

SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF SAAVU KUTHU IN CHENNAI

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ABSTRACT

The drumming, singing, dancing and boisterous procession that is part of some funerals in Chennai and other Tamil Nadu cities is often mistaken for a celebration of death by outsiders. This review article analyzes anthropological, ethnomusicological and folkloric studies on Tamil death ritual, and in that context, adds reference to Sangam era literature to suggest that death ritual is not so much a universal experience as a culturally mediated process of dealing with loss. It discusses the origins and literary context of the Tamil funerary performance from the puram poems of the Purananuru, to the caste history of the parai drum, to the present-day gaana and marana gaana traditions of North Chennai. It places these practices in a well-defined framework of social scientific theories such as Durkheimian collective effervescence, Van Gennep's rites of passage and Turner's communitas, as well as in a psychological framework of theories on grief and social support. The review finds out that saavu kuthu is at the same time social, cultural and psychological in nature. It exposes grief to the community and exposes it publicly, it has caste history in it as well as an assertion of contemporary identity and it provides participants with an active, rhythmic and socially engaged means of processing an overwhelming event.

Keywords: Saavu Kuthu, Tamil Funeral Rituals, Parai Drum

INTRODUCTION

In many urban North Indian contexts, in many contexts in Euro-American societies, it is the socially appropriate way to mourn to be quiet, restrained and private. In some areas of Chennai, the funeral procession involves parai drumming, dappankuthu style of dance, singing the gaana and shouting, sometimes with firecrackers and the use of liquor, and might seem strange to an outside observer (Clark-Décès, 2005). I believe this reading is based on a culturally and unquestioningly accepted view of what grief looks like. In fact, there is no uniform saavu kuthu or saavu melam, as it is called in Tamil, which is the funeral drumming or performance. It depends on caste, area, religion, age and method of death of the deceased, as well as family tradition (Clark-Décès, 2005). It has been most consistently observed among Dalit communities, the Paraiyar communities who have traditionally been assigned the responsibility for funeral drumming, and working class neighbourhoods of North Chennai where it has taken up the more recent urban musical form, gaana, (Arun, 2007; Sherinian, 2014). Thus, there are at least three dimensions of this practice that must be attended to, that of social function of public mourning, the cultural and literary historical context of Tamil funerary performance, and the psychological work that is done for the bereaved by the rhythm, movement and collective participation. This review is a compilation of existing anthropological and ethnomusicological work on Tamil death ritual, and situates the practice in the context of traditional Tamil literary texts on death, drumming and lament, while also drawing on social scientific theories of ritual and grief. To provide a unified explanation for why energetic funeral performance is a unified and historically distinct response to death, not an aberration.

THE METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE OF THE REVIEW.

A narrative interdisciplinary review method is used for this article to explore saavu kuthu as a social, cultural and psychological reaction to the death of a person. In the discussion, anthropological, ethnomusicological, folkloric, historical, literary and psychological approaches are combined to provide an understanding of funeral performance that goes beyond the assumption that what is seen on the surface is happiness or celebration. Tamil funerary practices, parai performance, oppari, gaana and marana gaana are received with special interest, with a particular interest in communities and musical cultures and traditions from Chennai and North Chennai in particular. Classical Tamil literary sources are used to provide the historical and cultural context, but not as direct ethnographic evidence of the saavu kuthu as it was in the present. Likewise, the ethnographic observations of the present are regarded as 'situated' and can represent only selected communities and not all Tamil funerary practices. The review thus identifies and separates historical documentation from ethnographic observation and interpretation. Saavu kuthu can be interpreted as a culturally specific practice whose meanings are multiple based on caste, locality, religion, family tradition, age and conditions of death.

HISTORICAL AND LITERARY BACKGROUND

Even before the advent of modern so-called gaana, Tamil literature had recorded death, sorrow and communal drum beating as the focal points of public, or puram, poetry. Although poetry is not generally associated with war, the Purananuru, one of the Eight Anthologies of Sangam literature, which dates approximate date around the first century BCE to the fifth century CE, is one such exception, and it has a significant number of poems about war, heroism, its aftermath and many elegies for fallen warriors and chieftains, (Hart & Heifetz, 2002; Zvelebil, 1973). A group of Purananuru poems have been identified as songs of bereavement, some of which are made by women poets, most notably Avvaiyars lamentations on the death of her patron Adhiyaman, Jothilakshmi (2022). The emotion of grief is already mixed with public display of the dead's social value in these poems, and remains so in later funeral practices.

The earliest textual evidence for the drum to be associated with funeral performance is found in the Sangam literature. The term parai is used for a very wide and general public announcement in the Sangam corpus; the instrument originally was used to declare war, to call communities together and for royal occasions before its performers got associated (via a long and contested caste history) with funerary duty (Sherinian 2021; Paraiya n.d.). The association of drummers, known as tutiyan, to other castes of performers like Paraiyans and Panans, as recognised social category, is very old as evidenced in the Purananuru itself (Paraiya, n.d.). The literary and historical context is important because it demonstrates that mixed forms of public laments, drumming and hierarchical performance work are not so new when it comes to death. It is an extension (in a modified form) of a long tradition of Tamil practice.

The cremation ground and dance are connected with the concept of death in another literary strand, this one Tamil Shaiva devotional poetry. The cremation ground in the seventh century Tamil saint-poet Karaikkal Ammaiyar is not just a scene of horror, but of cosmic performance and transformation as he describes Shiva dancing amongst the corpses, flames and spirits. It is not possible to find any direct documentary evidence that connects this devotional imagery with the modern practice of saavu kuthu. Both traditions, however, share a larger South Indian religious mythos where the cremation ground can be a place of ritual value, ritual action, and even celebration or pleasure, not merely of silence and dread.

SAAVU KUTHU IN CHENNAI

The current Saavu kuthu of Chennai needs to be understood in the specific social and spatial setting of the city in particular North Chennai. North Chennai has a history of working class settlements, industrial occupation, fishing communities and labouring people, the caste and economic disadvantaged communities. In these urban contexts, music and performance are often used not just for entertainment, but as a means of neighbourhood identity and social communication. The funeral march thus extends beyond the domestic realm and moves into the street, where the dead person is no longer a member of the immediate family but is now a part of a larger social network.

The street becomes a ritualistic and performative space as expression of grief, memory and community solidarity are publicly enacted. The noise of the drum, the march and involvement of neighbours make the death socially visible, but do not leave it an exclusively private family experience.

It is in the development of 'gaana' in North Chennai that this transformation is particularly important. Gaana was born in an urban context where the everyday lives of poverty, work, friendship, love, violence, caste discrimination, and neighbours' life could be heard in the vernacular and the rhythmic musical idioms. The incorporation of this into funerary performance provided a place where the personality and social identity of the dead could be portrayed in familiar musical and performative style. Marana gaana thus falls in between the realms of ritual lament, popular music and social commentary. It can be a means to honor someone, yet, at the same time, a reflection of the social world they lived in. The funeral procession then is more than just a journey from the house to the crematorium or burial site, but a brief snapshot of neighbourhood culture and collective identity.

Another aspect of saavu kuthu is the role of the body in expressing grief. Although mourning is usually mainly seen as an emotional or verbal experience, the funeral performance shows that grief may also be conveyed through movement, rhythm, sound and physical involvement. The drumming offers a repetitive and structured rhythmic pattern in what would otherwise be an emotionally disturbing situation. The participants are able to walk, dance, clap, sing or respond to the rhythm together, thus changing the funeral from a situation in which people merely watch over the dead into one in which they take an active physical part in the ritual. The body thus becomes an important means by which loss is communicated and experienced.

The repetitive aspect of percussion can also play a role in organising collective attention. A funeral procession involves a variety of emotional responses such as crying, silence, remembrance, conversation and, at times, laughter. Rhythm offers a unifying structure among this range of emotions. If a number of people react to the same beat or song, their separate actions become temporarily coordinated. Sociologically, this kind of coordination may help to foster a sense of collective solidarity, while psychologically it might offer a structured form of activity during a time of emotional uncertainty. It would still be inappropriate, however, to say that drumming or dancing necessarily reduces grief in every participant. Instead, the physical nature of saavu kuthu provides a means which is available within the culture for grief to be expressed, shared and accompanied by others.

SAAVU KUTHU AND SOCIAL IDENTITY

Funeral performance can also show parts of the identity of the dead. The size of the procession the number of people who join the music that is played and how much the public is involved can tell us how relationships the dead person had in the community. Friends may remember the person through songs, funny remarks, personal stories or familiar ways of performing. Therefore a funeral does not only mark the end of life; it also rebuilds the social identity of the individual through the memories and actions of others. In the context of Chennai this social dimension is especially important because people often belong to overlapping networks at the same time, such as family, neighbourhood, workplace, caste community, religious community, friendship groups and cultural associations. A funeral can bring these networks together for a time. Saavu kuthu and related performance traditions can therefore be seen as ways that these different social relationships become visible. The funeral procession shows who belongs to the world of the dead person and how that social world reacts to the loss.

At the time funeral performance can become a way to express modern identity. The parai drum, gaana and related musical styles may carry meanings linked to caste history, working-class culture, Tamil identity, neighbourhood belonging and anti-caste protest. These meanings are not the same, for every performer or participant. The same musical form can act as practice, artistic expression, cultural memory and identity politics all at once. This meaning is one reason why Saavu kuthu should not be reduced to just dancing or music at a funeral.

SOCIAL DIMENSIONS

Collective Ownership of Grief

In many of the communities in which saavu kuthu is practiced death is not simply a family or household affair. In this way the concept of the deceased being part of a broader family, of neighbours and community members is enacted physically as they transport the body from the house to the cremation or burial ground (Clark-Décès, 2005). This 'shared' accompaniment is a witnessing of the loss together. The most important thing is to be publicly recognized of his social status. The magnitude and level of a funeral service, both the size of the crowd and the degree of ornamentation of the bier and the amount of music can be a public declaration of the social standing of the deceased and his family. The funeral is well attended and musically rich and signals that the deceased was known to others, respected, and having a rich social network (Clark-Décès, 2005).

Caste, Labour and Identity

In the past, the community ritual labour division of work would include drumming and other related functions at funerals to which specific Dalit communities were assigned, such as the Paraiyars, who were also perceived to be ritually polluting (Arun, 2007; Sherinian, 2014). More recently, in the past few decades, the same drum and the same performance tradition have gained a new platform for Dalit political and cultural claims, most notably in the parai revival movements, folk arts collectives and popular ensembles like the Casteless Collective (Arun, 2007; Sherinian, 2014; Diwakar, 2023). Saavu Kuthu thus has a two-fold social significance. At the same time it's a remnant of an imposed occupational hierarchy, and in its modern re-imagining an expression of dignity and cultural pride. Funeral processions involve learning the rhythms, and what to do and say, and it is informal cultural education. It passes on death knowledge and community values to the younger generations (Clark-Décès, 2005).

CULTURAL DIMENSIONS

A Culturally Legitimate Form of Mourning

The definition of what constitutes “appropriate” mourning varies from culture to culture. In contrast to some traditions which have a preference for silence and modesty, Tamil folk funerary practices have traditionally allowed crying and singing of lamentation (oppari), drumming, shouting and dance to be part of the same ritual moment (Clark-Décès, 2005). Trying to see physical and loud mournings through a middle class or Western framework of quiet grieving can lose the meaning of the internal cultural process.

Oppari and Gendered Mourning Roles

Women have a formal verbal and musical lexicon for grieving, called oppari. Performers honour the passed-away person, refer to the past and express grievance at the person's passing (Clark-Décès, 2005). Men's involvement in the funeral, in many of the same communities, is expressed in other ways, such as drumming, singing and dance, and in this way a broadly, but not universally, gendered division of mourning labour is enacted.

From Ritual percussion to Gaana

Traditional funerary practice is enriched by the addition of the urban element in contemporary Chennai. Historically, Gaana which is a fast tempo, colloquial song, emerged from the death rituals and funeral traditions of Paraiyar and Pattinavar communities of North Chennai, to accompany the mourning on the day of the deceased and subsequent memorial days (Indian Foundation for the Arts, n.d. ; Diwakar, 2023). This development of gaana moved beyond the funeral context in the twentieth and twenty first centuries to include poverty, love, friendship, injustice and daily urban suffering, and has been a significant arena of Dalit expression and anti caste assertion, for example through groups like the Casteless Collective (Diwakar, 2023; South First, 2025). The specifically funerary aspect of this tradition, known as marana gaana or death songs, is a combination of older ritual lament with street culture, movement inspired by film and the current social commentary. It is this fusion that accounts for the fact that funerals in Chennai in more secular religious terms can sound and look significantly different from more formally religious funerals (Clark Décès, 2005).

Variation across Communities

There was no uniform funeral culture in Tamil Nadu. As expected, there are differences between practices among various castes, religions, geographical areas, urban and rural areas, and the age of the deceased and the nature of their death. A death following a lengthy life is in some documented traditions dealt with more 'festively' in terms of the overt elements of death than a sudden or violent death (Clark-Décès, 2005). This is the kind of variation that needs to be corrected from any generalization that may be made about the prevalence of Tamils dancing at funerals.

The diversity of Chennai makes variation an essential part of understanding saavu kuthu. Funeral practices can differ between neighbourhoods, caste groups, religious communities, occupational groups and generations. Within the same locality two families may organize funerals differently according to their religious beliefs, economic resources, family traditions and relationships with the wider community. Some funerals may involve parai performers while others may depend primarily on relatives, friends or local musicians. Similarly some processions may emphasize drumming and movement whereas others may give importance to prayer, lamentation, silence or other forms of ritual expression. These differences show that saavu kuthu is better understood as a spectrum of practices than as a single standardized funeral ritual.

Generational change has also influenced performance in Chennai. Older forms of mourning may coexist with musical influences drawn from Tamil cinema, gaana, street performance and popular culture. Younger participants may express grief through bodily forms that would have been unfamiliar to previous generations while still keeping older practices such, as oppari, ritual procession and community accompaniment. This mix of continuity and innovation reveals the nature of urban culture. Than disappearing because of modernization traditional forms can be reshaped and brought into new cultural settings. Religious diversity further adds to this variation. In Chennai the funerary landscape includes traditions related to burial, cremation, prayer, lamentation, procession and the treatment of the deceased. Therefore the presence or absence of drumming and dance cannot be understood without considering the community context. The right way to analyze this is to ask how specific communities interpret their funeral practices and what meanings they give to music, movement, lamentation and public participation.

PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS

From Helplessness to Active Participation

When someone dies, they leave survivors with a fate they can't change. The carrying of the bier, drumming, songs and processing turn passive helplessness into active and structured participation, which is consistent with the other psychological research outcomes that show that active coping, ritual action and processing effectively diminishes the helplessness following loss.

Rites of Passage and the Management of Transition

The classic model of anthropological rites of passage, developed by Arnold van Gennep, comprises separation, liminality, and reincorporation, and is helpful in describing the funeral procession (Van Gennep, 1960). The separation phase represented by actual traveling of the body from the home to the community to the cremation ground. A liminal transition is sustained by the noise, music and collective presence, while the (re)return of the mourners to ordinary life signifies reincorporation. The ritual is very predictable, and this renders the once-unpredictable and frightening event psychologically manageable.

Collective Effervescence and Social Support Are In Tandem.

Emile Durkheim (1912/1995) coined the term collective effervescence to refer to the heightened sense of group solidarity that can emerge in a group when its members share a single rhythm, movement and emotional expression. The concept of *communitas* is related to that of Victor Turner, who refers to the levelling, unifying experience that can be experienced in community when a community moves together through ritual (Turner, 1969). When used in the context of saavu kuthu, shared drumming and dance can reasonably create the possibility

of a temporary fusion of the individual grievances into a collective emotional experience. Meanwhile, the physical proximity of many grieving people provides tangible, embodied social support to the bereaved, which has long been known in bereavement studies as a protective factor against feelings of isolation.

Emotional Complexity rather than Contradiction

One constant finding across the anthropological literature is that while mourning and a form of celebration may occur at the same time in a ritual event, they are not mutually mutually exclusive (Clark-Décès, 2005). Sadness at a death and affectionate remembrance of a life lived can be together and a mourners can cry at one moment and dance a minute later at oppari. This makes it difficult to easily redescribe dancing as simply happy, and crying as simply sad.

DISCUSSION

The apparent celebration is caused by several different factors. For some communities, the funeral is a way to express sorrow and also make a statement of goodbye, especially if the person who has died has lived a full life, like a person who is elderly (Clark-Décès, 2005). Physical energy of drumming and dancing can also serve as an outlet for pent-up emotional energy. This is a naturally energetic and high volume environment, as large scale community participation creates such a situation, and the use of gaana, cinema influenced dance and contemporary popular culture lends the modern funeral performance a distinctly urban, high tempo character (Clark-Décès, 2005; Diwakar, 2023). If the deceased was also known for his or her sense of humour or sociability, then the friends and relatives are free to act in a similar fashion during the send off. To an outsider, the act of celebrating the dead, who are present in the flesh, seems like an incongruous response to the dead; to someone within the tradition, it is a fitting response of honoring, accompanying and remembering the dead.

CONCLUSION

Saavu kuthu in Chennai is not merely a celebration of death. Saavu kuthu is a response to death that has been shaped by history by rules and by culture that can change. Saavu kuthu meanings come from Tamil ways of lamenting and playing drums from the caste history of the parai from funeral practices that involve the whole community and from modern urban music like gaana and marana gaana. Although some forms of Saavu kuthu are closely linked to communities and places for example important traditions in North Chennai Saavu kuthu is not limited to just one area or one social group. Chennais many cultures create differences in how Saavu kuthu looks how strong it feels and what it means. Socially Saavu kuthu turns a loss into an event that many people see together. Saavu kuthu publicly honors the dead. Makes ties stronger among family, friends and neighbours. Culturally Saavu kuthu gives a way to say grief, remembrance, love and identity. Saavu kuthu history also shows how work that was once seen as status can be turned into strong modern culture and art. Psychologically Saavu kuthu rhythm, movement and group feel can give mourners a way to take part in an event. The company of others can lower the feeling of being alone when grieving. The mix of sadness and celebration in Saavu kuthu should not be seen as a contradiction. Crying, singing, drumming, dancing, remembering and even laughing can all happen in the ritual. Saavu kuthu shows that mourning is a mix of feelings and is set up by culture. Saavu kuthu shows that there is no way to show grief with eyes or actions. What looks like a party to someone watching may mean goodbye, respect, remembrance, teamwork and relief for people, inside the Saavu kuthu ritual. To understand Saavu kuthu one must look at caste, class, religion, gender, age, place, city life and each person's experience. Future studies that mix field watching, talking, music study and careful psychological tests could give an idea of how Saavu kuthu helps people deal with death in modern Chennai.

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