

The cultural construction and healing practices of the Paniya Tribe in Kerala, India

SUDHEESH M. VINCENT

Research Scholar

Kannur University, Kunnur (Kerala) India

ABSTRACT

The culture of every tribe denotes its collective behaviour, set of beliefs, values and the way of doing things. One of the most quoted definitions of culture given by Edward Burnett Tylor (1871/2010) is “Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is 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). Such a cultural complex whole of a tribe may include its own beliefs about illnesses and their healing and the adoption of divergent methods to cure cultural wounds inflicted upon them. This paper analyses the cultural construction of the cultural group of the Paniya Tribe living mainly in the hills of Wayanad in Kerala, India. The paper also attempts to demonstrate the healing practices of this community in facing cultural issues.

Key Words : Cultural construction, Paniya tribe, Caste, Race, Cultural wounds, Healing practices

INTRODUCTION

The Paniya community in Wayanad is an indigenous group of tribals who reside mainly in forest lands. Traditionally the Paniyas were hunter-gatherers and nomads who move from one forest to another in search of food. But in the later phases of their history the tribe was given the status of the labour caste. The word Paniya means worker and they are experts in agricultural fields who became bonded laborers or slaves and suffered oppression from the upper class (Paul *et al.*, 2017). The community has a peculiar power structure in which the Tribe is ruled by a chief known as *Muppan* who is the oldest and most respected member of the tribe. The moral code is enforced by the chief of the Tribe. The Tribe is included in the Hindu religion though differences are present in their worship and religious practices compared to the Hindu tradition. They have formed a distinct method of worship and many of the Hindu Gods are not worshiped or recognized by this community. They worship totem generally in the form of a rock, or a tree considered sacred.

The Tribe has a unique culture and engages in a number of rituals associated with life cycle of man. A special ritual known as *Valaikappu* is performed when a woman is pregnant in which she receives blessings from the elders and the child birth is celebrated with close kin and relatives. Puberty rites are also observed in the tribe which includes keeping the girl in seclusion for seven days when she attains puberty and her purification after this period (Mohanty, 2004). Marriages in the Paniya culture are from within their community and monogamy is usually practiced except in

rare circumstances. Divorce is allowed in the culture with mutual consent and widows are allowed to marry. There are also specific rituals associated with death and funeral.

The Cultural construction of the Paniya Tribe :

The culture of Paniya tribe is regarded as a part of the Dravidian culture which was prevalent in India before the invasion of the Aryans. The physical features of the Tribe such as black skin colour, broad nose and thick lips, with curly hair are similar to some of the indigenous populations in different parts of the globe. These physical features of the Tribe and their habit of living inside the forests by segregating themselves from other cultures and the development of a diverse culture resulted in the attribution of the status of a distinct race to the Tribe in the socio-cultural context of Kerala. Since the classification of race with respect to the physical features has no basis in the biological classification of human being, it can be stated that the concept of race is culturally constructed (Kottak, 2015). Kottak supports his argument by pointing to the arbitrary nature of cultural constructions by which different cultures perceive the notion of human race differently. In the cultural context of the Paniya Tribe, because of the culturally constructed ascription of racial status by the dominant cultures around them, they suffered alienation and social exclusion throughout their cultural history. Even though it is believed that the cultural constructions are ‘dynamic and change over time and through space’ (Kottak, 2015) much difference in the outlook of modern society towards the Tribe is not visible and still they are looked down as ‘aborigines’ without an acceptable culture.

The members of the Paniya Tribe prefer to live in small huts inside forests isolating themselves from the main stream. They live close to the Nature and believe that everything for their subsistence will be provided by the Nature. When the modern society prefers to redesign its surroundings and is continually altering its environment, the Paniya culture, on the contrary adapts themselves to their surroundings or to the Nature itself. An analysis of the habitat and living pattern of this tribal community points to the theory of ‘Cultural Construction of Nature’ which is comprehensively described by Scott Atran and Douglas Medin (2008) in their book *The Native Mind and the Cultural Construction of Nature*. This theory examines how different cultures perceive the natural world and the relationship between this perception of various cultures and their actions on the nature. Since the life of the Paniya Tribe is associated with elements of nature their culture is also constructed in such a way that it worships forces of Nature, develops an emotional attachment towards it and is concerned highly about the protection of Nature, which itself is their home, unlike many of the urban counterparts. This understanding of the cultural construction within the frame of their relationship with nature has important implications in formulating social policies for the welfare of this community as well as environmental policies of the State because any such measures should be based on their values and should not degrade their environment.

In his paper on the evolutionary theory of conflict over the construction of culture, Kevin MacDonald (2009) speaks about the conflict of interest over cultural construction which has different dimensions and includes a broad range of human conflicts of interest such as Marxian idea of class conflict between ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ and conflict of interest between ethnic groups. The probability of conflict of interest between ethnic groups is of special interest in the discussion of the cultural construction of Paniya tribes because the culture of this community is vastly influenced by the interests of the dominant cultures around them. The conflict of interest between ethnic groups over cultural construction may be manifested in two different ways. There are numerous examples in history where one culture attempts to impose its culture with its norms and values upon another and

force them to integrate with the new culture. The conflict of interest between ethnic groups may also result in the exploitation of one culture by another dominant culture and the weaker culture will become subordinated. Instead of amalgamation, the culture will remain intact but without freedom and rights under the oppression of the dominant culture. The Paniya culture experienced both these conflicts in different phases of its cultural history.

The Paniya tribe was labeled as the lowest of the lower castes in the Caste System which was prevalent in India. The members of the tribe were exploited for centuries by the upper caste and were treated as bonded labourers and even as slaves. In India, the formulation and implementation of Caste System dates back to the Aryan Invasion and rules were set by the dominant castes who positioned themselves at the upper rungs of the social ladder. Thus a culture of silence was imposed upon the Paniya Tribe by the oppression from upper caste culture. The 'culture of silence' as explained by Paulo Freire (2000) is the state of the oppressed culture in which their voice is not heard by the dominant or director culture. Instead they merely reflect the voices of the oppressors or follow the words prescribed by the dominant which will eventually lead to the effective silencing of that particular culture. As the result of a long cultural oppression by the caste society, the Paniya culture suffered an internalization of oppression which undermined their self-esteem and further increased their alienation from the main stream. But the socio-political changes ushered in India during last century exerted significant influences on the Tribal Culture of Paniyas. The active involvement of the Government of Kerala and the not for profit sector invoked a cultural emancipation of the Paniya Tribe. But often the State machinery ignores the interest of this Culture and development schemes often fail to render a culturally sensitive practice. The policies and programmes often focus on bringing the Tribes into the society instead of adopting measures for their betterment while allowing them to remain in the forest. Integration into the culture of outside world is a main issue faced by the Tribe today though many members could successfully assimilate to the cultures outside their habitat.

The theory of cultural construction of gender is equally important in the discussion of the culture of the Paniya Tribe. The fact that Gender is culturally constructed can be justified from the differences in the determination of gender roles in different cultures. In the case of Paniya culture specific duties and responsibilities are ascribed to men and women separately. Men usually perform hunting and fishing, while women usually perform house hold tasks and caring of children. In Paniya community women also have a major role in foraging. When compared to other tribes in Wayanad, the Paniya women enjoy higher status in community and they are known for their skills in the management of paddy fields and water channels and have special talents in dealing with disturbed habitats. The traditional knowledge about the edible variety of food collected from the forest is kept by the women in the Paniya culture and they pass this wisdom to next generation (Narayanan *et al.*, 2004). There are specific rituals associated with womanhood in the Paniya culture. During menses or menarche the women used to stay in a tent specially made for their stay. During that period the women were not allowed to cook or wash or visit any places considered sacred and holy. Analysis of the gender in the Paniya tribe shows that women have a secondary position than men in that community.

The cultural construction of narrative practices in a tribal community is another prominent feature that shapes the culture and preserves its elements. Through narrative the Paniya tribe tries to give meaning to their experiences. In the words of Garro and Mattingly (2000), "in both telling and interpreting experiences, narrative mediates between an inner world of thought-feeling and an outer world of observable actions and states of affairs" (p. 1). The Paniya's mystical experiences

about the Nature and that of God are well narrated through stories and riddles circulated among them. These stories, songs and dance forms are some of the central themes in the Paniya culture. A great deal of their cultural wisdom, understanding and knowledge are conveyed to generations through the narrative. A study on the oral tradition of the Paniya culture shows that they are good in forming riddles about things around them as well as about more abstract ideas like God (Kapp, 1987). This tradition not only provides a chance to make their leisure time enjoyable but also helps to kindle their traditional wisdom which would become an indispensable part of their folklore. Again, the narrative as culturally constructed often reflect the power relations within a community (Garro and Mattingly, 2000). The narrative process is often carried out by the elders in the community and the younger generation has to take part in it silently.

Cultural construction of illnesses and healing can also be seen in the culture of Paniya Tribe. Their approach to illness and ways of treatment are different from that of modern medicine. The usual cultural conception of disease held by the Tribe is that it is associated with certain super natural elements and hence they believe that prayers and performance of specific rituals are necessary along with the treatment of the disease. The Tribe believes that in order to cure certain illnesses such as mental illness they have to rely on black magic. Small pox, once a serious threat to the lives of these people was considered as a curse from Goddess *Kali* (a powerful goddess of destruction) and they relied on prayers offered to her in the treatment of the disease. Infertility is also considered as a curse from God and parents without children are looked down by other members of the Tribe. The Tribe is known for the treatment of some diseases using medicines extracted from wild plants especially in the treatment of snake bites. But the Paniya culture has a particular belief about healing of illnesses that if they ever share the knowledge about their healing practices using traditional medicines those medicines will no longer be effective and will lose their healing power. This reluctance to share traditional practice of healing is an ethical issue in the efforts of the state in preserving their knowledge.

Healing Practices of the Paniya Cultural Community :

Every culture adopts certain healing practices to confront with the cultural issues they face and so is the tribal culture of the Paniya. Centuries of oppressions and human rights violations have inflicted deep cultural wounds in the psyche of the community and they remained in a closed consciousness for long. But today the culture is in a liberating phase and one of the main reasons for their empowerment is the salient feature of being a collective identity rather than leading an individualistic pattern of life. Many of the indigenous population adopt this type of healing practice with shared understanding of their grievances and shared responsibility to move on irrespective of the hardships they face. Another prominent healing practice of the Paniya community is the interactive relationship within community and to the ancestors. In the opinion of Nieves Gomez (2007, para. 2), a community psychologist in Guatemala, "Cultural practices relating to ancestors are particularly important because of the reciprocity existing between living and dead persons". The rituals performed by the members of the tribe to strengthen their relationship with the ancestors and to seek the blessings from them are part of their healing practice to address the cultural wounds caused by external forces.

The special relationship of the Tribe with Nature also constitutes their healing practices. Their devotion to Mother Earth and the particular rituals performed in each season to satisfy the elements of the Universe, prayers and apologizing before utilizing the natural resources are all practices to heal hidden wounds in their spiritual and psychological realms. Religious beliefs which are

interconnected with the devotion to the Nature are also helpful in healing of cultural wounds. Art is considered as a tool for the healing purpose as well as a means of deriving aesthetic pleasure. The Paniya Tribe has in its cultural heritage distinctive forms of dance and tribal songs. A particular form of tribal dance is performed in many rituals such as marriage ceremony. The rhythmic steps and ferocious body movements of the dance which is performed as a group accompanied by music with the help of an instrument called *thudi* made of animal skin give them feeling of energy and vitality.

Death of a member in the community especially that of an elder and respected person leaves some void in the high culture community of the Paniyas and they need to adopt some healing practices to grieve the loss. The rituals associated with funeral and the prayers offered for the dead are some of the efforts of the tribe to remedy this cultural issue. When speaking about the funeral rites of Paniya Tribes Sumant Badami (n.d., para.1) says, “cultural practices embedded in their funeral rites help them to gain a sense of agency and empowerment”. During the burial, a particular member of the Tribe called *chemmi* who is a sacred specialist for death rites performs rituals like walking around the grave three times and breaking a pot filled with milk and cow dung and prays to the ancestors on behalf of the mourners. The ritual named *pula* (pollution) is observed and as part of it the relatives of the deceased pray and seek protection from the ancestors for the next seven days without consuming non-vegetarian food and liquor. After seven days (the period of time culturally set to mourn the death) the members of the Tribe observe the *pula* ceremony (Mohanty, 2004).

In its literal connotation, the term ‘healing practices’ of a community may be explained as the attitudes and beliefs held by the community about health and healing of illnesses. Different cultures perceive illness differently which would reflect in the differences of healing practices adopted by that culture. A specific example for this concept of cultural differences in the approach towards health and healing practice is the inclination of urban cultures towards modern medicines and the preferences of natural healers to biomedicinal practices and complete renunciation of allopathic medicines by the latter group. The Paniya Tribe perceives health with inter-linked physical and spiritual components and the treatment of illnesses involves natural medicines extracted from plants and appropriate rituals that seek blessings from the ancestors. The women in the community possess astonishing knowledge about different types of wild food plants and medicines and are adept in evaluating their applications. The transmission of this knowledge to the next generation is carried out through a mechanism of mother-child nexus (Garcia, 2006). But today erosion in this traditional healing practice can be seen in the Paniya Tribe because fewer children are collecting wild plants now due to the stigma of low status and poverty associated with collection of wild plants and herbs.

Conclusion :

From the above deliberations it can be concluded that the Tribes of Paniya have a distinct, historically constructed culture with peculiar rituals and practices. An analysis of the cultural construction of different ideologies existing in this cultural group leads to a thorough understanding of its typical features and ideals which would assist a social practitioner to deal with them using strategies of trans-cultural social practice. Such an analysis will also help the social practitioners to deal with the problems faced by the Tribal communities like the Paniya in the light of a new understanding of their culture and also to approach various issues with a culturally sensitive attitude. Through such an approach the popular stereotypic notion about the tribes that they are downtrodden people who lack the capacity to awake and liberate their consciousness will be transformed to a

more creative understanding about the cultural peculiarities of tribal population. The tribal culture should not be neglected by the authorities and their grievances should not go unheard. A novel insight that they also form an indispensable part of our community with equal rights to develop and participate should be integrated into the consciousness of the society.

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