

Origin, Myth and Rituals: An Ethnographic Account of Muthu Pattan

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ABSTRACT: Myths and rituals are the primary elements of folk religious practices that play a significant role in traditional bound societies. Myth often narrated through the medium of performing folk art forms in order to invoke the spirit of Gods and Goddesses, and enacted in rituals. This paper intends to document the origin myth and rituals of Muthu Pattan – a male folk deity existing in the southern region of Tamil Nadu. The author has tried to explore how the myth formed the rituals and ritualized in a particular socio-cultural context.

INTRODUCTION

From the Greek *mythos*, the term myth has come to refer to a certain genre or form of stories that share characteristics that make this genre distinctly different from other oral narratives such as legends, epics and tales. William Bascom defined myth as tales believed as true, usually sacred, set in the distant past or other worlds or parts of the world, and with extra-human, inhuman, or heroic characters (Bascom, '65). McDowell ('98) explains 'the characteristics of myths as cosmogony narratives, connected with the foundation or origin of the Universe though often specifically in terms of a particular culture or region. Myths are narratives of a sacred nature, often connected with some ritual, myths are often foundational or key narratives associated with religions. These narratives are believed to be true from within the associated faith system. Myths are narratives formative or reflective of social order or values within a culture. Myths are narratives representative of a particular epistemology or way of understanding nature and organizing thought. Mythic

narratives often involve heroic characters (super humans, or gods) who mediate inherent, troubling dualities, reconcile us to our realities, or establish the patterns for life as we know it. Myths are narratives that are counter-factual in featuring actors and actions that confound the conventions of routine experience (*cf.* McDowell, '98).

Myths are expressed, not only in symbolic words, but also in symbolic acts like rituals and rites, dance and drama etc. Van der Leeuw ('38) describes that myths are narrated and enacted in rituals. The myth often justifies the ritual, while the ritual transmits the myth and provides a way of taking part in it. Some anthropologists have in fact maintained that ritual was the earliest form in all religious traditions, and that myth was developed later to justify and explain ritual. Hyman and Raglan ('33), claim that myth arises from rites, even though the myth may be remembered long after the rite which it sanctioned has disappeared. Generally myths belong to a particular socio-cultural-geographical boundary and the interaction between myth and ritual is complex and diverse, and cannot be reduced to any simple universal pattern except by a selective use of evidence. In some cases myth

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influences ritual, in other cases ritual influences myth, in still others they develop together or separately (Clyde Klukhohn, '42). De Waal Malefijt ('68) maintains that myth and ritual are intimately associated, not because either is derived from the other, but because both are based on particular beliefs about the cosmic order.

Generally historians have studied myths to understand the ancient civilizations, psychologists have studied myths as cognitive entities, elements of worldviews and mental states, literary critics have studied the content of myths, anthropologists and folklorists have studied myth as a genre that addresses the supernatural, spiritual and magical and try to understand the functions of myth in a particular socio-cultural context. With this background, this paper intends to document the myth of Muthu Pattan and tried to understand the relationship between myth and rituals and how myth formed rituals and ritualized in a particular socio-cultural context. Empirical data have been documented through fieldwork in the natural- socio-cultural context of ritual performance, by following the triangulation research methodology i.e. observation, interaction and audio visual documentation.

MUTHU PATTAN CULT

Muthu Pattan – a male folk deity is worshipped in the Tirunelveli region of Tamil Nadu, South India. A temple dedicated to Muthu Pattan is situated in a serene and secluded atmosphere surrounded by Mundanthurai wildlife sanctuary on the banks of river Tamirabarani at the foot hills of Western Ghats, between Papanasam and Karaiyar water reservoir. It is believed by the people of this region that Sage¹ *Agasthiar* performed his meditation on this place and also the mythical events of Muthu Pattan took place in this place. This hill is also known as *Pothigai* or *Agasthiar malai*. This is one of an important folk pilgrimage centre of this region where a cluster of temples of folk gods and goddesses are situated. The deities worshipped here are Iyannar, Pathalakandi, Piramarakshashi, Mahalingam, Thalavai Madasamy, Sudalai, Muthu Pattan, Pommakka, Thimmakka, Irulappan, Irulaie, Kasamadan, Kasamadathi, Variaver, Manthramoorthy, Pilamarathadi Amman, Thoosi Madasamy, Muni, Vannar Madasamy, Karadi

Madasamy and Sangili Bhuthathar. Prominent among them is the Sorimuthian Kovil, an old temple patronized by the Singampatti Palayam of the Pandian dynasty. It has been traditionally managed by the erstwhile Zamin of Singampatti and the temple trustees. Apart from Muthu Pattan and his wives Pommakka and Thimmakka, all the other deities are situated under one roof. Since the deity Iyannar is considered as a chief among them, the entire complex is generally known as Sorimuthu Iyannar temple. The temple of Muthupattan is secluded within the passage of a branch from the main river. The deity Muthu Pattan is also locally known as Pattavarayan or Pattan.



Figure 1: Muthu Pattan-a male folk deity

Several versions of origin myths and narratives are available in connection to the above mentioned deities. The characteristics common to many folk deities in this region are that they have “*pey*,” i.e., “demon” or “spirit,” as their general name, that they delight in the sacrifice of animals and human blood, and that they go around the world causing trouble. If not pleased, they inflict diseases on men and cattle; they attack lonely women, especially if they are with child; night and midday are the worst times and the blackest days are Tuesday and Friday. Some of the general characteristics of folk religion in Tamil Nadu are as follows: The folk gods and goddesses are worshipped within a particular socio-cultural boundary; non-Brahmins serves as priests; fear of destruction dominates the faith; worship varies from place to place; several versions of origin myths of the deities are available; generally folk deities appear in clusters; rituals are traditionally transmitted and festivals are related to the vernacular calendar; several

forms of temples are constructed and no common or written rules are followed for their construction; several temples are erected at various places by taking “sacred soil” from another temple; mythological events are reflected in the religious practices; blood sacrifice, divination, spirit possession, healing, etc. are generally practiced; performing folk arts/music function as a medium to invoke the spirit of the gods and goddesses; annual festivals are related to agriculture, healing, fertility and prosperity. In traditional societies, health, wealth, fertility and prosperity are generally related to supernatural powers. Rituals are performed to please the ferocious gods and goddesses in order to protect oneself from their anger and to acquire their blessings in life.

To understand the origin, history, rituals and relationship between all these deities situated in Sorimuthu Iyannar sacred complex require intensive field study. This paper, to begin with, intends to study and document the myth and rituals associated with Muthu Pattan.

Origin Myth of Muthu Pattan

Origin myths explain the origin and nature of the particular gods and goddesses. These myths are orally transmitted from one generation to another, and also performed through various folk art forms in order to disseminate the supernatural power and nature of deities and to invoke the spirit of the deity during the religious practices. ²*Villu paatu* is an important performing folk art form that is performed in most of the folk religious celebrations in Tirunelveli region of Tamil Nadu. It is a traditional medium for transmitting the nature and characteristics of the folk gods and goddesses from one generation to another. A team consisting of a minimum of five members performs *Villu paatu*, and the devotees who have gathered in the temple carefully follow the narration of the story performed through this performance. The lead singer sings and narrates various episodes of the origin myth that explains the life and history of the respective deity in order to invoke its spirit. The music, rhythm, narration and text of *Villu paatu* function as a medium for creating a state of trance among the devotees.

The following myth which explaining the origin and history of Muthu Pattan is documented



Figure 2: Villu Paatu- Bow performance

during the fieldwork, transcribed and translated into English.

“Once upon a time, Ola Nambi Pattar and his wife Uruku Mani Achiar lived in Kumbakonam along with their seven sons. Out of the seven sons, six got married and the youngest son Arya Muthu Pattan remained unmarried. The six married sons were engaged in trade and had ships in the northern sea. One day all the ships sank due to severe storm and they lost all the means of livelihood and decided to go to other places for their trade. Accordingly they left Arya Muthu Pattan with their parents to look after them, and went to a place called Papanasam.

There, Subbu Kutti Iyer was rearing a calf and one day when he wanted to go the temple, he asked his wife Sundar Achi for a place where he can leave the calf safely. She told him to tie it near the well in their plantain farm. He did accordingly and both of them went to the temple. After some time, the cow grew thirsty and it looked into the well. It tried to drink the water and accidentally fell into the well!

On their return from the temple, the couple found the cow dead. They cremated the corpse. After few days, Subbu Kutti Iyer told his wife that the death of the cow was a serious curse and in order to get rid of the curse he must go to Kashi. And he went accordingly. During that time, Sundar Achi went to the river along with five or six women. On their return, one woman said that they require a place where no male was present to carry out the ³‘Arasar Viratham’. Sundar Achi said that her husband went to Kashi and they can perform the ritual in her home. They agreed and went to Iyer’s house, performed all the rites including rituals of ⁴maa kaapu and manja kaapu etc. They observed fast at night and left for their homes early morning!

The two idols made of maa kaapu and manja kaapu were left at Iyer's house. Iyer's wife thought that others would ridicule if they see the idols and therefore she swallowed the idols. Consequently she was pregnant! She worried and cried when she realized her pregnancy during the absence of her husband!

The neighbor consoled her saying that she would explain the matter to her husband. Even after ten months Subbu Kutti Iyer did not return home. In the tenth month she gave birth to two female children. Sundar Achi was afraid of her husband and asked a mid wife to throw the children in a forest. The mid wife laid the children in a solitary place and surprisingly the animals and birds in the forest took care of the children!

In those days, Valpahadai and his wife Poolu Pillai lived in Alampati village. They were descendants of a royal family and had no children. One day the wife took permission from her husband and went to the forest to fetch bark of ⁵Avaram plant in order to make footwear. There, she heard the cries of those children and also saw the wild animals surrounding them. When the animals saw her they gave place for her to come near the children. She lifted up the children eagerly and at that time her husband also arrived there. They invited all their relatives and named the children as Pommaka and Thimmaka! The children grew up properly and after a few years, both the children carried food for Val Pahadai to the market where cows were being sold.

In the mean time, Arya Muthu Pattan was searching for his brothers. While searching, he went to a forest to pluck some flowers in order to worship Lingam. In that forest, a sage named Poovala Sangili was in a sound sleep. The movements of Pattan disturbed him and he cursed and said

You dared to disturb my sleep
Within eight days you will be dead!

After hearing the curse, Pattan performed a pooja in a river. While he was doing so, he found a long hair twisting on his leg. He realized that it was from the girl who was bathing on the upper side of the river. Pattan was attracted by the beauty of the hair and he wanted to see the damsel and went to see her. She was one among the two who was carrying meals to Valpahadai. Pattan followed her.

The girl noticed that and complained to Valpahadai. Immediately Valpahadai caught hold of a dagger and went in search of the Muthu Pattan. But the moment he saw Muthu Pattan, he was attracted by his beauty. Patan told Valpahadai that he wants to marry his daughter.

Valpahadai replied

Oh! Nainar! We eat crab and crane
We eat pork and beef

Moreover, show me a pair of footwear made by yourself, then you can talk of wedding. Then Pattan prepared a pair of foot wear and handed over to him. Valpahadai was much impressed by the ability of Pattan in making foot wear. Then Valpahadai accepted his wish and arranged ⁶Pandal to be made throughout the city and solemnized their wedding.

In those days, Oothu Malai experienced severe drought. There were thousand and one thieves at Oothu Malai. The thieves enquired at the temple of Mundan, where to set out for stealing. The reply was

The wedding of Valpahadai is scheduled
You go to the market and you will find
thousand cows
You can steal them and live.

Accordingly, the thieves came and drove away the cows. That news was conveyed to Valpahadai. Immediately Valpahadai took his dagger and bow and got ready for the chase. But Muthu Pattan told his uncle to take rest and he will alone chase them. Accordingly he took a ⁷vallayam, chased and killed all the thieves.

After killing them, he was drinking water in the river. At that time a handicapped man struck him from behind. Pommakka and Thimmaka went in search of Pattan carrying meat in a pot and arrack in a bottle. They saw the thousand dead men. They checked each one. Finally, they saw Pattan and poured milk in his mouth. He died at that moment!

Then they collected the dry wood and laid Pattan on it and lit the fire. Both the women got in to the flame and killed themselves. On seeing that, Parvathi the Hindu Goddess took water in a golden vessel and poured upon them in order to raise them to life.

They said

If the dead are raised to life again,
The earth will not tolerate.
Grant us some boons and take away our lives.

Their requests were

Eight days festivals to be celebrated for them
All demons should be drive away at our staff
Our holy ash should heal all diseases.

Their requests were granted and they sailed in to the other world!

The dead thieves requested Parvathi that

Dogs and eagles will eat our corpses.
Give us a safe place.

Parvathi replied to them that

Each one of you bring a load of firewood
Spread it upon this rock and set fire to it
When it is aflame, throw yourselves in to it.

They did accordingly and became ash". (Iyyammal, Age 101, Female)

AADIAMMAWASYA

An Annual Worshipping Festival

An annual festival of worshipping Muthu Pattan is celebrated during the day of ⁸ *Ammawasya* in the Tamil month of *Aadi* (between July and August). The day of *Ammawasya* is considered as auspicious by Hindus and holds a very important place in folk religious practices of this region. People remember their ancestors, pay tributes to their ancestral spirits on this day. The annual festival is locally known as *thiruvizha*. This annual festival is celebrated not only in Muthu Pattan temple but also in the entire sacred complex which is known as Sorimuthu Iyannar temple. During the annual festival, the temple attracts an estimated two lakh visitors. The festival spreads over three days with preparations for it starting almost a month earlier. Notwithstanding the religious rituals and sentiments, the festival also acts as a major socio-cultural fiesta for the people from the surrounding areas. The festival's huge congregation also offers an opportune moment for the erstwhile Zamindar, popularly known as the Raja (King) of Singampatti, to conduct a customary durbar during the festival with high voltage traditional dances and martial arts being performed in his honor. The core rituals that are performed during the annual festival are described below.

The very step of this *thiruvizha* is *Kaal Naatithal* (posting a stem) that signifies the inauguration of the festival. Generally the *kaal naatuthal* ritual takes place eight days before *Ammawasya* in Muthupattan temple. The devotees worship the deity and make a small pit on the right side of the temple and put paddy and some other grains in the pit. Then they take a lengthy stem of a tree, apply turmeric powder, vermilion, and sandal paste and attach flower garland to the stem, and the important persons associated with the temple and the temple administrators join together and post the stem on the pit. This ritual is known as *kaal naatuthal*. It signifies that the *Kodai* has been inaugurated. From the day of *Kaal naatuthal*,

komarathadigal — who are traditionally engaged in various ritual activities in the celebration, give special attention in order to purify them. They abstain from meat, have a bath twice a day, and observe conjugal continence. Every day they worship the deity and apply sacred ash to their forehead and chest in order to purify them.

Lakhs of devotees from various parts of the State reach the temple one or two days before the day of *Ammawasya*. They clean up the hill areas surrounding the temple and put up temporary shelters with the help of gunny bags, tarpaulin etc., and stay there till the end of the festival. Generally devotees worship all the deities situated in the sacred complex. However they perform vows and rituals only to their specific family deity which is locally known as *kula deviam*. Sori Muthu Iyannar, Sangili Boothathar and Muthu Pattan are the main *kula deviam* in this sacred complex and all the core rituals in these temples take place on the day of *Ammawasya*. During the festival, the entire sacred complex is illuminated and all the deities are decorated with new clothes and garlands and celebrated with high festivity.

As a vow, devotees who worship Muthu Pattan as their *kuladeivam* bring *vallayam* from their homes and offer it to the temple during the festival. *Vallayam* is considered as a weapon of Muthu Pattan and therefore it has an important role in the ritual practices. *Vallayam* is a circular wooden rod generally 6 or 7 feet long with a diameter of 3 or 4 inches. A spear like weapon made of iron or brass or silver is fitted at the one end of the rod and decorated with bells. The carpenter who makes the *vallayam* observes fast and abstinence. He selects suitable wood, prepares the *vallayam* and applies sandal paste and saffron on it. He keeps it in a clean place and performs *puja*. Few days before the day of *Ammawasya*, the devotees wear a red or yellow cloth on the *vallayam*, perform *puja* (prayer) and carry it to the temple accompanied by the folk music and dance and offered to the temple. Apart from these votive offerings of *vallayam* made by the devotees, there is a main *vallayam* which is owned by the temple, and plays a significant role in rituals like divination and fire walk.

The ritual of the fire walk is performed in the night of *Aadi ammawasya*. The vernacular term for fire walk is *theemithi* or *Pookuzhi*. Generally tamarind



Figure 3: *Vallayam*- A sacred weapon

woods are used to create embers to perform the ritual. Tons of fire woods are arranged on the rocks near to Muthu Pattan temple where *pujas* are performed, and the fire is set with camphor on the firewood. It takes several hours for the firewood to be burned. When the firewood is aflame, spirit-possessed men and the devotees gather around the embers. Music is performed vehemently. The shaman gives sacred ash to the spirit-possessed men and women who are ready to walk on the embers. Then the chief *komarathadi* holds *vallayam* on his hand and walk on the embers with bare feet followed by other spirit-possessed men and women. The devotees believe that the fire embers will not burn them if they regularly worship and observe their fast properly. The fire-walk generally begins in the late night and ends at early morning.

Muthu Pattan temple is very popular for *Kuri solluthal* (divination) and *pey virathuthal*. This is performed by Komarathadigal around the Muthu Pattan temple during the annual festival. Devotees who come to the Muthu Pattan temple worship the *Komarathadi* and express their problems related to

health and wealth, and request for remedies. Accordingly, *Komarathadi* prays and lift a pair of heavy iron chains on their hands, swing and beat on their chest with the iron chains and then hold the *vallayam* on their hand and perform divination. It is believed that they will get possessed by the deity by beating on their chest with iron chains.



Figure 4 : *Kuri solluthal* _ Divination

During divination, the *komarathadi* hears the problems of the devotees and give remedies. He applies holy ash on the foreheads of devotees and asks the devotees to offer 101,501 or 1,001 rupees to the temple as well as a milk pot, or to sacrifice animals etc. to the deity in order to be blessed with prosperity. Sometimes the *komarathadi* also instructs the devotees to construct a temple for Muthu Pattan in his village in order to rid themselves of their problems. The devotee has to take the spirit from the existing Muthu Pattan temple in order to erect a new temple in his village. The devotee keeps a clay pot in front of the deity, worships him and takes some soil from the ground nearby the temple. He keeps the soil inside the pot, covers it with a cloth and hands it over to *komarathadigal*. He prays and gives it back to the devotee. The devotee brings the clay pot to his village. He identifies a suitable place, makes a small pit, and places a living fowl and some eggs into the pit. He takes the clay pot and constructs a pedestal or statue on it. This method of erecting a temple is locally known as¹⁰ Offering of footwear is an important and unique ritual in Muthu Pattan worship. Devotees who suffered with chronic illness especially diseases related to legs offer old footwear to the temple. These votive offerings of footwear are hanged in front of

the deity. Several shops nearby the temple sell old footwear to the devotee. Sometimes devotees bring footwear from their homes also. It is believed that the deity Muthu Pattan wear these footwear during night.



Figure 5: Offering of footwear

On the next day of *Aadi ammawasya*, devotees sacrifice lambs to Muthu Pattan in order to please him and protect them from all the problems. The nurtured lambs, reared with special care and brought from their house are purified with water. They are made to wear garland around their necks, and sacred ash and vermilion are applied on their foreheads and brought to the temple for sacrifice. Before sacrificing they sprinkle some water on the animals' heads and wait for few seconds. If the animal nods its head they believe that the deity give permission for sacrificing. If it does not, then they wait for some more time and sprinkle some more water until it nodes. Then they lay the animal on the rocks nearby the temple and sacrifices it. The sacrificed meat is cooked and offered



Figure 6: Animal Sacrifice

to the deity along with rice and later consumed by the devotees during the festival. It is a traditional rule that the sacrificed meat should not be taken back from the temple to their homes because it is believed that the deity will go along with that sacrificed meat and cause them troubles.

As a fulfillment of vow, devotees perform offering of *Pongal* to Muthu Pattan. Generally women folk perform this. They make a temporary stove made of stones on the rocks surrounding the temple and use the new pots made of clay or brass for cooking *Pongal*. *Pongal* is made of fine quality of raw rice, coconut and jaggary. *Pongal* refers to a kind of food and also the 'overflow' while cooking. While cooking *Pongal*, sooner the overflow signifies more happiness in the life of devotees.

CONCLUSION

This paper is an attempt to understand and document the myth and rituals associated with Muthu Pattan cult. It is important to note that the temple of Muthu Pattan is not an independent one but interrelated with the remaining temples situated in that sacred complex. Festival for all the deities are celebrated during the same time and devotees visiting that temple generally worship all the deities and perform rituals. Since it is a cluster of folk Gods and Goddesses, it is essential to study and document the narratives and rituals associated with all the deities in order to understand the socio cultural history, origin and relationship between all the deities which requires in depth field work and research. Thus this paper documented the myth and rituals associated with Muthu Pattan that clearly reflects how myth is used to explain the rituals and how rituals enacted mythical explanations.

The mythical episode of making footwear by Muthu Pattan is the basis for the ritual of offering footwear by the devotees during the festival; the episode of Muthu Pattan chasing the thieves with *Vallayam* clearly explains why *vallayam* is considered as sacred and therefore, as a vow, devotees offer *vallayam* during the annual celebration, and it is used by the *komarathadigal* at the time of divination and fire-walking rituals. The ritual of fire-walk is also originated from the myth of Muthu Pattan. The myth says that Pommakka and Thimmakka lit the fire laid

Pattan on it and got into the flame and killed themselves which is symbolically enacted in the ritual of fire walk. The annual celebration, divination and healing of Muthu Pattan are all celebrated according to the boon given by Parvathi after the death of Muthu

Pattan that clearly explains that myths are expressed, not only in words, but also in symbolic acts like rituals. It is the myth that justifies the ritual and the ritual transmits the myth and provides a way of taking part in it.

Informants interviewed

Name	Sex	Age	Occupation	Place
Subramani	Male	58	Agricultural labour	Papanasam
Sankaran	Male	60	Agricultural labour	Karayar
Somasundaram	Male	59	Traditional healer	Mylar
<i>Storyteller</i>				
Iyyammal	Female	101	Agricultural labour	Thiruvekatanathapuram

NOTES

1. It is believed that Lord Shiva sent sage Agasthiar to mount Pothigai in order to create the Tamil language.
2. Bow song- one of an important folk art form in Tirunelveli region.
3. A kind of fasting performed by women alone.
4. *Maakaapu* is nothing but a ball made out of fine flour of rice and jaggery. On the top of that ball, a small gash is made and ghee or oil is poured in. A mantle made of cloth is kept and lit.
5. *Cassia auriculata*.
6. Decoration and shelter made of colorful cloths flowers.
7. Sacred weapon made of a circular wooden rod generally 6 or 7 feet long with a diameter of 3 or 4 inches. A spear like weapon made of iron or brass or silver is fitted at the one end of the rod.
8. New moon day.

9. *Komarathadigal* is the vernacular term for spirit-possessed men, and *komarathadi* is its singular form.
10. Literal meaning of *pidimuneduthal* is to take a handful of soil.

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