

SURVEILLANCE AND CHRISTIAN RITUALS

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Abstract:

Rituals are an inevitable feature known to all human societies. They are usually traditions of a community, which may have cultural and religious overtones. More than that, they are elaborated, action or faith oriented 'codes' that proclaims a greater meaning, through symbolic gestures or actions. They bear a long history behind them, and are often unknown to its practitioners.

While most of us are active participants in ritual performances, we are sometimes ignorant about the surveillance element inherent in them. When it comes to Christian rituals, the concept of surveillance holds an important viewpoint. The religious sacraments, and other ritualistic acts, all contains actions, that signify the surveillance of the 'God's Eye' in them. But it doesn't end here. There are actions that also convey the necessity of being hidden, from other perspectives, but visible only to the 'Eye of God'. The paper tries to study the idea of surveillance and how it is reflected in Christian rituals in Kerala. We will try an analysis of the various holy sacraments, and religious gestures and practices to find out how the idea of surveillance is reflected in them.

Keywords: *Surveillance, Religion, Cultural studies, Gaze, Rituals.*

Religion and the rituals associated with them have always been part of the society, and are presumed to remain so for a significant period of time in the future. Rituals of this nature are meaningful behavior, and the meaningful contents of different rituals is an important field of research in social anthropology, as it is often the key to understanding comprehensive systems of meaning. They implicitly and explicitly reveal certain ideas regarding the corresponding religion's prominent beliefs.

So, what is surveillance? Surveillance, as per Foucault, refers to the ability to identify, classify, monitor, track, channel, and if needed, block the movement of individuals, objects, and communication across social, physical, and virtual spaces. When it comes to religious practices, surveillance goes beyond the Foucauldian idea based on disciplinary practices supported by scientific and popular discursive knowledge about forms of abnormality. As Deleuze has suggested, surveillance practices expand Foucauldian idea to include control of mobility of individuals inside state boundaries and beyond. In religion, this concept of "control" is exercised to prevent a believer from committing an action categorized as a "sin", as per the doctrines of that particular religion.

Religious communities have always been targets, as well as consumers, of surveillance. This may occur as the securitization of religious identity, as the feeling of being watched can either make a person secure or insecure. Cultures of surveillance develop with societies where religion remains a significant player and have a deeper influence. The case of religious practices of Christian communities in Kerala is somewhat nearer to this. The influence of religion is quite significant in this state.

When it comes to Christianity, this religion grew out of Judaism as a Second Temple Judaic sect in the 1st century in the Roman province of Judea. Other religious influences of early Christianity are Zoroastrianism and Gnosticism. And the religion has come a very long way to be in its modern form, as we see it today. The religion shows the influence of a variety of beliefs and cultures, and the same is reflected

in the religious rituals and practices too. Also, in Kerala, the religious rituals and gestures followed by the Christian community also show traces of Hinduism, which was prominent in Kerala before the arrival of Christianity.

Studying the Christian rituals, we can see that surveillance and gaze forms an important part of the same. The process of watching, and the belief of being watched forms an important aspect of these rituals. At first we will analyze certain sacraments associated with Christianity, especially that of Baptism and Penance. And then we will move on to certain religious practices followed in the religion, by the Catholic Christians in Kerala.

The first among these sacraments, Baptism is the act of immersion in natural sourced water. Immersion in the water represents a change in status in regards to purification, restoration, and qualification for full religious participation in the life of the community, ensuring that the cleansed person will not impose uncleanness on property or its owners. The surveillance part of the ritual becomes evident as Baptism; in a manner symbolize the act of bathing- the symbolic removal of impurity. When it takes the form of a sacrament, this act is under surveillance- the private act of bathing is publicized here, and is committed in the gaze of God. Again, this surveillance has another inherent importance, as Baptism offers you purity, and hence you become worthy for His gaze.

Unlike Baptism, the sacrament of Penance holds a deeper level on the effect of surveillance. In Catholic teaching, the Sacrament of Penance is the method of the Church by which individual men and women confess sins committed after baptism and have them absolved by God through the administration of a Priest. The Catholic Church teaches that sacramental confession requires three "acts" on the part of the penitent: contrition (sorrow of the soul for the sins committed), disclosure of the sins (the 'confession'), and satisfaction (the 'penance', i.e. doing something to make amends for the sins). The basic form of confession has not changed for centuries, although at one time confessions were made publicly. Here, the surveillance element was more crude- anyone was free to know of the sin others committed, and this freedom was often misused. The historical evolution of Penance makes it more interesting. Once, the public gaze was allowed on the individual, and later, the Church amended this notion, making the believer available only to the single gaze of God.

We can see this process of confession, following Foucault, as “a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence, or virtual presence, of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile” (*History of Sexuality* 61-62). There is always a second party who 'knows' everything that you confess. This factor can have various impacts, and it varies with people. Either they can be more vigilant, or can be worried. Also, Confession is a ritual in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who performs it as it has a therapeutic effect on the person- it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation and peace of mind. In other words, it makes the subject more docile, enabling the Church to easily exercise the power it have on the subjects.

Moreover, confession always takes place in some sort of closed space, a space that is sacred, denoting a kind of solemnity and privacy. This is typically a space that either belongs to the confessor or that he controls. This confinement also symbolizes surveillance that is entirely concentrated on the subject. Here, the subject becomes submissive to a dominant power that has right to question and criticize his actions. This idea too is established with the intention of making the subject feel remorse regarding committing further sins.

Regarding the other sacraments, the remaining five of the sacraments are usually done in the religious space of Church, except the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. The remaining four,

Sacraments of Holy Communion, Confirmation, Marriage and Holy Orders are performed in a sacred space, in the presence of witnesses, ensuring that the subject's acceptance in performing these rituals in front of the Public and the gaze of God.

When it comes to the sacrament of Holy Communion, the Kerala Catholic Christian community encourages closed communion, as against open communion offered by some other sects of Christianity. Closed communion is the practice of restricting the serving of the Eucharist to those who are accepted as members of the Church through other sacraments. Again, this act of communion reinforces the idea of surveillance exerted on the practitioners, as it proclaims the Christian belief of transubstantiation, before the closed community that follows such rituals. Transubstantiation is the process by which the bread and wine of the Eucharist is transformed into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ (“Catholic Doctrine of Transubstantiation: Definition & Overview”). The sacrament of Confirmation, as the name suggests, confirms the beliefs proclaimed through the earlier sacraments.

The sacraments of marriage and holy orders stands out in the list, as they are about the good of the larger community and how the newly consecrated individuals serve that community. These sacraments too, occur under the surveillance of a greater community, so that the future vocation of its recipients are publically proclaimed, making them feel the presence of an authority, who will observe their future actions and how far they remain true to the objectives of the sacraments they received.

Coming to the common religious practices observed by the Christian community, the actions performed in the ceremonies evidently shows surveillance. In some aspects, we can even see a gender-level surveillance in Christian practices. The women believers are expected to cover up their head, when indulged in prayers and ceremonies. This symbolic cover-up reminds an observer regarding a gaze to which they are subjected to. The need to be hidden, to be present only before His gaze throws light to the patriarchal notions that still exist in our community.

Also, the religious commemorative activities followed show the concept of surveillance that existed in Christian society. The Maundy Thursday is commemorative of the Last Supper of Jesus Christ, but it has also shared the history of the Jewish holiday of Passover that commemorates the Exodus from Egypt. Exodus 12 commands the Israelites to repeat this practice every year, performing the sacrifice during the day and then consuming it after the sun has set. Also it was stated that the action has to be done in the private space of home, so as to escape the tenth plague. This act assumes its modern form in the religious practice of Maundy Thursday. It symbolically reminds a believer that he is constantly under the gaze of a supreme power, that can make him vulnerable as he wishes. Also, adhering to the rules established by this power can offer him security and safety.

This doesn't end here. The presence of a surveillance power is reminded in most of the religious practices followed in Christianity. What we would like to acknowledge in this paper is the fact that Christian religious rituals, in Kerala exhibit an inherent element of surveillance in them. It reminds the believer, and assures him, that the power in which he believe him is watching over him, and is present to guide and chastise him as per the actions he perform. This itself is the root of any religion- the assurance of a supreme power that is present around oneself. Hence, surveillance can act as an element that acts as the core of religious beliefs itself and the religious practices observed by the Christian community in Kerala stands as a valid testimony for the same.

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