

FLUIDS OF IDENTITY: MILK AND BLOOD IN KOLAM KINSHIP

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Introduction

In this article, I attempt to evolve a comprehensive understanding of the procreative ideology of the Kolams, a Dravidian-speaking tribe, by means of a comparison with Pushpesh Kumar's article entitled 'Gender and Procreative Ideologies among the Kolams of Maharashtra' (2006). Kumar's work was with the Kolams of Nanded District, Kinwat Tehsil, on the south-eastern border of Maharashtra bordering northern Andhra Pradesh. As he mentions in his paper, Kinwat was part of Adilabad District, Andhra Pradesh, before the State Re-organisation Act of 1956, and the cultural homogeneity of the Kolams of Kinwat and Adilabad continues to be preserved through kinship and ritual ties, the new politico-administrative boundary notwithstanding (Kumar 2006: 284). It is in the light of this statement that the conclusions arrived at by Kumar will be compared and contrasted with the results of my own fieldwork, conducted among the Kolams of Adilabad in December 2007.

Procreative ideologies are essentially people's notions of how conception occurs, with particular reference to the male and female contributions to the foetus. Every culture has its own unique way of conceptualizing the biological process of reproduction. As Malinowski noted years ago,

However primitive the community, the facts of conception, pregnancy and child-birth are not left to Nature alone, but they are reinterpreted by cultural tradition: in every community we have a theory as to the nature and causes of conception.... (1930: 23)

It is these theories of conception that are today termed procreative ideologies. The use of the word 'ideology' is indicative of the manner in which they serve as principles to justify, maintain and propagate forms of social organization. The works of many scholars in this area (Fruzzetti and Östör 1984, Dube 1986, Busby 2000, etc.) have shown how procreative ideologies influence and are in turn influenced by gender concepts, descent rules, cosmology and so on. Although theories of procreation are seldom as well articulated as anthropologists make them out to be, they do have ramifications for tangible spheres of life, as seen through their invocation in times of crisis as rules of thumb for decision-making.

Kolam social organization

The Kolams are a Dravidian-speaking tribe inhabiting the hilly regions of southern

Maharashtra and northern Andhra Pradesh in India. Once famed for their skill with bamboo, they have taken to cotton and wheat cultivation over the last fifty years. Collection of forest products, fishing and hunting are supplementary subsistence activities. The Kolams speak Hindi, Telugu and Marathi in addition to Kolami, their native tongue. A patrilineal community with clan organization, the Kolam consist of numerous clans (*paadi/kuum*) organized into four larger groupings (*kulam*) which may be termed phratries, as Kumar does, following Führer-Haimendorf's account of the neighbouring Gonds (1948). The phratries are distinguished from each other by the number of gods each worships: *edu deyyale kulam*, clans with seven gods; *aaru deyyale kulam*, clans with six gods; *aidu deyyale kulam*, clans with five gods; and *naalu deyyale kulam*, clans with four gods. Although the *kulam* with the greatest number of gods is considered ritually superior, this does not spill over to the other domains such as politics or economics. All Kolams worship Bheemaiyyak,¹ and the unity of all Kolams is a recurring motif in conversations. Village chieftainship, however, rests with the group that first settled the village and is hereditary, being passed down the male line.

Post-marital residence is usually virilocal, although it is not uncommon for men to stay with their in-laws and tend their land in a form of bride service known as *iltam*. Members of clans belonging to the same *kulam* (or *dev* according to Kumar) are prohibited from marrying each other. As the Kolam saying goes, *Amme kuumun thaane pelli kalengonth*: 'Except within our own clan, marriage can occur with the other clans'. However, although the word *kuum* is used here, meaning clan, it is the phratry which is actually being referred to. In essence, members of each phratry or *kulam* may marry individuals belonging to clans from the other three *kulams*. This is the marriage rule at the simplest level: the Kolams also practice bilateral cross cousin marriage, with the mother's brother's daughter being the preferred spouse for a male ego, and it is here that other, more sophisticated rules restricting marriage choices come into play. These rules are best understood in the light of the Kolam's procreative ideology.

Nettur and paal: descent, alliance and procreative ideology

Although they acknowledge that sexual intercourse is necessary for conception, to the Kolams the male's contribution to identity is greater than that of the female. Descent is patrilineal, and it is believed that the blood (*nettur*) of a child comes from the father. This is how Kolams rationalize the membership of progeny in the father's clan. A male Kolam's clan membership is ascribed at birth, and property is inherited down the male line. A woman's clan membership, however, shifts to that of the husband's clan on marriage. The mother in Kolam

1. Kolams trace their origin to Bheem, the second of the Pandava brothers featured in the Mahabharata, through his son Ghatotkacha, born of his union with the forest demoness Hidimbi.

society is seen as more of a nurturer than a genitor. Her main contribution to the child is in the form of the milk (*paal*) she provides. As will become clear later, the mother's contribution to the child, although seemingly less substantial, has important consequences, particularly at marriage negotiations.

In his 2006 article, Kumar takes Dube's (1986) and Ganesh's (2001) works on seed-earth images in agrarian societies as reference points. His objective is two-fold: to determine whether the fact that the Kolams are new to agriculture has restricted the impact of their procreative ideology on access to symbolic and material resources; and to consider the extent to which Kolam conception beliefs control and regulate the bodies and sexuality of women. Although he gives a nuanced account of the 'maleness' of Kolami blood, it is my contention that this focus on the patrilineality of Kolam procreative ideology leads Kumar to lose sight of some of the ways in which the mother's rights in relation to her child are asserted in Kolam society. Even though he says that the emphasis on *nettur* does not obliterate the significance of *paal* (milk), and he does make intermittent references to the role of the matrikin, the indigenous rationale for this is not sufficiently explored, with the result that Kolam procreative ideology is seen mostly in terms of its masculine elements.

The principle of the distinction of kin into cross and parallel categories may be clearly understood by following the substance concepts of the Kolams. As blood passes from father to children, siblings share the same blood. As only males are capable of transmitting blood, brothers who share the same blood also transmit the same blood, making the children of brothers parallel cousins akin to siblings. The children of sisters are also equated with siblings. Their 'siblingship', however, is determined not through blood but through the milk they have shared: women raised in the same clan transmit the clan milk to their children, and therefore the children of sisters who have been nurtured by the same milk are also siblings. The parallels to the scheme outlined by Busby in her work on the Mukkuvars of Kerala (2000: 83) are striking.

The same logic applies to step-children. Step-children having the same father share blood and are siblings. Step-children having the same mother are siblings because they have shared the same milk. Thus it may be said that, while blood determines group affiliation, both milk and blood are significant in establishing siblinghood and the possibilities for affinal alliance. The key point here is that, even if one of these substances is shared by two individuals, they become siblings and are therefore placed in the category of parallel kin, those with whom a union in terms of marriage would be incestuous and is therefore taboo.

The manner in which illegitimate children are assimilated into a society is often a telling guide to its descent ideology and norms of identity determination. As Kumar notes, whenever such a situation arises, whoever the woman names in front of the village council or *panchant* is recognized as the father (2006: 296). If a Kolam woman has illegitimate children by a non-Kolam, both mother and child are sent out of the village; they are no longer considered Kolams. If the genitor of a child born out of wedlock is identified to be a Kolam man, then the woman is married to him and the child is given his clan name. Norms and practices related to adoption provide another good index of descent organization. Kolams prefer to continue to pray and make offerings to Bheemdev for a child than to take in another's child, especially if the child's original clan is unknown. Adoption into a clan is not possible, as membership is completely ascribed at birth. Indeed, there are even reservations against breastfeeding the child of another clan. The importance of milk as a substance is clearly apparent here. An orphaned child is usually looked after by the patrikin, the paternal grandparents and the child's father's brothers being the first in line. The FZ may look after the child if none of the male patrikin is alive. Both Kumar's and my own field data contain numerous instances which show that, in cases of divorce, separation or even the remarriage of the mother, the child is ideally expected to remain with the husband's family. The matrikin may look after the children if the patrikin decline to do so. The crucial point here is that the child's clan membership does not change, regardless of who raised him or her.

When it comes to the reflection of the procreative ideology in the institution of marriage, it may be noted that all the rules applicable in establishing siblinghood are invoked to determine who is and is not a prospective spouse. To reiterate a point made earlier, both blood and milk are significant in determining siblinghood and hence alliance possibilities. An unambiguous indicator of this is the question '*ere paalundi?*', meaning 'Whose milk has he/she drunk?', which both the groom's and bride's sides ask each other by convention during the marriage negotiations. The answer signifies the natal clan of the mothers of the groom and the bride, for example, *atramle paalundan*, 'Has drunk the milk of Atram', or more generically, *aaru deyyale pillane paalundan*, indicating 'Has drunk the milk of a child of the six god *kulam*', here a reference to the mother's natal clan.

While Kumar does mention this custom, he devotes more attention to the public announcement of the bloodline as part of the marriage proceedings, seeing in the query '*ere paalundi?*' an affirmation of the importance of affines in Kolami kinship (2006: 294). He thus neglects the more direct reference this question contains to the importance of the female principle in Kolam procreative ideology. Kumar mentions *paal* with reference to the positive

rule that both men and women may marry persons belonging to their mother's natal clan, and he takes this as a mark of the consonance of Kolam kinship with the Dravidian kinship principle of re-establishing previous marriage ties. My data indicate that a proscriptive rule is also associated with *paal*, one that points to the more active role of the female substance in instituting alliances. The question and its answer essentially establish that the prospective spouses do not have mothers who were raised in the same natal clan (i.e. patriclan), for then the mothers would be classificatory siblings, and so too would their children. The marriage would thus be an irregular union. To generalize, a Kolam man can marry a woman from any other clan than his own so long as his mother and his prospective spouse's mother do not share their natal clan. As my informants put it, '*okka palundaar jod kalayer*', 'Those who've drunk the same milk cannot unite'. Thus the reference to milk is clearly more than a token acknowledgement of affines: it is an operational directive that ensures that kinship ties accord with Kolam ideas of substance transmission.

It must be noted here that the milk a person is raised on links him or her not to the natal clan, but to the mother's natal clan. This is because, while blood is transmitted through the father's natal clan, milk goes through the mother's natal-clan. Taking a male ego as the reference point, it may be said that he inherits his father's blood and is raised on the milk of his mother's father's clan, as that is where his mother was raised. The answer to the question '*ere paalundi?*', put during the marriage ceremony, therefore refers to the individual's mother's father's clan. A woman's clan membership shifts during the *nauri* ceremony at the time of the marriage. The bride and the groom pour water over each other, and it is at this point, when the water touches the *pothi* or marriage pendant, that the woman assumes her husband's clan membership. However, her link to her natal clan remains in the form of the milk she will transmit to her offspring. A woman inherits her father's blood, is raised on the milk of her mother's father's clan, assumes the membership of her husband's clan and transmits the milk of her own father's clan to her children. Thus while she has had the milk of her mother's patriclan, what she will transmit is the milk of her own patriclan. In essence, the link between ego and the grandparent's generation is through blood on the father's side and milk on the mother's side. The importance accorded to the affines, who are usually also the matrikin of a male ego, thus has a definite basis in the substance concepts of the community. The veiled bilateral tendency in Dravidian kinship could not be more apparent.

The practice of the remarriage of women affords a glimpse of the flexibility of a woman's clan identity and of the differential importance of blood to each gender. Kolam widows may continue to stay with the husband's family. Even if they go back to their natal

family, they may continue to carry the husband's clan name until remarriage. Widows who do not remarry are buried in their husband's land. However, once the *pothi* or marriage pendant is removed as a result of widowhood or divorce, a woman is technically no longer a member of the husband's clan.² Most importantly, she is free to marry from the same clan again. In other words, the same rules that applied during her first marriage hold good for any subsequent marriage too. The fact that women are never completely assimilated into the husband's clan is thrown into relief once again: if a woman's shift to her husband's clan were to be total and permanent, then a second marriage to someone belonging to the first husband's clan would logically be incestuous and tabooed. However, this is not the case. Therefore it may be said that, although a woman's membership shifts, her link to her natal clan is permanent (see also Tharakan 2007). The existence of terms for levirate (*vanna masa*) or remarriage to the brother of a deceased husband, as well as actual cases of such remarriage, indicate that a woman's clan membership is not a tangible fact linked to her body, but an external consideration associated with her relations with her male kin.

This discussion of the importance of milk as a substance in determining alliance patterns would be incomplete without any reference to the concept of *paal badal*. *Paal badal*, which literally means 'milk exchange', is definitely a validation, if not a Kolam equivalent, of the anthropological construct of delayed exchange. *Paal badal* requires that at least one of the daughters of a female ego be married into her natal clan. This, of course, is embedded in the institution of cross-cousin marriage. If the daughter marries the son of ego's brother, she will naturally be going to ego's natal clan. The idea is to make good the loss of a woman and her nurturing power to her natal group by ensuring that at least one of her daughters is brought back in marriage to that group. The importance of this institution becomes apparent when one considers the repercussions of a rejection of a proposal constituting a *paal badal*. To elaborate, if a family refuses to give their daughter in *paal badal*, then the clan of the boy places a restriction on anyone from that clan marrying the same girl. This prohibition is mandatory for close kin, even extending to members of the same clan living in other villages.³

To summarize, a woman transmits her patriclan's descent milk to her daughter. When

2. According to Kolam custom, when the husband dies, the widow's *pothi* is removed; she will wear it again only when she remarries.

3. In such circumstances, the clan elders make the following declaration to the marriage party:

Ivre pillane paal badol vel thaandamgani amung seeyether.

Neer velthir indi neer aa pillan velner.

Aa pillan nende kutumbantha kotekkathodh,

Marakutumbathar erenna kocchar.

They did not give their girl in *paal badal*, so you are not to take her either.

You came up to here, but do not ask them for her.

None of our clan may take her in marriage.

Let other clans do so.

the daughter marries into her mother's patriclan, she pays them back for the milk she was raised on by nurturing their next generation on her own patriclan's descent milk. This male quality of milk raises interesting questions regarding the 'femaleness' of milk, and whether milk can be considered a purely female substance by virtue of ontogeny. However, this is a question deserving in-depth analysis beyond the scope of this paper. What may be said without controversy is that there is an alternation in the transmission of milk from one generation to the next. *Paal* has without doubt both a synchronic and diachronic role to play in shaping Kolam kinship. The synchronic element comes into play in determining siblinghood, while the diachronic element is at work in ensuring the perpetuation of the institution of cross-cousin marriage by creating a sense of obligation and appealing to the ideal of reciprocity.

Conclusion

There are significant references to the female principle in Kolam theories and images of procreation that warrant further study and revision of our current male-oriented understanding of their concepts of substance. Kumar's observation regarding the maleness of blood in Kolam society is unambiguously true; however, it requires the qualification that its consequences for men and women are of different orders. While in agreement with his conclusion that the maleness of blood does not preclude the rights of Kolam women over their productive and reproductive capacities (2006: 308), I wish to stress that the manner in which the transmission of milk actively fashions and acknowledges these rights deserves more attention. Indeed, an analysis in the ethnosociological tradition of these bodily fluids and their role in constituting and concretizing Kolam identity offers much promise for a sophisticated understanding of Dravidian kinship as a whole.

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