Traditional knowledge of folk crafts in Tamil Nadu

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Folk craft is one of the significant areas in the study of material culture. It is social rather than individual. The traditional craftsmen serve the purpose of fulfilling some of the socio-cultural needs of the society and they are generally identified by their traditional occupation. The paper gives attention on three traditional folk crafts, i.e. earthenware by Kullalar, grass mat weaving by Muslim Labbai and basketry by Malai Kuravar community. It documents the traditional techniques of crafting and analyses the role of crafts and craftsmen in socio-cultural context and the changing scenario of folk craft in contemporary context.

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Traditional knowledge refers to knowledge systems, creations, innovations and cultural expressions which have generally been transmitted from generation to generation and are constantly evolving in response to a changing environment. The nature and use of such knowledge and expressions are transmitted to enhance, safeguard and perpetuate the identity, well-being and rights of the indigenous peoples. Folklore is traditionally transmitted, preserved, created and recreated in the society. Material culture may be considered as tangible but the traditional knowledge about the material is intangible. Each material culture reflects the cultural identities of a particular people in a particular region. The traditional knowledge of material culture refers the techniques, skills, recipes and formulas transmitted across the generation. How men and women in traditional societies build their homes, make their clothes, prepare their food, farm their fish, process the earth’s bounty, fashion their tools and Implements and design their furniture and utensils are important that are concerned with material culture. In every rural society, there are particular socio-cultural groups, which are traditionally specialized in crafts. In southern Tamil Nadu, Kullalar community is expert in pottery, Malai Kuravar community is specialized in basketry and Muslim Labbai community is specialized in grass mat weaving. Though there are many other cultural traits practiced by the crafting communities, they are generally identified by their traditional occupation. For example, basketry is an identity for Malai Kuravar, earthenware is an identity for Kulalar and mat weaving is an identity for Muslim Labbais in a particular region. District Tirunelveli is situated in south of Tamil Nadu. The hills, which form the western boundary of the district, are a continuation of the great chain of the Western Ghats. It has all five geographical traditions mentioned in Tamil literature, Kurinji (mountains), Mullai (forests), Marutham (paddy fields), Neithal (coastal areas) and Palai (desert). Most of the population (80%) in this region is employed in agriculture and agro-based industries. Pottery and grass mat weaving are important folk crafts of the region. In the paper, three folk crafts practiced by three particular communities at Tirunelveli district in Tamil Nadu have been discussed.

Methodology
The paper is primarily based on empirical data and secondary sources are also consulted to enrich the paper. Ethnographic/folkloristics research methodo-
Eco-ethnology has been followed to accumulate data. Primary data were collected through fieldwork in the natural context of craftsmanship. Fieldwork had been carried out at selected villages of Karukuruchi, Pathamadai and Samathanapuram famous for the folk crafts.

Earthenware by Kullalar

Karukuruchi is a village situated in Tirunelveli district. About 20 Kullalar families are engaged in their traditional occupation. There is a myth that explains the origin of Kullalar community and the reason for which they are traditionally engaging in pottery. Clay is an important raw material for earthenware. Kullalar get clay from the nearby lakes like Udaikulam, Pathamadaikulam and Thalaimaraikulam. Fine sand is mixed with clay in the ratio of 4:1. Then little water is poured on the mixing and left overnight. The next day morning, clay mixing is pressed with foot for some time and then it is knead with hands. The clay gets processed and gets ready for fabrication, locally known as Manaithal. Traditionally, a wheel, a bamboo stick, iron needle and a bit of cloth is used for fabricating earthenware. Earlier, wheel operated manually was used but now-a-days, electrical wheel is used. The first stage of fabricating a pot is to fabricate the upper portion. A particular quantity of clay is kept on the wheel and the craftsman fabricates the mouth portion of the pot with his hands keeping their left hand on the outer portion and right hand on the inner portion of the fabrication. The size of the pot is measured with hands or sometimes a small stick is used to measure the mouth of the pot. An iron needle is used to cut the unwanted portion of clay during fabrication. After finishing the upper portion, the lower body of the pot is fabricated continuously. Traditionally, fabrication (manaithal) is done only by the men folk of Kullalar community. The next step of fabrication is Thatuthal i.e tapping the pot. After fabrication, the pot is removed from the wheel and the bottom of the pot is tapped in order to get it shaped. A small flat stone is used to support inside the bottom of the pot and a wooden bat is used for tapping from the outside of the bottom. Generally, women folk perform this work. By tapping, the pot gets a fine shape. A huge kiln (choolai) is used to bake the earthenware. Choolai is made of bricks. A huge cylindrical drum made of bricks is at the top of the choolai and holes are made under the drum to make fire. The earthenware are arranged in a circular way inside the drum. Straws and woods are used in between earthenware in order to avoid damage. There are several sizes of drums. Generally, in a drum 1,000 items can be burned at a time. After arranging the items in the drum, the mouth of the drum is covered with paddy straws and husk. Then fire is made in the holes under the drum with firewood. Large number of firewood is required to burn the earthenware. The earthenware is kept in choolai for about 6 hrs. Then the baked pots are taken away from the choolai and arranged for marketing.

Basketry of Malai Kuravar

Basketry is a traditional occupation of Malai Kuravar domiciled at Tirunelveli district in Tamil Nadu. Malai Kuravar is also known as Vedar, Vettuvvar, Vettaiyaran and Veduvar. Malakuravar are divided in to 6 sub groups; Kaval kara kauravar (watchmen), Uppu kuravar (salt mongers), Thappai kuravar (bamboo splitters), Karwappalai kuravar (curry leaves sellers), Patchai kuthu kuravar (tattoo markers) and Koodai ketti kuravar (basket makers). These subgroups are based on their traditional occupation and vary from place to place. In Malai kuravar society, both men and women folk are engaged in basketry. Earlier, when they were in the jungle they used to collect bamboos- the raw material from the forest but in recent time they buy it from the market. To make the bamboos suitable for weaving, the bamboo sticks are first vertically cut in to pieces. The number of pieces depends upon the size of the basket; if the size is big bamboo is cut into 4 pieces and if it is small is cut into 8 pieces. These pieces are sprinkled with water and left to dry for few hours; then these pieces are further splitted into 3 pieces, called thappai. Thappais are polished with the help of a small sharp knife in order to make it fine. These thappais are classified into Muthuku thapai, Vaithu thapai and Ilan thapai. Muthuku thapai is the outer portion; ilan thapai refers to the middle portion and Vaithu thapai refers to the final portion of a bamboo piece. To make the baskets more attractive, colours are applied. Colour bars are dissolved in a bucket of hot water; thappais are dipped into the water for few minutes and then dried. With these thappais designs are made on the baskets.

After processing thapai, weaving of the basket starts. The first step of weaving a basket, adipodal refers the base or foundation for a basket. Some bamboo reaps are arranged one upon another in a
circular way and a knot is made in the middle. The numbers and the length of reaps depends upon the size of the basket. Then, thapais are interlaced on the base. This stage of weaving is known as meleluputhal (weaving the upper portion); the final part of weaving basket is vaimudipu (binding the mouth). Here, the ends of thappais, which are interlacing upward, are bent inward and tugged. There are several kinds of baskets. Kanji koodai (rice basket) is used to filter the water from cooked rice. Azhukku kodai is used for storing the soiled clothes. It is about 92 cm in height and circular in shape. Paper basket is about 31 cm height and circular in shape; used as dustbin. Appla koodai (pupped basket) used to keep fried puppeds is circular in shape with broad mouth. Kooparai moodi is a round disk is used to cover water containers. Kaikari koodai (vegetable basket), about 15 cm in height is used to store vegetables. Prasadha kodai, a small basket is used to carry puja items while going to temple. Thelli kodai is a basket used for keeping trapped fishes alive. The mouth of this basket is narrow and volume of it is large. Apart from baskets, they also prepare a window mat made of bamboo and nanariver (a kind of root). This window mat is used as a curtain in the window in order to make the room cool. Besides these, in monsoon season, they make some other type of baskets. Since, bamboos are not available during monsoon; they prepare baskets with the fine rods of udai or koolathi trees. These kinds of baskets are generally used to carry cow dung. The produced baskets are sold in the market.

Grass mat weaving of Muslim Labbai

Muslim Labbai families are domiciled at Pathamadai village in Tirunelveli district. Both men particularly women folk are traditionally engaged in grass mat weaving. Pathamadai village is prevalently branded for its grass mats. Looms are owned by every home and all family members are engaged in mat weaving. Korai, a kind of grass is used as raw material for mat weaving. Korai is largely available in the river Tamirabarani. Korai is gathered, tied into small bundles and kept in sunlight for about 10 days for drying for getting golden colour. These Korai is again tied as small bundle and kept in current water for 7-10 days; then the rotten and wastes are removed and divided on the basis of its length. Only the lengthy grasses are used for mat weaving. Every Korai is spited into 2 with a small sharp knife and the inner portion of the Korai is removed. These Korai are identified with counts like 100, 120, 140 based on their thickness and softness. Korai is dyed with natural colours. Herbs like Sambangi pattai, Kasaras are mixed with a bucket of water and boiled for some time; korai is dipped into this water. Lamp oil is also mixed with the water in order to make the colourings effectively. However, these days artificial colour powders are also used for dyeing. Cotton thread is an important raw material for mat weaving. These threads are identified with counts like 40, 50 and 60. The counts like 40 and 50 are used to weave ordinary mats and the count 60 is used to weave silk mats.

A particular kind of loom used for mat weaving consists of the several parts (Fig. 4). The local names that are used to mention the parts of the loom are munthandu, pinthandu, anaikuzhal, mukkali, maandon, thoduvattam, viluvattam, achu and kuchaani. Here, achu is the main tool for weaving. Achu is nothing but a kind of axle made of a wooden pole with holes in a horizontal line. Separate achu is used to weave different mats. The size of the holes is differing according to the kind of mats. Cotton threads are first horizontally woven in the loom and then korai is interwoven vertically in between these threads. Generally, 3-4 days are required to produce an ordinary mat and 10-15 days are required to produce a silk mat. Korai that are used for silk mats are very thin therefore it requires more expertise and time. After weaving the mat, a border is stitched with

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Fig.1 Mixing of sand & clay  Fig. 2 Manaithal  Fig. 3 Loom used for weaving  Fig. 4 Sticks cutting for basketry
to give soul to the sacred images. This ritual is known during the annual folk religious celebration. During the annual folk religious celebration, the devotees offer the images of the gods and goddesses as fulfillment of vow. For example in Isaki Amman worship, devotees offer the terracotta image of the Goddess to the temple. The traditional potters produce these votive images. Similarly, the grass mats also have significant role in some traditional marriages. The bride and the bridgroom should sit upon the mat to perform the marriage rituals. These examples signify the importance of the traditional crafts and craftsmen in the socio-culture.

**Cultural context of folk crafts**

Folk crafts are not only the traditional occupation of a particular community but also play a vital role in the socio-religious celebration of the region. The earthenware produced by Kullalar takes a significant place in folk religious practices. Offering of Theechati (firepot) and Ayeram kan paanai (pot with 1,000 holes) is an important ritual performed by the devotees as fulfillment of vow. These pots are considered as sacred. Devotees give some money together with betel leaves, areca nuts and vermilion as an advance to produce the sacred objects. Kullalar, who produces these sacred objects have to observe fasting to produce these sacred objects. Kullalar are expertise not only in pottery but also in the art of making the images of Gods and Goddesses. They also produce several votive offerings like horse, elephant, etc. Most of the images of the folk deities are made of terracotta. Generally, Kullalar produces these terracotta images. Devotees, who wish to erect a new temple for a particular deity in his village, take some sacred sand, locally known as pidimun from the origin temple of that deity and give it to Kullalar. Pidimun is mixed with the clay during the fabrication of the sacred images. The kullalar completes all the artistic works of the images other than draw the eyes of the image. On a particular day, the sacred image will be handed over to the devotee and will be erected in the new temple. Generally, the new images are installed during the annual folk religious celebration. During the celebration, the kullalar performs a ritual in order to give soul to the sacred images. This ritual is known as kanthirathal, i.e. opening of eyes. The sacred images are covered with cloth and the kullalar perform some puja and draw the black portion of the eyes in the images. It signifies that the image got its divine power. In some folk religion, devotees offer the images of the gods and goddesses as fulfillment of vow.

**Modern context of folk crafts**

The traditional folk crafts and the craftsmen are seriously affected by the modernization and urbanization; plastic and metal products are replacing the traditional materials. The raw materials are replaced with synthetic fibers and metals. The traditional craftsmen are forced to compete with the modern industries for their survival. The craftsmen are also changing their production according to the needs of the society. Kullalar, who were producing large number of earthen utensils for cooking are now concentrated on flowerpots and water pots. Grass mat weavers are changing their traditional colouring and started applying synthetic colours. The amount that they earn from the crafts is not enough to meet their day-to-day life. The younger generation is not concerned about their traditional occupation. Consequently, the transmission of the traditional knowledge of folk crafts will become endangered. The traditional craftsmen emerged as the most marginalized section of the society. In the general process they have been relegated to the outer edge of the society economically, culturally, politically and socially. They lose their cultural ideas and values like solidarity, communitarian spirit, cooperation, team work, sharing, sociability, direct face to face relationship harmony with nature and environment, etc. that have been traditionally transmitted over generations is also lost sight of. Modernization keeps the traditional craftsmen in nostalgia about their crafts, which becomes a survival problem of them.

**References**