept their identity as Malamuthan and their religious beliefs. This is the sole reason for the inter-caste marriages. To be specific, those marriages are with the people belonging to the upper caste. And, as Hinduism is the predominant religion of the state, Malamuthans interactions and work are all with the Hindus. But it is worth noting here that Hinduism is a non-proselytizing religion (Srinivas, 1968): it does not have the idea of conversion. A person may call himself a Hindu even when he or she does not believe in the existence of God; even an atheist can be a Hindu (Eschmann et al., 1978). Most of the Muthans are visiting the Hindu temples nearby because some of the Hindu gods have some kind of connection with the Malamuthan deities. For instance, Thekkenkariyathan is seen as God Ayyappa. Some families even started relying on lighting lamps and breaking coconut to appease these gods. Besides this, the incorporation of Onam (traditional festival of Kerala) into their culture and chanting Hindu mantras for ancestors also can be witnesses in some settlements. The inclination towards this religion is also because they are afraid of how the society perceive them. In all the interviews and group discussions, we witnessed this fear and this resulted in the opinion that they want their children to get educated. In fact, the elders in the community are not against keeping these beliefs, they found it as a way of reinforcing the collective consciousness. The emphasis on education and in some places, this resulted in the alienation of the children towards the traditional values as well.

Graph 1 shows the cultural preferences of participants



The graph, which itself is an evidence that, people want change today, so that they can meet their needs and cope up with the changing situations. One cannot blame for such a drastic change in their legacies. The need and desire that came along with the changed situations is a result of the socio-political and economic environment. The development that came in the form of educating tribal people was simply stuffing their children with something which has no connection with the practical life. The result is that young men and women leave their village or group and settle in cities and forget their roots. Development simply means an increase in self-confidence, thoughts and ideas. By being creative through it, one needs to find ways to attain one's goals instead of simply depending on the mainstream or the government (Devy, 2006). There is no embarrassment in knowing the fact that the younger generation and the generation before them are not efficient enough to speak the language that plays a crucial role in the religious rituals and lives. But, here, it is quite a relief that, most of the informants are going for a mixture of traditional and modern culture.

Despite the changes, the faith in deities and ancestors remain intact and the continuation of all the rituals including the dance is a proof of that. Chemmimuthan, still holds a powerful position in the community. He is still respected and informed about everything in the community. Though the punishments are not existing, the people are ethical and are following moral codes and conducts. As one informant said, 'despite the fact that we have more freedom now to take decisions, we don't trespass nor our behaviour brought any problems to the community members. We are aware of our responsibilities and ethical behaviours'. This is an apt example that the internalization of taboos and rules uplifts the individual's behaviour and shapes the inner world. The belief in their supreme being and the assimilation of societal values together has created a strong foundation for the personal growth. The shamanistic practices and reliance on healing through herbal remedies is still existing in the community, but declined tremendously. But the herbal practices are not well transmitted to the other generations and hence there is a high chance of extinction of knowledge regarding the same would be witnessed.

CONCLUSION

Most often, the traditional intellectualist view of religion, which considers it primarily as a system of beliefs or ideas which is centered on a definite object. As it also has been conceived in different ways, these differences are of little importance only. These perspectives assume beliefs as the essential core of religion, while rituals are merely external expressions of these beliefs which is lacking the intrinsic value. But Durkheim challenged this notion by saying that religion is not only a category consisting of just beliefs but fundamentally a social phenomenon as well that is deeply rooted in the rituals and practices that are collectively presented. It is very evident in the Malamuthan community that despite the changed times and structural changes happened over these years, the religious structure and the components that Durkheim emphasized are staying intact. The spirit of commitment to the worship persists and religion continues to be the major influence in every sphere of their lives. Though the faith of some is largely inclined towards Hinduism, one cannot deny the cultural continuity that persists in almost all the areas of their religious structure. The traditional festivals, rituals, meanings, and beliefs, continue to have an important place among them and also the new generation in the community are quite aware about its significance and uniqueness and its trivial role in maintaining the moral order and social cohesion. Their

conscious effort for its revival paves way for a significant change in this journey of preservation in the near future.

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