

Memory and Matrilineage: Is the Siri Mass Possession Tradition of Tulunadu a Death Ritual?

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Abstract : Tulunadu, a Tulu-speaking ethno-linguistic minority region in the west coast of India is abundant with oral narratives and associated rituals very unique to this region. One such major worship tradition prevalent here is the mass possession cult of women called Siri Jatre. Deriving its referential script from the Siri epic or pāḍḍana, Siri rituals are performed annually in many places of Tulunadu. During these rituals thousands of afflicted women gather at the temple premises and get possessed by the pantheon of seven Siri spirits. While mapping the existing corpus of literature on Siri Jatre – analyzing it as a mode of spirit possession, its psycho-therapeutic significance, its emancipatory potential, etc – this paper offers a paradigm shift by perceiving the entire Siri ritual as a death rite offered to Siri's grandfather Berma Alva. It draws its arguments from the fieldworks conducted recently in some Siri shrines, interviews conducted among adept Siri women and by analyzing the death rites performed among Bunt caste of the region, and locating it within the historically matrilineal fabric. Thereby, it problematizes the existing analytical frames and raises the question of – if annual Siri ceremonies are a means to bemoan the end of a matrilineal family of Siri? It would delve on the gender configuration as manifested in the Siri cult, having its base in the Tuluva society's matrilineage, and thereby add to the prevalent ethnographic investigative approaches.

Keywords : death rite, matrilineage, possession, women

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