Cultural Significance Of Naming: A Case Study Of Yakobaya Of Central Kerala

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Abstract: The name is the first identity of any individual before any other factor is considered but at the same time considering its literal sense can lead to misconceptions. Selection of the personal names often associated with not only emotions, expectations and experience but most often have cultural bearings. Obviously, the name reflects one's caste, religion, gender, and even his nationality too. In some societies, some names are prominent and popular than others due to various cultural reasons. Cultural geography, cultural landscape, sacredness, divine experiences, memories, myths, and folks are acted the cause of this cultural phenomenon. In middle Kerala, the often-repeated name among Jacobite Syrian sect is Eldho/ Basil, as a suffix or prefix. In this paper it is intended to analyze the cultural significance of this name among the concerned sect, giving a reflection of history, faith, and religiosity of the Jacobite Syrian Christians.

Index Terms: Eldho, Yakobaya, Collective Memory, Culture Landscape

1. INTRODUCTION

Basically, discussions about the name are one of the study areas of both Linguistics and Philosophy. Both these disciplines have several theories about the naming. They are mainly focused on the function and nature of the name, and one of the conclusions of linguists is “that names do not have meaning but only perform the function of denoting items once they become inactive” [1]; [2]. And Ullmann observed that “General nouns were seen as being meaningful units while proper names stand as mere identification marks” [3]. John Stuart Mill- a Philosopher incepted the discussions about the theories of a proper name. Mill’s first conclusion is “a proper name is an unmeaning mark which we connect in our mind with the idea of the object” [4]. He further says it should singular and noncommotative like Raman, Seetha, etc. Next school of thought of name developed by Frege. Theories of the names are split into these two schools of thoughts, Frege’s theory is contrasting the Mill’s theory. The central tenet of Frege’s view is that “in addition to the reference of a name, there is its sense, wherein the mode of presentation [of the referent] is contained” [5]. They defined what is the name and the theoretical discussions about the name are very vibrantly going in these disciplines. The anthropological perspective is quite different than the linguistics or Philosophy.

Anthropology of Name

We briefly have seen the crux of the name from the perspective of Linguistics and Philosophy and here our interest is to understand anthropologically what is a name. The proper name has a direct relation with the culture and the names are varying within the culture. As a blanket, we can take the example that Raman and Seethe the names of people who followed Hindu religion, and Joseph and Mary are the names of Christians, these names coming from the Holy Texts which belong to the respective communities. This is one aspect of the choosing of a name. The above conditions show that the past history, myths, and folks are underlying causes of making the names. Of course, this paper is not intended to discuss how the name incepted but it is aimed at the anthropological perspective of a name and the cultural influences behind it. The names have proper indication in their respective culture and these names have certain boundaries which may be because of geographical boundaries, religion, caste, Tribe, ethnic groups, and sect. We focus here the cultural roots of the name. It looks into the role of culture in the names of persons, places, communities and so on. The name is highly related to the culture where it belongs and it becomes incoherent if it is displaced. As an example, “Ravulla” is name of a tribal community in Kerala and Karnataka border and the word carries a meaning ‘traveler’ and the tribe were a nomadic pastoralist community and the name represent this very hub of their culture. The word became senseless if it is taken away from that particular culture. So, each name has a strong relation to its culture. In some cultures, some names are visible very commonly, while some names are very common in a particular geographical area. All these characteristics of the name are related to different aspects of culture including myths, folks, holy texts/ religious texts, collective memories, lived experiences, history, reverence to the legends of the culture, ancestors and so on. In some cases, cultural geography especially cultural landscape also be a player of this phenomenon. Myth is a universal phenomenon. Every culture has its own myths. And in the cultural groups based on modern religions, the stories of Holy texts played the role of myths and folks. But most of the myths and folks are in oral forms, even text-based religions like Judaism, or Christianity also have their own oral forms of stories and knowledge which may vary with the geographical areas. Myth is a very complex phenomenon so there is no single definition about it [6] but in very simple terms we can call it a “sacred narrative” or “culturally important stories” [7]. One of the important and interesting definitions of myth is given by Wendy Doniger O’ Flaherty [8] quoted by Gentile [7]... “Myth is a story that is sacred to and shared by a group of people who find their most important meanings in it; it is a story believed to have been composed in the past about an event in the past, or more rarely, in the future, an event that continues to have meaning in the present because it is remembered; it is a story that is part of a larger group of stories”. Peter O’ Connor summarizes “Myth is the distilled essence of human experience expressed in metaphor” [9]. The narratives of unwritten events, acts, values of life, the essence of life, answers of fundamental questions of life and so on are passing through the generation through oral narrations in the form of stories, poems, etc. is the myth of the society or the culture. And these myths may have several heroes who can be called legends. One of the characteristics of legend is he/ she has “some historical or topographical connection” [10]. The people of a particular culture may choose the names of their legends in both history and myths for themselves or their descendants and the
They are scattered all around in Kerala but they are numerically strong in middle Kerala specially Ernakulam and Kottayam districts. Angamaly, Perumbavoor, Kothamangalam, Muvattupuzha, are thickly populated by the Yakobaya sect. In this Geographical region, the name Eldho and Basil are very common personal names in this sect. It is also visible in other areas of where the sect is present but not this much in abundance. Nonetheless this particular geographical region the name Eldho is very common and popular. Here starts anthropology. All the research investigation is around a church in this region which is St. Thomas Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church Kothamangalam, natively known as Mar Thoman Cheriyapally Kothamangalam. One of the important religious ceremonies of a Jacobite culture is maramanda, normally conducting on the 90th day of the birth of a person that includes baptism and name-giving. The name given has a direct relationship with his/ her ancestors. Though most of the names are biblical in origin for all this one exception is there which is completely left to the parents’ will. That exception does baptism on the church of St. Thomas Jacobite Syrian Church Kothamangalam. This church has become popular due to the tomb of Saint Eldho Mar Baselios. Saint Baselios Eldho Usually, Jacobite names are mostly coming from the Bible or the saints of the first five centuries of the Christian era. The name Eldho first mentioned in the Bible in the book of Genesis (25: 4). But that Eldho is not a legend or hero and the character there got no importance. The name was originated in the upper Mesopotamia (Iraq) region in Aramaic language. Later the term was taken to the Syriac language which is liturgy language of Edessa (Urfa, Turkey) [17]. This is a dialect of Aramaic and in this language, the term Eldho has a meaning which is Holy birth, and usually its use to denote the birth of Lord Jesus and Christmas is known in the language as Yeldho perunnal. Not only this name, but every name itself also has a meaning in the Syriac/ Aramaic language. The name reached in Kerala in the sixteenth century with the arrival of Saint Eldho Mar Baselios (in old vernacular text it was spelled Yeldho) who born in a village Karakosh near Mosul, Iraq. The Christianity of Kerala traces its origins directly or indirectly to the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch [18]. There are several missionaries and bishops came from the core part of the Syriac Orthodox Church to Kerala. The core area of the Syriac Orthodox Church is in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. All these regions were Christian populated before the rise of Islam. The Syriac Orthodox church’s liturgy is in the Syriac language which is the dialect of Aramaic, the language the lord Jesus Christ spoke. Linguistics says both are same language. Christianity emerged in Kerala through the missionary activities by the Apostle St. Thomas [19]. But later the Christianity was nurtured by the bishops and monks who reached in Kerala from the third century onwards. Priesthood, liturgy, dress code, all other religious aspects were given by them. Christianity in Kerala became an integral part of Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch [18]; [20]. The church was popularly known as Jacobites [18]. The name also used to describe the Christians in Kerala. In the fifteenth century, the Roman Catholicism reached in Kerala with the Portuguese colonial forces. They tried to convert all Syriac (in vernacular text also seen as Syrian) Christians to Latin rite under the Holy See of Rome. This led to several disputes and resulted the schism in the church, one faction followed Roman Catholicism and another is standing under the Holy See of Antioch (Syriac Orthodox Church) [21]; [22]. The Syrians in Kerala do not point any
blood relation to the middle east region. It is purely cultural relation; the Syrians of Kerala were native origin but followed the Syriac liturgy in their prayers and religious and cultural life and they consider the Patriarchies of Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch as their spiritual head. The Syriac Orthodox people or Jacobites in Kerala lose the link with the church of Antioch because of the intrusion of Portuguese. In this situation, to reestablish the relation with Antioch, the head of Kerala church Mar Thoma II written the letters to the universal head of the church, the Patriarchies of Antioch Moran Mor Ignatius Abdul Masih I [18]. The Arabian sea was in control of the Portuguese army and the port Kochi is also under control of them and several bishops already murdered by the army and at this complex situation Maphryono Eldho Mar Baselios was ready to go to Kerala. Saint Eldho was joined in Mar Bahnan monastery in Iraq (Mosul) at his young age and he converted to a monk and in 1678 he was ordained as Maphryono. In 1684 he knew about the situations in Kerala and very next year at the age of 92, the Saint started his journey to Kerala to protect the faith of the Jacobites. Kochi was under the Portuguese surveillance, so his ship sailed to Thalassery, the northern part of Kerala, and from there the Saint and his companions traveled through the forest. After several weeks of the journey by foot, they reached Kothamangalam church which is in the mountainside and lies is in the central Kerala where Jacobites vastly inhabited. He was totally tired and he lived only 13 days and on October 2, 1685 the Saint died. Before his death he prophesied it. A lot of people met him on these days. After his death, he was entombed in the alter of Kothamangalam church. People who sought his intercession fulfilled their needs. The people consider him endowed with divine power and later the Patriarchies declared him as a Saint. On his way to the church, and within these small number of days he did several miracles and these supernatural experiences at his instances would be imprinted in their collective memory. The people who were in the region not only experienced it but also witnessed. The experienced knowledge was spread and rooted in their hearts and they passed it on to next generations and this would have been a cause to the wider acceptance of the saint.

(St. Thomas Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church, Kothamangalam)

(Tomb of Saint Eldho Mar Baselios)

The Saint’s name to their children became a cult of the region. People who want to give the Saint’s name to their children came to the church for baptism which later on became another cultural trait of the region. The peoples’ devotion and the love for the Saint increased rapidly. It was a mountain region and the people consider him a protector and called him Muthappan (Grand Father). Thus, two customs developed in the region. One is, if anyone wants to give the saint’s name to their children, they must have baptized in this church where the saint entombed. At the baptism time, the parents stand in queue (if more than one (family) is coming for baptism) and the odd one gets the name Eldho which is the Saint's first name and the even one gets the name Basil which is short form of the Saint's second name. The Saint name is not given to females because the saint is male and according to the tradition of sect the name of male characters/ saints/ legends is always given to males and the same as in females' cases. Another custom is once a person accepts this name, he cannot use any other name. Usually Christians in Kerala have two names one is Baptism name which may be a name of a Character in Bible or name of a saint, another name is his common name but, in this case, both should be same. The Saint and his miraculous life were a part of the collective memory of the people in the region where the church is. The devotion to him was rapidly increased and most of the people offered to the saint that “we give your name to our children”. This cultural trait is the actual cause of the abundance of the name in this particular region. The self-enacted cultural law, that is to get the saint's name one must have to baptize in the Kothamangalam church creates a cultural landscape or cultural boundary to the name. The cultural landscape comprises the surrounding regions of the church which include Muvuttupuzha, Piravam, Adimaly, Perumbavoor, Aliuva, and Angamaly.

Social Cohesion and Identity
This name is visible only among Jacobite Orthodox Syrians, so the name itself reveals the sect identity of the individual and it brings about cooperation among the unknown individuals under this name. In Kerala, Christianity has several sects and to identify the sect of unknown persons is not easy, but the individual who has this name reveals indirectly his sect identity and people who belong to the same sect can easily identify them and this creates cohesive relations and makes social interactions easy. The name opens the way for comfortable interactions with the people of the same sect. The same reason would isolate them in some gatherings, and places where inter-sect conflicts are prominent. Some regions of Kerala witnessed the inter-sect conflicts between Jacobites (Jacobite Syrian Orthodox) and Malankara Orthodox sect. Within the community, the people who have the name have certain social statuses, not only the individual but the family as a unit. This does not give any economic benefits but in social consciousness, they have a respectful position. In case of any inappropriate behavior against society or religion, it would affect them more drastically than the others. Even non-sect/ non-Christian people criticize them like “with the saint name he did all these things”. So, the people who have this name should take care to be free from blame and contempt. The name gives respect and simultaneously it gives responsibility too. The people who have the name must have to visit the church at least once in a year, of course, it is not a law but by practice, it becomes customary law. Not only the person, his
family members also visit the church. The name bearer always believes that the saint would protect him always and in their individual consciousness the thought is very strongly rooted. The female family members, like mother/daughter/sister/wife also have the same belief and feeling because so and so person (like my father/son/husband/brother) has the name. The name bearers always seek the intercession of the saint and they are very happy to visit the saints’ tomb and that gives mental strength and confidence to them. The relationship between the name carriers is also interesting. They may become friends so easily with or without knowledge of each other and may become very much attached if other socio-economic aspects match, and a fraternal relation is formed in their circle.

CONCLUSION
The name is a tool to denote a person. The names are not coming accidentally. The culture has a crucial role in it. The Saint Eldho and devotion to the Saint are becoming a part of the collective consciousness of Jacobites in this region. The region falls in the jurisdiction of the church. In 2014 the church has conducted a meeting of the people who have the name Eldho and Basil. In that meeting more than fifty thousand people have participated. In Kothamangalam region every Jacobite family has at least one person with the name either Eldho or Basil. Even today we can identify the geographical boundary of this cultural landscape. The epic arrival of the Saint, his miraculous life, peoples’ memory, peoples’ devotion, and offering are the religious and cultural causes of the abundance of this name. The cultural trait of this name is limited in a particular geographical region and the cause is cultural landscape. The name was deeply rooted in culture of Jacobite Syrian Orthodox sect. This particular case is showing certain cultural traits beyond the individual identity requirement which a name expected to sense. The myths, folks, legends, characters of religious texts, history, memories have a role in the names of that culture.

REFERENCES