

“The heritage of the Kolam”

Interview with Rajaveni, Anandou and Sumitra at Ilainjakal school, Auroville 29th of December 2015

Context:



Image: Anandou

On the 29th of December 2015, I had the opportunity to meet with Balu - a passionate man who is in charge of the head unit Mohanam bioregional cultural and heritage centre in Auroville, under which four main sub-units are running. I will be working for the commercial tangent called Lively, which focuses on women's empowerment through tailoring and embroidery of the traditional Kolam. One of Mohanam's key mission is to spread the knowledge and heritage of the Kolam to the global public, as well as to the next generation locally. This is where my contribution enters the picture. Balu needs assistance in the creation of a presentation that will be used in schools in and around Auroville to promote the Kolam practices and values. Furthermore, he needs material that can be put on display on a cultural exhibition at the end of the Pongol month (15th of January 2016). After our initial meeting, he sent me with his wife Rajaveni to Ilainjaikal school, where I had the honour to interview and immerse myself in the history of the Kolam and Tamil culture.

Introduction:

The interview below takes place in a group setting with Rajaveni, Anandou and Sumitra. Rajaveni, Balu's wife, is one of the few female poets in Tamail Nadu. She also runs the Lively boutique and tailoring and embroidery workshops for village women. As a young woman she went to Ilainjaikal school to learn english and Tamil culture, where Anandou, the man who is the main respondent in this interview, was her teacher and role model. She says before we enter the building that he taught her everything she knows about the Kolam and that she still comes to him for advice and blessing every time before her travels for Kolam workshops abroad and around India. Anandou is an artist with a master in Economics and a Yoga degree. He expresses to have a strong personal attachment to the Gods as he presently conducts research on the Mandalas. There are four main Mandalas: Knowledge, Courage, Prosperity and the Power of the mind. The main difference between Kolams and Mandalas, is that a Mandala is generally more energetic and powerful. It has a stronger system of geometry. When I ask where Anandou was born he answers “On the earth only” and laughs before he adds Pondicherry - where he lives even today. He doesn't like to bind his birth to one geographical point, but sees himself as a product of the earth as a whole. He is working by giving service to Auroville; “I don't like to work because I don't want to be a slave. My soul said that I only have to serve in Auroville and that is what I have been doing for the past 16 years to develop

Aurovillians' inner feelings and motivate their souls to lead happy lives. More than 2000 students have been at this school".

Sumitra, the third participant in the interview, is a teacher at the school. She originally comes from one of the bioregional villages, but has lived in Auroville for many years assigning her life to service for the Aurovillian community. The person speaking in the interview will be referred to with their initial.

E: What does the Kolam mean?

A: The Kolam means beauty, prosperity, wealth and health. The making of Kolams is a form of meditation. However, there are regulations applied to the Kolam. You have to draw it before sunrise (roughly 06.00) in front of your house. Before you can start the preparations you have to open the backdoor to give free space for the spirits. Then you have to wash your hands and face, while the bath will have to wait for later. Water mixed with cow dung is sprinkled on the floor, after which they sweep off the dung. Thereafter they start draw the Kolam. When the sunlight hits the cow dung it results in a strong smell that travels into the house and kills all bacteria i.e. cleanses the house and welcomes the Gods. You can make the Kolam in different styles to welcome the God. Some may put a candle in the middle, or a piece of cow dung with a pumpkin flower on top. The pumpkin flower represents the sun, which welcomes both guests, Gods and Goddesses. Additionally, during menstruation, women should not draw Kolams unless they have taken a complete bath before and not at all in front of the kitchen entrance regardless if they have taken a bath or not. There are many secrets behind the Kolam. The dots represent the man (the God) and the lines represents the woman (The goddess). Without the man there is no woman and without the woman there is no man.

E: Do women make Kolams everyday?

A: Yes. The structure and size of the Kolam tells the story and situation of the woman. If it is small she was maybe not well or in a hurry to something else. If someone in the family dies, there will not be a Kolam in front of the house for 16 days. Also the day of the new moon there will be no Kolam.

E: Is it only women who put the Kolam?

A: Only the women.

R: Men are lazy haha.

A: The young girl first learns the mathematics of how to count the dots. They also learn how to keep the house beautiful and the artistic skills to value and create beauty. Men are the most powerful in the house, which is illustrated by the dots. The dots have to be drawn first - this is very important because they are the foundation; and then you draw the lines. The women circulates and encloses the men, which symbolises the women's indirect power and the interconnection between the sexes. If the Kolam is drawn good or bad, for example with the protecting symbols surrounding the Kolam or if it has been made in a symmetrical manner or not, this will influence whether the day will be a fruitful or draining one.

E: So the women are in some ways in control of the whole day, depending on how good they make the Kolam?

A: Haha yes you can say that.

R: But it is primarily the one who drew that Kolam that will have the strongest effects.

E: Are there different types of Kolams?

A: Yes. The one with dots and lines is the most powerful one. It is the one with the deepest meaning and is called Sicku Kolam. The Sicku Kolam has thousands of hidden secrets. Actually there is a girl from America that will make her PhD on the Kolams during 2016! The Sicku Kolam has no meaning without the dots, then it is just a drawing Kolam for the sake of its beauty. Again you can see that there are no women without the men, there are no lines without dots. This month is the Pongol month, which is the month for Kolams (15 December - 15 January). This month, the women are extra active and make many Kolams every morning because they have additional power and energy during this month. The Sicku Kolam is always white, because there is no place to put the colours. If you put colours you will not see the dots. Other than Sicku Kolams there are also Picture Kolams or Flower Kolams, which are just for the beauty and they have a lot of colours. The male peacock is a common Picture Kolam, because it has all the colours and is the symbol that takes away evil such as snakes and other evil spirits. In the mountain areas in India, they do the wall Kolams instead of on the ground.

E: What are some of the effects from the Kolam that was mentioned earlier?

A: The Sicku Kolam improves the mental power, mathematical skills, logistics and meditative strength of the women. The women also learn to discipline themselves when they are cleaning and drawing the Kolam.

E: Is there a certain way that the Kolam has to be drawn?

A: Yes they are not supposed to sit down when they draw it. They must have straight legs and bend - it will improve their abdomen. You always start drawing from the right side and finish with the left. This is because the right side represents the man and the left side is the woman. This means that half of all human beings' bodies has concentrated man power in the right side of the body, while the other side has concentrated women power. The right side also symbolise the sun and the left side the moon, which is reflected in the breathing. When you breathe through your right nostril your body becomes hot, while it cools down when you breathe through your left. Furthermore, the breathing also have power over your blood pressure. Breathing through your right nostril results in higher blood pressure while breathing through your left calms you down and lowers your blood pressure. When women bend down to draw the Kolam, their heart is facing the ground, which improves respiration and concentration. The drawing of the Kolam and its power is also influenced by which day of the week it is. Sunday refers to the Sun, which makes it a hot day because more sun energy is radiated to the earth. Monday is the day of the moon, which makes it a cooler day. Tuesday is another hot day, because it represents Mars, which is reddish and hot. Wednesday is the day of Mercurous and Thursday the day of Jupiter. Thursdays' energy improves people's knowledge absorption because the brain is more active. Friday is Venus' day. Every Friday each house has a particularly beautiful Kolam, because it is also the day of women empowerment. The Kolam often have yellow and red powder incorporated in the design on Fridays. On Fridays and Tuesdays, women must bath with sesame oil that is being applied from head to toe. This reduces the body heat and lower stress levels, which is another reason why Kolams on these days often have extra power -

the women have a higher concentration, control and discipline. A herb called Sikha is used to clean away the oil. The yellow powder that is used on these days is the Tumeric which is very hygienic and have antibiotic functions. When it is applied to the body it control skin problems, aching, menstruation (cleanses the impurity of the blood), ageing, female moustaches (which is why men cannot use this powder, because it would stop their moustache growth and reduce their manliness) and lastly it controls cancer. Thus Tumeric is used by the women on Tuesdays and Fridays, which makes the women's skin look very beautiful on the following days. Men should take the oil baths on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

E: Is the Kolam practice affected by the strong caste system in India?

A: No, the Kolam is not for any particular caste. It is for all. Even the very poor will make sure to buy powder before they buy food for themselves. The Kolam makes them feel happy.

E: What is the strongest memory you (Anandou) have of the Kolam?

A: One day when my mother was making the Kolam, I felt so inspired and said that I wanted to make it too. But my mother told me that I should do art on the side while she makes the Kolam. So I did that for two days straight haha and it gave me so much happiness.

E: Is there any rivalry between the women when making the Kolams?

A: Yes there is a lot of jealousy between the women. They look at their neighbours how they do it, memorise it and then try to improve their own styles.

S: I cannot sleep at night because I imagine the design. It improves my mind. We also appreciate the beauty and help each other finish if it is starting to get late. We also give compliments.

A: Unmarried ladies are extra interested in the neighbours, because there might be a young man living in the house haha.

E: What are the Kolams made of?

A: Rise powder. In our culture you have to offer something to the surrounding. The rise powder serves as an offering to the smaller beings, which eats the powder. When you offer something, the Gods will protect you and give back to you. The Sicku Kolum is strictly made with rise powder, while the Picture or Flower Kolam can be made of any powder. The yellow is usually taken from the Tumeric.

E: Where do the women learn how to make the Kolam?

S: I learnt from friends. The Sicku Kolam is very difficult so my mother taught me that one.

E: What is your (Sumitra) strongest memory of the Kolam?

S: I remember when I was 15 during the Pongol month. I told my mother that I would do the Kolam the next morning. I did a Flower Kolam and my mum became very angry. She told me that today is Pongol, why did you do the Flower Kolam? I had woken up at 03 and put a lot of beautiful colours,

but she was still angry. I had to wash everything away - I was so sad. After I had cleaned everything, I had to put the Pongol Kolam. Every Pongol time I think of my mother.

E: How do you (Sumitra) feel when you are drawing the Kolam ?

S: I always feel very happy when I do them. It was just that one day with my mother that I was sad. But after that day she taught me so many things and helped me to learn the Sicku Kolam. Now I only do the Sicku Kolam. I remember I felt so proud when I finally learnt to do it, because it is difficult.

E: Why do you feel that it is important to share and pass on the Kolam tradition?

A: We must not forget the tradition and history. The West forgot their culture and traditions because of capitalism and modernisation.

