

## Roots of Resistance and Identity: An analysis of *Kantara and The Journey of Tai-me*

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### ABSTRACT:

The oral transmission of cultural narratives and traditions is vibrant and organic in nature among most Indians. We have grown up listening to folk tales, myths and legends which have been passed down from generation to generation. Storytelling has been a part of our lives. Our mythological stories of Ramayana and Mahabharata, Akbar and Birbal Fables, have been the fondest part of the Indian childhood. Oral tradition has been a great part of Indian tradition as well as for the native American. The paper intends to approach the use of indigenous media and indigenous oral narratives by giving a comparative study of Kannada language movie *Kantara* (2022) and N. Scott Momaday's *The Journey of Tai-me* (1967) by blending folklore with mythology. *Kantara* optimally represents indigenous concerns within the form of contemporary media. Momaday's *The Journey of Tai-me* provides how oral transmission ensures the survival of the spirit of indigenous perspectives and world views. Both works successfully encapsulates and explores several culturally located traditions. The paper reflects the akin indigenous ontology viz the emphatic use of *Bhoota Kola*, a performative ritual prevalent among the indigenous community of Adivasi in the coastal region of southern Kerala and the *Sun dance* ritual of the native American, exchange of *Panjurli Daiva*, (an animist form of the spirit) and the exchange of spiritual amulet *Tai-me* to the Kiowa tribe. To delve and analyse the two works, this paper will employ the theoretical model of "fourth cinema" as offered by Barry Barclay and Levi-Strauss's concept of "mythemes". The paper attempts to bring up the essence of indigenous values, lives, and authenticity to limelight within an indigenous space rather amalgamating nor assimilating within the mainstream or dominant narratives. By bringing

up the mystical and intriguing narratives through folklore the paper studies the discourse of indigenous practices and rituals and how it also raises the question of polarity between the negative and positive connotation of superstition and belief.

**Keywords:** Oral tradition, folklore, myth, Bhoota  
Kola, Sun Dance, Panjurli Daiva, Tai-me,  
fourth cinema, mythemes.

The human mind was like white paper, void of all characters without any ideas form. This idea of blank paper or “tabula rasa” propounded by John Locke which expressed how epistemology was gained; it is nothing but everything comes to mind from experience. The question is how idea or knowledge form? It is by processing the sense experience, we sense the world through experience and some perception gives us the knowledge. From this point, experience matter and it is the ancestral experience which has been shared in the form of oral tradition by the indigenous people. The experience is shared in the form of myth, legend and folklore by the indigenous people around the world. This experience of collectiveness and authenticity has been used as a tool to relook the history and to deviate indigenous perspective from the mainstream literature and from the mainstream cinema by the contemporary writer and filmmaker. The present paper examines a comparative analysis of indigenous cinema and indigenous writing. To detail how indigenous work differed from mainstream cinema and literature, two works viz, *Kantara*, a Kannada movie and *The Journey of Tai-me* by N Scott Momaday will be appraised critically by employing the concept of “fourth cinema” Levi Strauss’s concept of “mythemes”.

Native American literature stems from rich traditions like songs, dances, myths, and stories. N Scott Momaday’s work, such as *The Journey of Tai-me* (1967), explores the cultural and spiritual significance of Tai-me, a sacred sun dance doll among the Kiowa people. It is a blend of mythology, history, and personal narrative, reflecting Momaday’s connection to his Native people, capturing tribal legends, giving voice to America’s deep cultural heritage. Analogously the film *Kantara* (2022) is based in the village of Kaadubettu, where residents pay homage to their guardian spirits, Panjurli and Guliga. The narrative centers around the veneration of these two divine beings. The legend of Panjurli originates from oral folklore. As per the tale,

a wild boar's demise in Shiva and Parvati's paradise led to Parvati adopting its offspring. However, the boar's destructive nature prompted Shiva to consider slaying it. Parvati's affection for the boar stayed Shiva's hand, and instead, he exiled the boar to earth, tasking it with safeguarding humans and accepting offerings. Thus, the boar transformed into a benevolent spirit, Panjurli. This myth displays the integration of local worship into Shaivite traditions. Although the movie's storyline is fictional, the depicted local customs and celebrations are rooted. Consequently, folklore has been played a pertinent role in our life, especially to the indigenous people, where oral tradition is taken as a treasure as well as a part of their culture and history. The two works present in the paper whirls around the myth and folktales of the indigenous people of Adivasi community (Kerala) and the Kiowa tribe, a native American.

The concept of "fourth" cinema was coined by an award-winning New Zealand filmmaker, writer and philosopher Barry Barclay. In his book *Our Own image* (1990), he emphasizes and gives in details how his own M ori Community deviated from the mainstream's cinema. Barclay advocates the indigenous control, perspectives in media and display the indigenous genuinity and verity to the audiences. The concept of Fourth Cinema emphasizes the importance of indigenous voices and perspectives in filmmaking, challenging dominant narratives and hegemony. It shares similarities with Third Cinema in its potential for polemic and social critique. The term "Fourth World" originally referred to aboriginal peoples in colonized lands but has expanded to include minority groups globally, adding complexity to the definition and scope of Fourth Cinema. This ingredient of indigenous authenticity is conspicuous and discernible in the Kannada film *Kantara*, by Rishab Shetty. This movie can be examined from divergent perspectives with varied issues. However, the paper intends to investigate the indigenous truth which breaks the fourth wall of so called monistic mainstream cinema. Simultaneously the paper will do a comparative analysis of N. Scott Momaday's book *The Journey of Taimé*, which is a collection of Kiowa folktales with an enlargement form of Kiowa history. The book is fit to be employed the concept of fourth cinema although the book falls beyond the genre of cinema because fourth cinema is the eye of a Fourth World of history.

N. Scott Momaday embarks upon a project of reconstructing the indigenous truth and history through the book. He depicts the deep concern and representation of Native American traditions which differed from the monistic perspective of Eurocentric narration. In the preface of the book *The Journey of Tai-me*, Momaday focusses on the importance of oral tradition which is more immediate and vital than the written tradition, he said:

We are talking about the difference between reading Hamlet in a book and seeing Hamlet performed on a stage. In *The Journey of Tai-me*, we come as close to the oral tradition as it is possible to come on the written pages.

The significant of oral traditions is evident in the movie as well. Oral Storytelling as a part of Indian tradition, *Kantara* opens with a man telling the story of a king who possess everything except the peace of mind. In return of his peace of mind, he exchanged some parts of his land with the local spirit called the Panjurli Daiva. The plot of the movie revolves around the practice of Bhoota Kola, a practice of worshipping around the Coastal Karnataka. To precise, the indigenous elements found in both works, the words of Stuart Murray, University of Leeds can be quoted. Stuart Murray said about fourth cinema in relevance with the book *Our Own Image*:

Barry Barclay produced a manifesto for indigenous cinema. Both intellectual exhortation and community document, it is driven by a ferocious critical intelligence and a commitment to a practice and understanding of cultural representation based on principle of justice and self-determination. It discusses to be seen as a major contribution to global film studies.

The important words to be highlighted from the above quote includes-indigenous cinema, community document, practice, cultural representation, self-determination; these are abundant in *Kantara*. In the movie, the indigenous uniqueness with the practice of Bhoota Kola from initial to the end, where community perform it as an oracle. The movie shows the culture, beliefs, faith, identity with the concept of regionality. And the story recorded as a significant landmark towards age-old traditions and customs of the indigenous. It not only revived the traditions of indigenous people but also acts as a tool of transforming the mainstream ideologies. It is same in the case of Momaday's *the Journey of Tai-me*, which is pre-eminently the history of an idea, man's idea of himself in the form of mythology,

legend, lore and hearsay. This form of narrating and writing of Momaday along with an echo of past generations made a complete deviation from Eurocentric writing and made a clear way to bring forward from margin to the centre. So, both works can be looked as displaying indigenous myth to reveal the indigenous values and transforming ideology. By contributing in the forms of writing and cinema, tried to make ideas and facts passed as natural, answering what the hegemonic instances of power do, in Antonio Gramsci's word – to support and sustain them the position of domination.

To compare and reveal the indigenous truth the two works also fit to analyse with the concept "mythemes". Mythemes is the concept devised by Claude Levi-Strauss which includes units of narrative features to compare different myths around the world in a more scientific approach. Levi Struss used the arbitrary relationship between signs and their meaning (Ferdinand de Saussure) to compare myths across the world which is diverse culturally. The two works viz *Kantara* and *The journey of tai-me* have same properties as Levi Strauss argued, that mythemes contain properties which is above the ordinary linguistic level. The details in the movie and the book are different at some extent yet the significant remains same. By arranging the mythemes into semantic packets, the two indigenous work reveals the indigenous authenticity. The myths used in the works are broken down into units, starting from the beliefs and culture of the indigenous people of Kannada and Kiowa tribe of Native America.

One of the most striking episodes in the movie and the book is how the king found his peace of mind with an exchange of the demigod, Panjurli Daiva and how Tai-me belonged to the Kiowa tribe. The movie starts with a narration of a king, who had everything except for peace of mind. Despite being tried everything to have peace in his mind, everything turned out as futile and the king was in despair. So, he went out desperately in search of "peace of mind" all alone. After visiting many places, the king went to the forest and he heard a distant sound of anklet and look unfazed. He felt like he has found the thing he has been searching for, he then stops in front of a stone and surrender his weapon and folded his handed with reverence. He then requested the tribal people to entrust the stone, the demigod (Panjurli Daiva) to him. That is when Panjurli spoke out and asked the king:

Panjurli: I shall come along with you...

If I bestow you with happiness and peace,

What will you give to my people  
You will grant all the land across  
Which the sound of my voice traversed.

That is how the villager's Panjurli Daiva belonged to the lap of the king. The king's vast land was now in the hands of the villagers. This episode of exchanging Panjurli and the king's peace of mind has striking similarity with the myth of Tai-me. The Kiowa myth tells how tai-me belonged to them:

Long ago there was bad times. The Kiowas were hungry and there was no food. There was a man heard his children cry from hunger, and he went out to look for food. He walked four days and became very weak. On the fourth day he came to a great canyon. Suddenly there was thunder and lightning. A voice spoke to him and said, "why are you following? What do you want?" The man was afraid. The thing standing before him had the feet of a deer, and its body was covered with feathers. The man answered that the Kiowas were hungry. "Take me with you," the voice said, "and I will give you whatever you want." From that day Tai-me has belonged to the Kiowas. (36)

Tai-me is both animal and bird and yet is neither of the two. The stone or the spirit that gives peace of mind to the king was both stone and spirit and yet is neither of the two. Panjurli Daiva, the demigod was in the form of stone and Tai-me was in the form of animal and bird, having the feet of deer and its body covered with feather. Though some of the specific details in the stories are different, the significant remains the same, that's how Panjurli and Tai-me belonged to the people with their protecting charm and thus became an indispensable part in the life of Kiowa tribe and Adivasi community. How Panjurli exchange with kings' inner peace of mind and how Tai-me exchanged with the hunger of Kiowas have a comparable analogous. So, both the demigod and fetish named Tai-me act as a spiritual amulet which has protecting charm. These two episodes can be considered as a mytheme, where semantic echoes reveal about the beliefs and values of the indigenous tribe.

Many Europeans and Euro-Americans considered Native Peoples to be beneath them – bloodthirsty, godless, and stupid. It is same with the Adivasi community that always goes with a typical notion of barbaric and uncivilized. Momaday revisits the myth of how the Kiowa girl married sun and how they failed to cultivate plants and ultimately leads to be nomadic.

It is apparent that many of the indigenous tribe were nomadic and survive through hunting but they never posed a threat to the land and environment. Similarly in the film *Kantara* explores the interconnectedness of humans and nature, highlighting their interdependence. The story touches on the conflict between the lord's family, who want to maintain control over the land, and the tribes, who believe their rituals and worship of nature, particularly the wild boar, are essential to preserving the forest's sanctity and balance. Yet they have their own certain beliefs and practice with a harmonious living relationship with nature by relying for their survival.

Another astounding similarity between myths found in the two works are the practice and belief of the indigenous people. By breaking down myths into units and reflecting to the indigenous genuinity and verity to the audiences, the practice of Bhoota Kola and Sun Dance can be looked as a practice which shows the indigenous peculiarity. In the movie, from initial to the end, where community perform Bhoota Kola acts as an oracle which ultimately gives the concept of regionality and their culture. Daiva Kola a ritualistic, a sacred animist dance performance in the honour of local deities is akin with Kiowas sacred ceremonial Sun Dance tradition which integrally connect with Tai-me. The beginning of the Sun Dance is told in the book as:

The dancers treated themselves with buffalo medicine, and slowly they began to take their steps. You know why there were the four societies: the O-homo, the Gourd Dance, the Black Leggings, and the Hunting Horse. And all the people were around, and they wore splendid things- beautiful pendants shone like the sun. There were many people, and oh, it was beautiful! That was the beginning of the Sun Dance. It was all for Tai-me...

The two works sought to privilege the indigenous gaze and the indigenous audience like in the ceremonial sacred process of performing Sun Dance and Bhoota Kola that have a great akin, the way how performer of Bhoota Kola prepared with bright colours on his well-oiled face and body, and dressing up with traditional jewellery and cloths. In this way the native communities address themselves as well as transcends powers through ritual orations. They have spiritual, supernatural and even metaphysical relationship with nature or with their surroundings. In the same way Native American thought is also essentially mystical and psychic in nature. Like how the sun dance performers adorned themselves with white

paint, symbolizing spiritual purity, and carried sacred pouches (containing spiritually significant objects) and sage. Inside the ceremonial hut, they would place their sage and pouches in a designated spot. The lead spiritual leader might begin the ritual by honouring the spirits with a trophy from a past battle. The sacred pipe, filled with revered tobacco, was lit and offered to the cardinal directions, the divine, and fellow participants.

By centering the indigenous gaze both works highlight indigenous identity and cultural preservation and resistance which eventually challenge the dominant narratives. Both the works potentially touch on a dream sequence which is mystic in nature. In *Kantara*, the protagonist Shiva, who must perform Bhoota Kola, always has a dream sequence where Panjurli appears in certain disguise and give a warning of events to be happened or about the downfall of his community. In the same way in Momaday's book *The Journey of Tai-me*, a character called Botone was the last Tai-me man to perform Tai-me and the one who could open the bundle and not supposed to leave it. But he left it alone at night and he died but before he died a voice said in his dream why he forgot about Tai-me. After the dead of Botone, the sign of Tai-me's presence is visible through dreams and sense it to Botone's daughter. Once people believed Botone's daughter was to be dead but she woke up and Tai-me was returned to her. This returning Tai-me goes parallel with how the demigod spirit returned to Shiva after the death of his father. So, the myths are mystic in nature even the forest in *Kantara* has a mystical power. This connection between the indigenous symbol and the concept is a mystical one, that ultimately make to hold their identity and history. By arranging the semantics packets of myths and identifying smallest elements from the two works, the signification remains is the 'indigenous truth' and 'the underlying meanings in the myth'. But the big question is why we always intend and speculate to go with the inappropriate stereotypical notion and negative connotation with the indigenous practices and believes? Levi- Strauss, regarding myth, has a belief not to think myths as something 'idle play' or a 'coarse kind of mankind'. In his book *Myth and Meaning* (1978), he wrote:

Mythical stories are, or seem, arbitrary, meaningless, absurd, yet nevertheless they seem to reappear all over the world. A 'fanciful' creation of the mind in one place would be unique—you would not find the same creation in a completely different place.



It is because the stories of the myths convey the basic and essential feelings which is usual to us, to the entire human race. With its mystical idiosyncrasy renders some sort of elucidation for phenomena which science had yet to expound. Besides being adherence to indigenous identity and truth through myth and folktales, it makes us to reflect a complex social structure and social relations of each tribe or community. Subsequently, the semantic reverberation endowed in divergent myths divulge about different culture and our understanding of the world.

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