

# Personal Narrative of The Festival of Roce: Gender, Kinship and Premarital Celebrations among Konkani Speaking Catholics

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## Abstract

The ceremony of roce (translated: coconut milk) is a premarital tradition practiced by Konkani speaking Roman Catholics residing in the western coastal regions of South India. Aiming to teach and transmit values and customs in the community, the festival involves bathing the bride and groom with coconut milk, dancing, exchanging gifts, and reciting Voviyo songs. Voviyo are Konkani folk songs that have been passed down for generations, exclusively sung—and often, composed—by women in the community. The tradition of singing folk songs during the ceremony remains alive among the Konkani Catholics today, and have not changed significantly over the years. This study discusses the rituals performed at the roce ceremony from an ethnographic interpretive framework, including the traditional food served, the celebrations and the exchange of specific, significant objects, in order to understand the kinship that underlines community practices. It presents a literary and anthropological analysis of Voviyo that have been collected and translated through extensive fieldwork. By unearthing female subjectivities, gender roles and relationships propagated through these Voviyo, the paper argues that the ceremony of roce represents and reproduces notions of femininity based on the patriarchal and religious practices that dominate women's lives in the community. The study maps recurrent gender images, defined gender roles and the community's expectations of an ideal marital relationship, as described through these songs.

## Introduction

Voviyo are traditional marriage songs, sung by the members of the Konkani-speaking Catholic communities residing in and native to the western coastal region of South India. These songs are predominantly performed during marriage ceremonies,

which are significant occasions in the community that span across two days. This article is an ethnographic study of the premarital ritual of roce, and explores the festivities and songs that are exclusive to and associated with it, also providing English transliterations and translations of these Konkani folk songs, documented through fieldwork based on Gladys Quadros' (2017) collection. The analysis on these songs will provide the foundation for an investigation into the intersubjectivity and community of Konkani-speaking Catholics. The songs recited primarily for the bride are selected and viewed through the lens of gender roles and their valuation in the community, with reference to traditional gender relations and notions of womanhood reflected in the songs.

Roce is a Konkani word referring to the milk extracted from the pulp of dried harvested coconuts, which is then applied to the bride or groom. The ritual begins with the Christian liturgical prayer recited in Konkani, with the roce of the bride and groom held on the same day in their respective houses. The ceremony is preceded by the head of the ward that the bride and her family belong to, attended by a priest and, occasionally, nuns. Wards are sub-communities divided and assigned by the church, determined by the residents' geographical locations. The bride or groom is anointed with holy oil, and the audience then take turns to pour coconut milk on the bride. In recent times, these ceremonies have also included the exchange of gifts, as the family members bring their agricultural produce and place it on the stage. The process takes place through a theatrical skit, where the family members dress up in colourful traditional costumes, pose as other family members and carry gifts such as arecanuts, vegetables and fruits, while merrily singing and dancing, while the aunts of the bride grate dried coconuts on the stage to mark the commencement of the festivities. After the roce is

poured on the bride, the relatives gather to share a traditional meal and join in the dance celebration of *baila*. The food usually consists of pork cooked in *bafat* powder (a traditional mixture of ground spices, used to make meat), pulses, lamb curry, *idli/dosa* and chicken cooked in coconut paste, accompanied with a locally-grown variety of red rice, with celebratory alcoholic beverages—specifically whiskey and beer—also served. Alessandro Falassi (1987) suggests that several constituent parts (referred to as ritual acts or rites) are 'quantitatively ever-recurrent and qualitatively important in festive events' (p. 4). The festival of *roce* is not only a religious rite of passage that marks the transition between virginity and marriage, but also a rite of conspicuous display and consumption (Falassi 1987, p. 4), wherein objects that are of importance to the community are displayed, invoked and consumed, usually consisting of crops such as coconuts, arecanuts and other vegetables. The ceremony is marked by colourful displays of flowers, grand clothes, gold ornaments and singing and dancing, while elders of the family—who are the guardians of the culture and authority figures—lead the festival through the *Voviyo*, which helps to propagate the shared values of the community. Though the festival of *roce* is religious in nature, it is performed outside an institutional setting, such as in farms, houses and backyards.

## Methodology

This article draws from my own experience of the Konkani Catholic community and experiential data I gathered in 2019. I was born into, and grew up in, the Konkani-speaking Catholic community of Mangalore, located in the southern state of Karnataka, India, where a variety of festivals are celebrated throughout the year, including the harvest festival of rice and the anniversary of the church. Every wedding celebration in the community is accompanied by the pre-marital ritual of *roce*, and the tradition of singing folk songs during the ceremony remains alive in the community today. The community is tight-knit, and weddings are grand, large-scale events, therefore over the years, I have heard the music of *roce* ceremonies firsthand. The data for this study was gathered after two rounds of fieldwork, where I actively listened to the recitation of these songs, which I collected by conversing with the women who performed them during the ceremonies, transcribing them in real-time (using Devanagari, as Konkani does not have its own distinct script). Through one of the singers

that I interviewed, I was acquainted with Gladys Quadros' compiled book of songs and prayers, 'Kanim Ghale Thel' (2017), which I went on to translate along with the *Voviyo* collected from the women that I observed during my study. The songs gathered are an integral part of the Konkani Catholics' culture, and contribute to the understanding the ritual practices in the community. Collected from the Udupi-Mangalore region of Karnataka, the songs can also be found in other regions in South India in Goa and Kerala where *roce* is performed, since the ritualistic practices are interlinked.

## Orality

Studying oral histories is an essential practice, and is used as a means of preserving the Konkani language and the lived experiences of its people. The practice is primarily designed to capture the voices of ordinary people and their everyday lives, described by Kathleen Blee (1998) as 'people who, historically speaking, would otherwise remain inarticulate' (p. 334). Ruth Finnegan (1977), defines oral literature as 'the means through which the people's culture, ideologies and belief systems are propagated, with the purpose of teaching and maintenance of social control' (p. 44). These aforementioned songs are repeated and are traditionally preserved through memory, serving as an expression of cultural identity. Even though they are documented in the local dialect, with every new generation they are under the threat of being lost and forgotten. The Konkani language lacks its own scripts and is iterated using the Devanagari, Kannada or Malayalam script, depending on the region. As a result, scholarship on Konkani literature is minimal. Manohar Sardesai (1982) has extensively studied novels and poetry written in Konkani, noting that riddles are innate to Konkani folkloric tradition among Konkani Catholics, visible in the cryptic idiomatic language of the *Voviyo*, however studies on oral Konkani folksongs remain sparse (p. 118).

Murphy (1978) states that 'use of oral literary forms as communicative strategies in social interaction' (p. 113). These are central to the study of oral literature in the 'social context and involve the key anthropological topics of cultural meaning and social structure' (ibid:113). The technical notion of 'speech community' aptly constitutes a group of people 'who habitually interact with each other linguistically that defines the social unit' (ibid:115-6). Oral literature is defined as a set of speech genres that constitute parts of the linguistic resources of

the community that uses a specific language to communicate. By conceptualizing 'speech communities advocated for the study of oral history that further aids our understanding of the relationship between social life and the language' (ibid, p. 116) by the community.

Orality is an essential feature of the Konkani Catholic community. They have a rich tradition in music interwoven with religion, and have a wide variety of songs for many occasions, including harvest, festive seasons and weddings. These are predominantly performed by women, but it is not uncommon in some families to see men joining in. In fact, during the sacrament of marriage and the vopsun divnche—when the bride joins the bridegroom's household at the end of the marriage ceremony—the songs are sung by the entire community. The vopsun divnche ceremony is the official departure of the bride to her husband's family, wherein a male elder or a father figure of her family gives her "away" to her husband's family. The husband's family pledges to keep the girl happy and forgive all her missteps.

During the ceremony of roce, the singing crowd is made up of a large group of women, consisting of one lead vocalist while the others stand behind the sitting bride, while the attendees pour the coconut milk. The Voviyos are very short. Each song consists of two parts: the first being one or two lines recited by only the lead vocalist, followed by a refrain sung by the whole group, and sometimes the audience too.

Rhyme is an important characteristic of the Voviyo, with all songs recited using a very similar, specific tone and tune. Each Voviyo contains a pair of rhyming words. The repeating refrain begins with the word 'vove', followed by one of the rhyming words used in the first sentence and the subsequent repetition of the second part. The short nature of these songs and the rhyme is not accidental, as they are easier to memorise.

An interesting aspect of the Voviyo, as is evident from the translation, is that there does not need to be a linear transition in the meaning from the first line to the second – the first line exists for rhythm and rhyme only, to convey a specific observation made based on people's daily lives or a general observation of the surroundings. The audience, in their reply, repeats the second line.

The second line is the most important, as it conveys a message directed to the bride or the groom and,

occasionally, to the other community members. This repetition, seeks to evoke feelings for the bride, who will soon move out of her own house to live with her husband's family in her conjugal home. It is not unusual to see the bride crying and praying, particularly as these messages often acknowledge deceased loved ones.

The collected Voviyo in this article are divided into two categories: The Songs of Guidance and The Songs of the Dead.

### The Songs of the Dead:

1. आप्रोस पोसुथ टे णिड्ल मुयन्थ ननःया  
Remember your dead elders  
  
एक उतार जाण्या तुज्य पूवज्यक  
Peace to them, may god grant.
2. इतले सक्कड असों होकले कितले तुका उणे?  
What is the use of having everything, dearest bride/groom?  
  
अवय बापय नतले तुजे रतेः जेनेः  
Without your father and mother, your life is empty
4. मंडूर मेज़र घल्ली गेंडी  
Arranged on the table is a flower pot  
  
सरगार घाल्या धिंबी बप्यन होकले तुज्य  
Offered in the heavens are prayers of your dead father that are well thought.
5. सर्गार असल्या बपाय कित्ये तुका उणे  
Oh, Father of the bride praying in heaven,  
  
होकोल दीता ढेणी अत्या मीस  
On earth, your daughter attends a mass for you at seven.
6. मेज़र देवर्ला एक वोड्लो घिल्स  
There is a glass kept on the dining table  
  
सर्गार बोरेल्ला नाव होकले तुज्या  
In heaven, your ancestors' names are written on marble.
7. सार्गरच्या वाटेक आड असा रुक  
The way to heaven is blocked by a tree

8. एक काड दुख अजिएक तुज्या  
Shed a tear for your dear departed grandmother  
बापय ना मुनोन होकले नाका कोंकु चिंता  
Don't you worry about your dead parents,  
बापय सरकी मान दिया भाव होकले तुका  
Your brother will bless you in place of your father
9. घरा आईल्लय सावंक दे तू होकले वाइन  
To the guests at home, dear bride, serve wine,  
सरगर असलया बोहन उढस कर होकले तुज्या  
For your dear departed ancestors, you pine.
10. सकाली कदल्ली फुला बावल्ली  
The flowers we have picked for your roce  
ceremony have withered  
सरगर तवून पवल्ली होकले रोसाक तुज्या  
Oh, look, dearest bride, the ceremony is  
attended by the departed.

### The Songs of Guidance

1. आयिल्लय साइरयंक बोरे मुक्नोन होगोल  
Praise the relatives who visit your house  
शेजार मोगाल तुज्या गुणाखल  
Through good behaviour gain a good name.
2. पोदा वेलि पोद वेरसावेलविरसे  
The girl from the neighbourhood knows how to  
sing  
सदा शेकय तेरस तूज्य कुंभुनत  
Make sure you recite the rosary for your elders  
without fail.
3. लगी मावडों माहणुन सदा तेय वसनाका  
Do not visit your hometown even if it is nearby  
घराचे कःबर बहिर सगनाका  
In your in-law's place, do not gossip and do not  
spy.
4. सकक्ड काम करून मगिर तिक्के बोस  
After finishing all the work, make sure you get  
adequate rest

5. माय मवान सोड्ल्यर कुलरा वोस  
Obeying your dearest in-laws is for your best.  
आमच्या घोटयांत सुबरोनीचे झोत  
In our cowshed lie a lot of brooms  
संगलों सत मवाक होकले तुज्य  
To your father-in-law, oh bride, you must always  
speak the truth.
6. आमच्या घोटयंथ गाब असा गाय  
The cows in our shed are plenty  
चार पाँस बुगी जाय होकले कुतमंथ तुज्या  
Make sure you have at least four or five children
7. यजमानेच्या अंगार उदोन घाले चीतल  
The vessel cleaned twelve times needs to be  
washed once again  
रंदक जाय नितल मयंक तुज्या  
Your mother-in-law, oh bride, wants everything  
to be very clean.
8. आमच्या घरा मूकार साँनू गेलो कोंकनो  
The worker is passing in front of the house  
काम संगीनत्यर माँव गलति देण्डो  
Your father-in-law will be angry if work is not  
given by rule.
9. बितर गल्ली मन्द्री बयर वोरनिका  
Don't pull out the mat that is on the side  
पेंश्च पोडलर माइक सोडिनाका  
Never desert your mother-in-law when she is  
sick
10. अमचा घरा पअतल्यन वोड एक पज बरा  
Behind our house lies a huge boulder, dear bride  
पोयले भाज होकले मावक तुज्या  
Your father-in-law for twelve days, expects  
everything fried.
11. खोल्या बितर खोलो कसूले चो खोलो  
Behind our house, there are plenty of trees  
सकडवारनि बोरो होकले देर तुजो  
Tremendous hunger is what characterises your

brother-in-law.

12. **मीसाक वतना शव्ल सोड्नाका**  
As you attend mass, do not forget your dupatta  
**मवाक दूक पवयनका**  
Similarly, do not forget to care for in-laws.
13. **रुकर असल्लों अंबो दाधव्न पयिे वंक नाका**  
Trying to ripen a mango forcefully is in vain  
**विंगड रव्या मुहण हारे ताक शे के यनका**  
Do not incite your husband into staying separately.
14. **वोय्ले घर तुका सकेले, घर मका**  
Lower house is yours; Upper house is mine  
**एका बायच्या ऊतका कातिर जगदनका**  
Do not fight for the water from the same well tomorrow.
15. **यजमाने च्या कंदयर विडून घे ल्ली चीठल**  
Do not jump on the roof of your house lady  
**रंदाप जाय नेथल मवाक होक्ले तुज्या**  
Your father-in-law prefers that food cleaned and cooked freshly.
16. **खोलया भिटर खोलो कसूले चो खोलो**  
The plants planted behind our house have given pend  
**सकडवारवी भूक सड होक्ले देरक तुज्या**  
Your brother-in-law, dear bride, is always hungry.
17. **मत्यान्थवन पोठा रोस होक्ले तुज्या**  
Coconut juice is flowing from your head  
**गोरवांक पोस होक्ले तुज्या नोवे घरा**  
The cows are waiting for you in the shed.

In most religious practices, spoken word is integral to ceremonial and devotional life. In stating the relationship between the oral word and the sacral, Walter Ong (1982) suggests that the 'interiorizing force' of the spoken oral word relates to the sacral in a very special way, and speaks out the concerns of human existence (p. 72). In this context, the constituted framing for the ritual of the roce is religious in nature, despite not taking place in a religious site.

## The Festival of Roce

The roce is as important as the marriage ceremony itself, as not only is it an integral part of the community members' socialisation, but the Voviyo that it contains can have huge religious sentiment to Konkani Catholics. The roce ceremony begins with the bride and groom's religious anointing. The ritual is liturgical, with Voviyo often containing Catholic prayers, communal prayer and interpretation of the gospel, evoking the past tradition of Christianity (Stephenson 2015:80). Simultaneously, it is also a ceremonial practice, celebrating a version of a civil Christianity that involves other elements such as dancing, drinking, eating, theatrical mimicry and performances. The roce is symbolic of a 'vernacular religion that incorporates in it what fixed liturgical marital rituals fail to express' (Magliocco 2014:2).

Roce is a purifying ritual, where the bride and groom are symbolically cleansed as coconut milk is poured on them by the guests one by one, taking place separately, in their respective households. A group of selected relatives from the bride's family attend the groom's roce and vice versa, as this is an act of extending hospitality to the guests to welcome them into the family. The coconut milk pouring symbolises a bath of purity, in which the bride and groom are rid of their virginity as they enter the new phase of life in marriage. In 'What is Social in Oral Poetry?', Samuel Schreger (1998) explores the relationship between oral history and social reality, claiming that oral narratives are full of messages on social realities (p. 285). Since these narratives are sung from memory, they assist in preserving the community's tradition, and propagate age-old cultural values from one generation to the next.

In 'Songs Of The Dead', deceased ancestors play a significant role in the culture of the Konkani Catholics. The songs call out to ancestors to attend the ceremony in spirit, while also recounting memories with loved ones who have passed. Each member of the community is considered significant, with special Voviyo composed if the bride or groom have lost close relatives. These ancestors serve as role models to the bride and groom, who are called upon to continue their legacy.

The songs that I have chosen convey two types of messages. 'The Songs of the Dead' contain nostalgic laments that remember the bride's ancestors and her relatives who have passed, and hope to receive blessings from them. They serve a dual purpose:



firstly to pay respects to the dearly departed and acknowledging their spiritual presence in the ceremony, and secondly as a recollection of the bride's childhood and the time that she spent with her family.

'The Songs of Guidance' have the singular purpose of guiding the bride on how to perform a multitude of tasks in her new household. These songs also signify each family member's specific desires and expectations, as well as their individual characteristics to give the bride an idea of what her life in her conjugal home will be like with her new family – which the bride must respect. The reprise and rhythm serve as a form of emphasis on the messages communicated to the bride through the Voviyo.

Among the community members, parental authority is sacred and the ceremony takes place with the parents' consent. The Konkani Catholics are a traditional patrilineal family, and the woman is required to move to the husband's house after her marriage. The marriages take place among the members of the same community and, in most cases, the bride or groom's region is not of importance as long as both belong to the Konkani Catholic community. The well-defined rules of the roce and the celebrations that follow reflect the community's communal values.

The Mangalorean family is traditionally a patriarchal monogamous family, headed by the oldest male. The 'Songs of Guidance' speak about the bride's transition period as she prepares to move from her natal home to her new conjugal home, where she must reside until her death. In her new house, she is expected to respect her mother-in-law and father-in-law and tend to them unconditionally. To make the transition easier, the songs highlight the good nature of her in-laws. The bride can only visit her maternal home during her pregnancies and cultural festivities, once she finishes her duties at her husband's home. Her stay in her husband's house comes with specific duties assigned to her, including cooking, household chores, childrearing, looking after her elderly in-laws, instructing the workers on the fields and helping with agricultural activities. She is also instructed to impress her relatives with her good nature, and is urged to maintain high standards of cleanliness. Her eating habits are also monitored, as she is required to eat only once the older family members have been served and taken care of.

The festival is a combination of the community's cultural values and religious beliefs, which are heavily interlinked. The rules of the roce are dictated by local elders of the community, and institutions such as the Catholic Sabha. Such institutions gather information and monitor the ceremony, to make sure all the cultural practices are followed according to the mandate prescribed. A participant mentioned, however, that young people are changing the tradition – for example, now the groom can be seen attending the bride's roce, and vice versa, while traditionally this should not be allowed. Institutions are taking steps to make sure they keep such changes in check, and certain guidelines are not violated. The practice of roce is supplemented by prayers directed by the respective church, and the cultural practices are performed based on the advice of family's elders, who will have witnessed countless ceremonies. The host of the ceremony often asks the public to refrain from mirth and merriment during the blessing and prayer, requesting that the audience wait until the end, when Bollywood and Konkani songs are played, before they begin to dance. I noticed that the cultural practices such as the exchange of commodities, singing, dancing, and recitation of certain jovial Voviyo were more causally performed, and had an element of fun to them. During the more religious aspects, such as the blessing of the food served and the recitation of communal prayers, the audience engaged themselves by joining hands, closing their eyes and reciting them silently.

Family is a hugely important part of the ritual, and this sentiment is reflected in the songs recited. Family is revered in the community, and the songs reiterate the importance of keeping this unit together by living in harmony and peace. Traditionally, there are specific roles for men and women, where the man is the provider and the woman takes care of the household. The Voviyo explain that performing these roles will ensure a harmonious relationship among all family members, reminding the bride to 'behave like a woman' and that she must wear a shawl on her head. There is also a focus on her procreation, and she is encouraged to bear multiple children. The woman is asked to continue the family by taking care of her household, raising their children to observe all the values reflected in the Voviyo. These Voviyo become a roadmap, dictating the woman's life within the community.

The traditional bride follows the messages communicated through these Voviyo, as they resonate with the traditional teachings taught since childhood in the family household. The general assumption is that by following these Voviyo, the bride can have a fruitful and happy married life, however these values are deeply in line with the patriarchal nature of the community. For the most part, the women are encouraged to confine themselves to household activities and cater to their husband's family members, prioritising their needs over her own. However, with changing times and the rise of nuclear families, many women no longer follow some of these rules. Women prioritise their needs, are financially independent and vocal, and are active participants in decision-making in the family. Despite that, these songs continue to be recited in every Konkani Catholic marriage ritual, and most of the messages conveyed in the voviyo remain unchanged.

## Summary

There are plenty of other roce to be studied and translated, such as the Voviyo recited during the application of the roce, the wedding, religious Voviyo of prayer and the anointment with holy oil. I have tried to preserve rhyme in my translation, though sometimes this cannot be maintained in English in order to avoid the complete meaning and authenticity of the Voviyo being compromised. The Voviyo highlight the patriarchal nature of the community, and as a researcher I noticed that it disseminated different expectations on brides and grooms. Interviews with several elders also indicated that the roce of the bride tends to be grander than the roce of the groom. Through most of the women are becoming self aware and opting to not follow some of the Voviyo, the region has witnessed the birth of conservative religious circles that call for a return to patriarchy, and perpetuate the idea of a restricted notion of 'womanliness' and family. Further studies could study the influence of religious groups on roce.

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