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INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE SILPIS OF MALABAR AND THE SCIENCE OF SCULPTURE: SOME ANTHROPOLOGICAL INSIGHTS

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ABSTRACT

The study primarily focuses on the Silpis, a stone-craft group that is a part of the Viswakarma or Kammala community and is referred to locally as Kakkotty's. They have a long history of stone carving, and the vastness of their work focuses on creating sculptures for temples. They continue to use their traditional measurements and science while designing sculptures. As per Gennep (1960), a rite of passage is observed as a transition rite to mark the passing of a person from one state to another especially during the course of his life. Gennep explains the rite of passage in terms of the life course of human beings. But the present study examines that the rite of passage does not only happen in the case of humans, but also, in the case of a stone, passage from a stone to a deity.

KEYWORDS: Intangible Cultural Heritage, Craft community, Rite of passage.

1. INTRODUCTION

Stone craft tradition is one of the India's richest traditions, strongly tied with art and architecture, and dates back to the Indus Valley civilization. India has an intricate tradition of crafting stone sculptures. Every Indian traditional art form possesses an aesthetic sensibility. One of the earliest forms of visual art is stone art, which is highly pertinent to anthropological research. India's centuries-old stone-art pattern has a unique origin story. There are several intricate ways that art and crafts have been used in anthropological studies. The study of religion has benefited greatly from the symbolic and expressive aspects of iconography and ceremonies. Recent developments in theories of embodiment and anthropology of the senses have also drawn attention to things and practices that fall within the larger category of art. These kinds of investigations are crucial parts of the anthropology of art and craft, and deal with aspects of human life—aesthetics, symbolism and representation, and the senses, which have a broader application, but are of central relevance to the analysis of art. 'Silpa was a complex concept constituted of many aspects like art, craft, labour, ingenuity, rite and ritual as well as form and creation. Therefore silpi, more than a mere technical performer, becomes an agent of magical and divine powers' (Kramrisch in Miller, 1983:59–60).

The study focuses primarily on the stone craft community or Silpis also known locally as Kakkottys, which is part of the Viswakarma or Kammala community. The Viswakarma community comprises of five sub-groups: goldsmiths, blacksmiths, carpenters, bell-metal craftsmen, and stone masons. In some locations, Viswakarma is considered a subgroup of the Brahmanical division known as Viswa Brahmins. Viswakarma is a recently established community title that refers to all of these castes. Previously, the title Kammala was commonly used. The term Kamma is derived from the Tamil words Kannalar or Kannanan. All of these castes trace their origins back to Lord Viswakarma of the Hindu pantheon. Viswakarma is the god of architecture and the *Silpasastra*. Ajesh (2017) in the article, Temple and Artisan Communities in Medieval Kerala mentions that the 'emergence of temple as a consumption community during the medieval period paved the way for proliferation of artisan communities and the emergence of artisans was perhaps an outcome of social formation. He also mentions that the Brahmin centred society existed before the second Chera empire itself'.

Silpasastra is a knowledge base that includes

techniques and measures for stone cutting, carving and sculpting. Silpi was believed to be the ancestor of the stone craft community. The study presents a picture about the *Silpasastra* of the Kammala (Kakkotty) of Kannur District in Kerala.

2. OBJECTIVES

- To study the stone craft and intangible cultural heritage of the Silpis of Malabar.
- To study the Science of Sculpture of the Silpis.
- To explore the applicability of anthropological concepts in *silpasastra* tradition

3. AREA OF STUDY

The fieldwork for the present study was conducted mainly in Ramanthali Panchayat in Kannur district of Kerala. Ramanthali Panchayat is about 8 km from Payyanur, Kannur District. The data for the study was collected from various settlements of the Kammalas (stone sculptors) at Neelakara Chal, Neerozhukcum Chal and Karanthad of Ramanthali Panchayat in Kannur district, Kerala. All these settlements lie at different folds of the Ezhimala, which forms the resource base of the community. In addition to this, to understand the stone-craft tradition of this community, various religious centres and places in the district were also visited and data collected.

4. METHODOLOGY

No work has previously been done on the socio-cultural and economic profile of the Silpis or Kammalas (Kakkotty), including their stone-craft tradition. Primary and secondary data have been utilized for the study. Anthropological techniques such as interviews, participant and non-participant observations, case studies, and household surveys have been conducted to collect primary data, especially on the socio-cultural profile of the Kammalas. Participant observations and interviews were mainly employed to understand the process of stone-craft production and the traditional knowledge base of the community. Historical documents were also utilized to trace out the history and migration of these people. Data pertaining to the stone-craft tradition was collected through interviews and other visual aids have been utilized to document the tradition in a systematic way.

5. THE KAMMALA

It is said that the stone-craft community, i.e., the Silpis (Kakkotty) of the north Malabar, was actually from Tamil Nadu, and was brought there by the Chirakkal Raja of Kolathiri dynasty to accomplish

some specialized work. The rulers and the ruling class have enjoyed the patronage of religious and ancient architecture and sculptures. However, this community had not been part of the traditional social structure of Kerala society. Eventually, the community became part of the Kerala society through their unique stone-craft tradition. As the skill was transmitted generation after generation, the replication of it by any other community became obscure and challenging. In fact, in spite of their skilled workmanship, the community still remains an 'unidentified' group, even among the Viswakarma. Locally, the community is known as Kakkotty – it is a shortened form of the word, Kallukotti, which means a person who beats the stones.

However, even centuries after migration to Kerala, this group still remains a distinct group within the Viswakarma community through its endogamous nature. The endogamous nature of the community thus imparts a true picture of their distinctive identity and culture. Irrespective of other Viswakarma communities, the stone mason community opts for marriage alliances within their own group even today. The stone masons claim that they enjoy a high status in the society, and like Brahmins, they also wear *poonool* (sacred thread); further, the term *Achariis* mostly attributed to the stone mason community as a high status. Generally, the Viswakarmas of Malabar didn't enjoy this type of privilege.

Chakyar Madam is one of the *taravadus* of the Silpi. Taravadus are the ancestral family division in a community claiming their descent from a common ancestor. As per the members of the taravadu, they were brought to Ezhimala (in Kerala) from Tanjore for the construction of the famous temple, Rajarajeswara at Taliparamba in Kannur district, Kerala. Tanjore was the chiefdom of the Second Chola kingdom (Kerala *charithram*); the Chola dynasty ruled South India until the 13th century. The Chakyar Madam Taravad got this title from their place of residence, which was known as *madam*. They resided near the Rajarajeswara temple; this house was reserved while they conducted their *silpa* work. Another taravad, Puthumana, stated that they came to Ezhimala from Kodungallor (Mahodayapuram). Kodungallor was the chiefdom of the Chera dynasty. Both Chakyar Madam taravadu and Puthumana taravadu state that they came here for the construction of Rajarajeswara temple at Taliparamba in Kannur district. It is clear that the Silpis or the stone-craft community residing in the folds of Ezhimala in Ramanthali Panchayat had migrated to north Malabar from ancient Tamilakam for pursuing

their specialized work on granite stones. In Tanjavur, a place in Tamil Nadu, lived many artisans and sculptors. In those days, Kerala was ruled by the Chirakkal king. As there were no granite sculptors in Kerala, the temples were facing the problem of a lack of granite sculptures. To solve this problem, the Chirakkal king brought some stone sculptors from Tamil Nadu. They first started work for the Taliparamba Raja Rajweswara temple for the people of north Malabar. The King provided them with accommodations at *chakyar madam* (House of Chakyar). Once the work here was finished, some of the sculptors were taken to Ramanthali near Ezhimala to work on the Ramanthali Devaswam temple known as Shankaranarayana Ksetram. The Devaswam provided them with accommodations at different areas (folds) of Ezhimala, known as *chal*. The place where the Silpis finally settled came to be known as *chal*.

Ezhimala is a historical region that has witnessed a number of changes overtime in the geographical, ecological, political and socio-cultural spheres. In the olden days, they used to have a close relationship with the environment and procured the granite needed for their stone work from the surroundings itself. Later, the ban on mining adversely affected their utilization of granite pieces from the area.

It is seen that the stone-craft tradition flourished in areas where black granite stones were readily available, thus, implying that ecology and culture are related. Ezhimala is a hilly area with several folds (*chal*) of habitable areas and a rich hoard of granite stocks. Traditionally, the Silpi community inhabited these folds of Ezhimala and derived the resources for their stone-craft from the hills.

The socio-cultural framework and the traditions of the society show that they have had distinctive identity among the Viswakarmas, especially because of their unique craft tradition, and the endogamous nature of the community helps preserve the stone craft tradition.

There are five *taravadus* of the Silpis in the study area, which are as follows:

1. *Chakyar madam*
2. *Mundankund*
3. *Kizhakkeveed*
4. *Puthumanaveed*
5. *Puthanveed*

The way of life, religious organizations and the social structure of the community, implies that they were the craftsmen from ancient Tamilakam. These craftsmen still follow the practices and traditions of their Tamil ancestors. Even centuries after migration to Kerala, the migrant groups preserve their cultural

identity in unique ways – in their language, customs and practices.

Vasthuvīdyā, *tachushastram* and *silpasastram* form the basis of stone-craft tradition. The Silpis still conserve the science of the tradition. Vedic Puranas, ancient scripts and texts, and hymns form the basis of the traditional stone-craft work. The Silpi makes sculptures by following a specific *sastra* (science) and measurements. The Silpi imbibes the figure of the sculpture in his mind and starts to work by following accurate measurements. The type and nature of the deity, its posture, colour, clothings, weapons and allied objects are prepared by following the rules and regulations given in the ancient guidelines. As per Silpa Sastra, '*Vijnanam Silpa Kaushalyam, Jagat Sarvam Shukpamevabhavati*' or 'Silpa's greatness lies in it being scientific' (in Namboodiri, 1988). Silpa Sastras are the ancient texts dealing with the rules and principles of sculptures and architecture. They follow the proportions, dimensions, shape, behaviour and rules of sculpture-making. Iconography is a term derived from the Greek word, *eikon*, meaning a figure representing a deity. It also includes sculptures or metals meant for worship.

Sculptures are classified into three groups. They are known as *salam*, *asalam* and *salasalam*. *Salam* images are movable and generally made of metal. These metal images are used for ritualistic and processional purposes. *Asalam* images are immovable images. They are fixed in the appropriate places of the temple, permanently. *Salasalam* images are also movable images; however, they are not allowed to be moved from the place where they are installed (Ganapathi Sthapathi, 1978).

Generally, based on the body dimensions, nature and behaviour, sculptures can be categorized into five types, namely, *Hamsa*, *Bhadra*, *Malavya*, *Ruchaka* and *Sasaka*. These are usually referred to as *Panchmaha Purushas*. Usually, they come under the iconometric measurement of *panchatalam* (five *talam*) to *dasatalam* (ten *talam*).

Talamana is the type of measurements (iconometry) usually used in iconography. The Silpi follow these measurements to set an idol or deity and its allied objects. The different parts of the body of the idol are also prepared based on the ratios prescribed in the *talamana* system. 'Viswakarma's' work manuals inherited from the early history manifest high influence of cosmology, geometry, astronomy, physics, meteorology and metallurgy' (in Varghese, 2003)

The *silpa* prepared in stones will be installed in the temples and shrines permanently. The sculpture work is treated as a divine routine by the Silpi.

Through sculptures, the Silpi articulates their internal visualizations and make proportionate figurines of males and females. The sculpture work is aesthetically and spiritually a functional art form because it involves the amalgamation of expertise, divinity, devotion, imagination, etc.



Photograph 1 .Granite stone Quarry

Sculpture making is a long process, especially sculptures of temple deities. Like the birth of a baby, the sculpture of a deity is born within a span of ten months. This is as per ancient texts, and the traditional stone craftsmen strictly follow

this timeline in their sculpture work. In temples, usually granite stone is used to make the sculpture of the deities.

The knowledge of the stones, proportion and measurements to be followed for each idol, carving of stones, emotional evocation and sensation of the divinity are the different aspects associated with the production process.

Ezhimala is geographically a hilly area rich in granite. In earlier times, they had access to granite rocks free of cost. The vibrant nature as well as the hardness of the granite stones makes it special for sculpture work and designs. They do not depend on the stone quarry for the stone-craft work. They mainly make use of *krishnasila* for the craft work, which are available in the interior parts of the laterite soil and laterite stone area.

They do not collect all types of granite stones for their work. *Krishnasila* is mainly employed for the craft work; it is carved out from the slopes of Ezhimala. After carving, it is brought to the workshop or *ala* of the Silpi and is designed as per *silpasastra*. Fitness of the body and mental preparedness are essential for involvement in the work, since one has to complete the work in a stipulated manner without taking assistance from the

fellow Silpis. In one *ala*, one can see a number of Silpis working at the same time on different sculptures.

6. PRODUCTION PROCESS

Each sculpture is a unique piece with different measurements and dimensions. They use the measurements such as *yavam* (size of a barley grain) and *angulam* (unit of measurement which literally means finger) and *kol* (unit of measurement; 1 *kol* is 72 cm) for the sculpture work and temple architecture.

7. THE RITES OF PASSAGE: FROM STONE TO DEITY

As per Gennep (1960), a rite of passage is observed as a transition rite to mark the passing of a person from one state to another especially during the course of his life. Norman Habel defines religious experience as the structured way in which a believer enters into a relationship with or gains an awareness of the sacred within the context of a particular religious tradition (Habel, O'Donoghue and Maddox, 1993). Van Gennep (1960) states that the rite of passage comprises of three ritual stages: separation, transition and incorporation or pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal stages.

Gennep explains the rite of passage in terms of the life course of human beings. But the present study explores that the rite of passage does not only happen in the case of humans, but also, in the case of a stone, passage from a stone to a deity.

8. STEPS AND TECHNIQUES

8.1 Identification and Selection of Stones

Traditionally, the Silpis first identify the granite stone needed for the sculpture work in the various folds of Ezhimala, and the rock is then cut out using a small chisel. The stone resource base for the work is usually referred to as *sila parigraham cheytha sthalam*. For this, they make horizontal holes in the huge granite rocks. The holes are known as *thamarkuzhi*. A tool called *thulamana* is used for making the holes. *Thulamana (uli)* is a very pointed chisel. An *aiyppu* (a different type of *uli*) is inserted in this hole. By using a heavy hammer, they beat the top of the *aaap* (tool for breaking huge granite block). The experienced stone masons beat in different modulations and apply pressure so that the granite piece of the required size is cut out. The process of cutting the stones required for the work is called *thamar adikkuka* (process of breaking huge granite block). After this, they bring the stones in the working shed, called *aala*. It is very difficult to carry the stones into the working site.

These days, they also use modern equipments instead of a chisel.

They mainly categorize the stones into two types: *ramasila* and *krishnasila*. *Ramasila* is a white-grey coloured stone and is easily breakable. Because of its texture, it is not feasible for making sculptures and is used for flooring purpose. *Krishnasila* is a very strong, blackish stone, easy to carve and dig out from the earth. It has a hard texture and is very appropriate for making the sculpture. The idols are carved out of only *krishnasila*.

Gendering of stones by the silpis highlights that material objects are also imbued with identities and masculine and feminine principles in cosmic world. The sculpture categorizes the *krishnasila* into *purusha krishnasila* (male), *sthree krishnasila* (female) and *napumsaka sila* (neither male nor female) based on the texture of the stone and the sound made at the time of hammering the stone with a chisel and hammer; if the intensity of the flame is high and the sound is metallic and deafening, it is regarded as a male stone; if the flame and intensity of sound is low and the shape is that of a plantain leaf, it is regarded as female stone.

Napumsaka sila is a kind of stone that is neutral and does not have any particular structure but has many peripheral fractures. It does not have a uniform thickness and does not make any sound when hammered. *Napumsakasila* is mainly employed for flooring purpose. Based on this categorization, they collect the granite stones needed for sculpting the idol.

Thus, the gendering of stones serves as a mechanism for categorizing even the material objects in the social and ritual order and hierarchies.

The tools for sculpting the idol are prepared by the Silpis themselves as they believe the work to be sacred. The shaping and smoothening process of the rough granite stone is known as *pirikkal*.



Photograph 2. Krishna sila



Photograph 3. Thamaradikkal



Photograph 4. Cleaved Granite stone

8.2 Sketching of the Sculpture

In the working area, the *silpi* outlines the sketch of the sculpture on a stone as per the *silpasasthra* measurements such as *angulam*, *yavam*, *kol* and *tala*. Burnt sienna is used for making an outline of the idol on the granite stone. *Tala* is the traditional measurement system followed in *silpa* iconography. Generally, they make *silpa* with a maximum of ten *talas* (*Dasa tala*). The ten *talas* and the corresponding *angulas* are as follows:

- 1 *tala*- 12 *angulas*
- 2 *tala*- 24 *angulas*
- 3 *tala*- 36 *angulas*
- 4 *tala*- 48 *angulas*
- 5 *tala*- 60 *angulas*
- 6 *tala*- 72 *angulas*
- 7 *tala*- 84 *angulas*
- 8 *tala*- 96 *angulas*
- 9 *tala*- 108 *angulas*
- 10 *tala*- 120 *angulas*

One *tala* constitutes 12 *angulas*, and for each successive *tala*, 12 *angulas* are added.

- 1/12 of a *talam* is one *angulam*.
- 1/8 of *angulam* is a one *yavam*.
- 1/8 of a *yavam* is one *yuka*.
- 1/8 of a *yuka* is one *likha*.
- 1/8 of a *likha* is one *vaalaagram*.
- 1/8 of *avaalaagram* is one *thresarenu*.
- 1/8 of a one *thresarenu* is one *paramanu*.
- 24 *angulam* is one *kol* (around 72 centimeters).

These measurements, especially from *yavam*, are used for making the outline, starting from the forehead, down to the tip of the toenail in the foot of the idol. The *silpis* are experts who follow these units for making various sculptures of different deities.

For making a sculpture, generally, they take stones having a length and width twice of that needed for the sculpture. The measurement is taken in *yavakanakk*. One *kol* is 24 *angulam* and one *angulam* is divided into eight *yavam*, which is the minimum measurement. One *yavam* is divided into 16-minute units and all these measurement units are termed *mahayani kanakk*.

The lowest part of a sculpture is known as *naalam*. Just above the *naalam* is the *pathmapeedam*. The measurement for making *naalam* is provided as follows:
Prathimangulamimsathinaalathadham
Oordhamorangulamerivarum

This means that from *naalam* (lower part) to *oordham* (upper part) the measurement varies, usually enhances. One *angulam* is divided into 12 portions. For the *pathmapeedam* (lotus shaped pedestal), the total length of the sculpture is divided into *amsams* and one *amsam* is taken for *pathmapeedam*. They carve a lotus in the *pathmapeedam*.

Generally, the measurement is taken from the *naalam* to *ushneshnakett* (forehead). They make divisions, known as *thalam*, on large stones. These divisions range from *ekathaalam* to *dasathalam* (ranging 1 to 10). *Ekathalam* is the smallest division. *Pathmapeedam* is made in *ekathaalam*. *Dwayathalam* is not used in sculpture making. *Moonnamthalam* is applied for the legs of the idol. The sculpture-making process is divided into four parts, of which three are *kaalmutt* (knee joint), throat and *ushneshnakett*. The measurements for different parts of the idol are provided below.

1. One *thalam* for *kaalpaadam*(foot)
2. Two *thalam* for leg portion up to *mutt*(knee)
3. Two *thalam* for *thuda*(femur)
4. One *thalam* for *pokkil*(navel)
5. One *thalam* for portion below the chest
6. One *thalam* for shoulder, and
7. One *thalam*for lower jaw to forehead.

The measurements are different for different idols. The idol for the *purusha bimbam* (male deity) is built in

navathalam or nine *thalas* and the idol for the *sthree bimbam* (female deity) is built in *dasathalam* or 10 *thalas*. The crown of the gods and goddesses will not be sculpted using these measurements. The male sculptures are made in male *krishmasila* and female sculptures in female *krishmasila*. They opine that making a female body sculpture is more complicated than making a male body sculpture, because a female body sculpture is built with a larger stone of greater width and length and it also requires sculpting decorative ornaments. The idol of god Ganpathi is depicted in *panchathalam* or five *thala*, the *vahanas* (vehicles) of the deities are prepared in three to four *thalas*, the *vamana* is depicted in *saptathalas* or seven *thalas*. According to them they build the idols of supreme deities such as Shiva and Vishnu in *dasathala*. The idols of deities such as Krishna, Rama, Mahalakshmi, Saraswathi and Durga are prepared in *navathala*. For building idols of kings and monks, they use *ashtathala*. This satisfies not only the spiritual attribute but also the aesthetic and cognitive aspect. The sculptures, thus, attract people in various ways.

Even today, the Kammala use their traditional tools for making the sculpture. The different kinds of chisels are *thulamuna* (a chisel used to make holes on the granite rock to cut it, that is, *thamaradikkan*), *aaiyppu* (a small chisel used as a tool to break large granite rocks), *chaturuli* (a chisel used to shape the sculpture as per the measurements), *palamuna* (a chisel used for finishing work), *odayapp* (a tool used for shaping the curvature of the stone), *arappan* (a tool used for carving the stone), *vettirumb* and *mattam* (iron scale, especially used for making square objects). These chisels and tools are made by the craftsmen themselves. For some of the work, the Kammala use modern power tools. *Kodil* (Plier) is an iron tool used to handle hot metal iron and to hold the items in a firm way. This is used when they make their traditional tools in the settlement. The chisel (*uli*) needed for sculpture work is made in the sculpturer's house itself.

After the completion of the work, they smear oil on the idol and carry it to the temple. It is received

ceremonially and readied for *jaladivasam*. *Jaladivasam* is a tantric term that means immersion of the idol in water. The idol is immersed in water for 10 days. This ritual has different connotations, including that life originates in water and as a purification rite. This rite is performed by the *tantri* of the temple.

The last stage is known as *nethronmeelanam*. This is also a tantric term and it literally means the eye-opening ritual of an idol. Through this final act, life is infused into the idol and it becomes the 'god' it is modelled on. This is done cautiously by scratching the idol with a golden needle and marking it with honey. The sculptor murmurs hymns into its ear to impart divinity to the idol. This stage marks the rite of passage of a stone idol into a divine being. The silpiis offered *dakshina* for this. Coomaraswamy (1979) mentions that in Ceylon and South India, the act of 'eye painting' or 'netra-mangalya' is believed to infuse the idol with divine powers prior to which it is only a lump of metal or clay.

Mostly the deities are carved directly on the granite stones and the carved sculpture is known as *ardhasilpa*. The sculptures that are made three dimensionally are known as *silpabhasam*. The temple walls, and the *pooja* rooms and *natyamandapa* are also areas where granite sculptures can be built.

9. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

The stone craft tradition has a rich heritage in India. This tradition continues through its unique production process. An idol generates through various production process starting from the identification of appropriate granite stone to the last eye opening ritual of an idol. As per the silpis, an idol generates like a baby within a span of ten months. Like human, the idol also undergoes through 'rite of passage' i.e., from one stage to the other, and the last stage marks the transformation of a stone idol into a divine one.

By gendering stones, the study also explores how material items in the cosmic universe are also endowed with identities and male and feminine principles.

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