

Rituals of Kalicult in Kerala

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Abstract

The worship and ritualistic performances of Kali cult exist since the ancient periods, throughout the Indian sub-continent. This paper attempts to show the various art forms of Kerala using the Kali cult which are ritualistically performed, synthesising the Aryan and Dravidian cultures. The Kali cult and local Bhagavathy or Devi myths are blended aesthetically, providing not only sheer entertainment to the people participating and witnessing them, but also enabling mutual cooperation and collective participation of each caste in the ritual instilling and strengthening of common identity and mutual bonding in the rural community. The healing power of rituals and myths could be a part of spirituo-therapeutic process which is quite evident in the various ritualistic performances of Kerala like, Padayeni, Theyyam, Mudiyettu, Kaliyoot etc.

Key Words: *Kali cult, Bhagavathy myths, Aryan, Dravidian, Worship, ritualistic performances, mutual bonding, healing*

Introduction

Rituals are a collective way of relating to the divine energies and celebrating them. In the process of celebrating life, we have the opportunity to practice a form of the ancient arts known to change our lives for the better, to create our lives the way we want them to be. Ritual has been part of the human experience since the beginning of time itself. Our lives are filled with unconscious rituals that makes our day and add warmth, texture, and meaning to our existence. Rituals are an integral part of the human psyche; they connect us to others, to our own inner processes, and to that something which is greater than ourselves. Kerala is a land of classical, folk and ritualistic performances from time immemorial. The geographical diversity of the landscape enriched the diversity of the culture of Kerala. It is defined by its antiquity and the organic continuity sustained by the Malayali people. Kerala could be divided into four cultural areas: Travancore–Cochin, Central Kerala, South Malabar and North Malabar. It has contributed to the world a stylized classical dance-drama Kathakali and Koodiyattam, the only surviving specimen of the ancient Sanskrit Theatre performed according to the tradition of Bharatamuni's Natya Shastra. The art is believed to be almost 2000 years old and recognized by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. Kerala has a rich tradition of folklore. The folklore of Kerala includes

elements from the traditional lifestyle of the people of Kerala. The traditional beliefs, customs, rituals etc. are reflected in the folk art and songs of Kerala. Folklore in this region is a spontaneous expression of human behavior and thoughts. Generally speaking, folklore could be defined as the lore of the common people who had been marginalized during the reign of feudal Kings. The culture and lore of Kerala mainly stems from their agricultural activities. Sowing, planting of *nharu* (seedling), clearing out the weeds, harvests etc. are the different stages of agriculture which have their typical rituals. Numerous songs and performing arts are accompanied with them. *Kaliyoot, Padayani, Mudi yettu, Theyyattu, Theyyam*, etc. are some of the ritual folklore of Kerala based on the Devi (Kali) cult.

Kali is the goddess associated with empowerment or shakti (power). She is called the goddess of time, change, power, creation, preservation and destruction. Her earliest appearance is that of a destroyer, principally of evil forces. Devi Bhagavatam, a Sanskrit text that belongs to the Purana-genre of ancient Hindu literature reveres Shakti as the primordial creator of the universe and the Brahman (ultimate truth and reality). Various Shakta Hindu Cosmologies, as well as Shakta Tantric beliefs worship her as a benevolent mother goddess. The worship and ritualistic performances of Kali exist since the ancient periods, throughout India. In this present article an attempt has been made to describe the various aspects of ritualistic performances of Kali cult of Kerala. Data are collected from both primary and secondary sources data.

Ritualistic performances of the Kali cult:

“The culture of Kerala is a synthesis of Aryan and Dravidian cultures, developed and mixed for centuries, under influences from other parts of India and abroad.”(Menon 1978:3) Ritualistic, folk, martial and classical styles of performing arts are existing from ancient periods in Kerala. “Kathakali is only about 500 years old but has its origins almost 1500 years ago in the early ritual folk dances and dance dramas of Kerala such as the dances associated with the cult of Bhagavathy (*Thiyyattom, Mudi yettu, and Theyyam*), that were performed at religious festivals by performers wearing elaborate masks, colorful costumes and head-dresses, and intricately painted faces; and socio-religious and material dances such as the *Sastrakali* and *Ezhamattukali*” (Philip 1984) Popular modern world theatre practitioners like Eugino Barba, Richard Scheckner, Peter Brook, Philip Zerelli and many others recognized the richness and the dramatic spectacle of the folk and classical art forms of Kerala. Theatre and dance students from many parts of the world are eagerly learning these art forms from the master performers of Kerala. These classical and rich traditions of Kerala incorporated so many essences from the ritualistic and religious folk art forms of Kerala.

“North Malabar in Kerala has its own cultural identity. It was under the rule of Kolathiris, the Kings of Kolathunadu, and they codified the rituals, beliefs, taboos and folk performing arts.” (www.kerala.com) Even the dates of specific fertility rituals and folk performances were decided by the Kolathiris of which many are continuing even to this day. The *Theyyam* festivals, even now, are conducted as per the dates once fixed by the King. From north to south of Kerala there are hundreds and hundreds of temples, shrines and Kavus. “a word which literally means a grove of trees, these little shrines being ordinarily placed in an open clearing with an abundance of trees surrounding it” (Raghavan 1947) and periodically some sort of ritualistic performances are taking place. The temples celebrate annual festivals which are not only unique to the region but sometimes have features that are unique to each temple. Each temple describes each interesting history behind its creation.

The cult of Bhagavathi, the Mother Goddess had and still has an important place in *Theyyam*. Besides this, the practices like spirit-worship, ancestor-worship, hero-worship, masathi-worship, tree-worship, animal worship, serpent-worship, the worship of the Goddesses of disease and the worship of Graama-devata (Village-Deity) are included in the main stream of the *Theyyam* cult. Along with these Gods and Goddesses there exist innumerable folk Gods and Goddesses. Most of these Goddesses are known as Bhagavathy.

The folk arts of Kerala can be broadly classified under two heads: ritualistic and non-ritualistic. Ritualistic folk arts can be further divided into two: devotional and magical. Devotional folk arts are performed to propitiate a particular God or Goddess. *Theyyam*, *thirayattam*, *poothamthira*, *kanyarkali*, *kummatti* etc., are some of them. Forms like *panappattu* and *thottampattu* are composed in the form of songs. In *kolkali*, *margamkali*, *daffumuttukali*, etc., the ritualistic element is not very strong. Margamkali is a folk performance of Christian community. They incorporated the style, movements and steps from the traditional dance form called *Thiruvathirakkali*. *Daffumuttukali*, similarly is a group dance practiced by the Muslims of Kerala.

Magical folk arts seek to win general prosperity for a community or exorcise evil spirits or to beget children. Gandarvas and nagas are worshipped in order to win these favours. The magical folk arts include *pambinthullal*, *pooppadathullal*, *kolamthullal*, *malayankettu*, etc. In different folk and ritualistic forms there are different kinds of body language, gestures, postures, dances, martial arts, recitations, oral traditions, mudras or signs with fingers, facial expressions using elaborate masks, colorful costumes and headdresses. The make-ups are also of many varieties and so are the musical instruments used.

In almost all of the villages in Kerala, Mother Goddess temples especially Kali Cult is present. *Mudiyett* or *Mudiyettu* is a traditional ritual theatre and folk dance drama from Kerala that enacts the mythological tale of a battle between the goddess Kali and the demon Darika. The ritual is a part of the Bhagavathi or Bhadrakali cult. The dance is performed in temples called 'Bhagvati Kavus', the temples of the Mother Goddess, between February and May every year after the harvesting season. Darika was a demon who received a boon from Brahma which granted that he would never be defeated by any man or gods living in any of the fourteen worlds of Hindu mythology. This made Darika immensely powerful and arrogant. Armed with this boon, Darika went on to conquer the world defeating even Indra, the king of the gods. As his atrocities became intolerable, the sage Narada requested Shiva to contain Darika. Shiva agreed, circumventing Brahma's boon by declaring that Darika would be killed by the goddess Kali, she being a woman and one not born among the humans. *Mudiyett* is a village ritual performed by members of the Marar and Kuruppu communities in Thrissur, Ernakulam, Kottayam and Idukki districts of Kerala. There's no rehearsal or preparation involved in playing Kali. The performance is a natural progression from Lord Shiva, Narada, demons Danavan and Darikan to Kali.

In these folk ritualistic art form it is amazing to observe a well structured theatre construction similar to modern theatre practices. Apart from Kali and Darika different characters appear in the performance like Lord Siva, Narada, Vetala, Kooli and Koyimpiidar. Like a well made play the dramatic structures are seen through the events and characters using dialogues, songs, rhythmic body language, gestures, postures, facial expressions with the association of musical instruments and indigenous lighting. The passionate participation of the audience with their strong religious beliefs increases the dramatic effect of the performance. The conversation between Siva and Narada, exposition (purappadu) of Darik), exposition (purappadu) of Kali and her assistant Kooli, challenge (porvili) of Kali and Darika showing the increase in the conflict resembles almost a Greek tragedy. Exposition of Koyimpidar, a character representing the particular society and people, a realistic character directly connected with the region, playing a role with the mythical characters highlights the fertile imaginative powers of the ancestors, who developed this ritual. The climax scene depicting the ferocious fight between Kali and Darika and the denouement where Darika's head gear being removed, the symbolic representation of Darika's final destruction, truly offers a dramatic spectacle.

The people who belong to a particular village or region staying away from the place for various purposes will return every year to participate in the rituals with the belief that the blessing of Mother Goddess will rejuvenate them. They feel their minds are purified and all evil thoughts are eradicated. This could be the

Catharsis as mentioned in Aristotle's Poetics which says the purpose of tragedy is arousing pity and fear in the minds of the audience and thereby purifying their mental condition. The purposes of all rituals are to maintain communal harmony as well as personal strength of the spectator and performer.

Padayani, also called *Padeni*, (from the [Malayalam](#) word for military formations) is a spectacular ritualistic art form of [Kerala](#) deals with the Kali myth. *Mudiyettu* is ending with the myth of the destruction of Darika, whereas *Padayani* begins from the killing of the Asura. It is a [ceremonial](#) dance involving masks and an ancient ritual performed in Devi temples. The dance is performed in honor of Devi or Bhadrakali. The Meaning of *Padayani* is , a 'row of warriors'. *Padayani* is an art form that blends music, dance, theatre, satire, facial masks, and paintings. It is a part of worship of Bhadrakali and is staged in temples dedicated to the goddess from mid-December to mid-May every year. *Padayani* is unique to central Kerala, especially in the districts of Kottayam and Pathanamthitta. *Padayani* is regarded as a remnant of the Dravidian forms of worship that existed before the advent of Aryan culture. "*Padayani* is a form of thullal or jumping with rhythmic movements accompanied by an instrument called *Thappu* (a small percussion instrument). The folk art, *Padayani* is a divine ritual tradition in association with festival occasions of village Devi Goddess or Bhagavathy temples of Kerala.

Padayani is very popular in Kerala, as a means, used to worship goddess [Kali](#). The story line comes as after killing Darika, the goddess was very fierce. The bhoothagana, servants of lord Siva, danced in front of her to reduce her anger fearing that her anger might result in the destruction of the whole world. In memory of this incident, the participants wear *kolam* (masks) made of lathes of the areca tree using one to hundreds. The colours used to make the kolam are purely natural. They are made of *kamukinpacha* (the green of the lath itself), *kari* (carbon), *manjalpodi* (turmeric powder), *sindooram* (vermilion- a kind of red powder), etc.

In all most all the *Padayani* performances is being conducted along with the 8 days called *ettupadayani* (eight days) from a total of twenty-eight days of preparations and rituals during January – February (Makara Bharani) months. Out of twenty eight days the last eight days are most important days for the performances. In those days the village folk from different areas come with different Kolams and performing like a competition. The Last eight days are equally divided to two *karas* (different parts of the particular village) that is four for each. The last two days (*valiya Padayani*) are most important for both *Karas* and they conduct programs in a competitive manner. Beautiful Processions will be there on the evening of last two days. The main programs include *vela Kali*, *Adavi*, *Pallippana*, *Vellam Kudi*, *vinodam*

and *kolam Thullal*. The kolams performed in the *Padayani* are *Ganapathi Kolam, Kuthira, Bhairavi, Sundara Yakshi, Araki Yakshi, Marutha, Pakshi, Kalamadan* and *Kalan Kolam*. This could be connected with the agricultural folk life. The rest period after the harvest of paddy crops till the next planting season is utilized to pay gratitude to Mother Goddess Kali, the goddess of fertility, who not only provides with a bountiful harvest but also ensures joy and happiness by protecting them and their animals from diseases. *Padayani* is communicating the message that art can give a spirituo-therapeutic effect. The performance through the transformation of Kali from a fiery and aggressive state of mind to a calm and humorous demeanor is showing that the negative emotion of anger can be changed to joy, evil to virtue and pressure to relaxation. Kali is thrilled to see her own kolam by a performer and is tickled to laughter thereby changing her mood.

In the southern part of Kerala the Kali- Darika myth is performed in a different manner. The festivals in the temple perform *Kaliyoot* a ritualistic art during the Malayalam month of kumbham (March). Kali, the Mother goddess is the deity of farmers. It is evident from the inclusion of the fictitious interpretations of agricultural art traditions in the rituals of the art form of *Kaliyoot*. *Kaliyoot* is the dramatic presentation of the genesis of Kali and Darika the representatives of good and [evil](#) respectively, their confrontation and later the extermination of Darika in devotional terms and with rhythmic footsteps. *Kaliyoot* as a synthesis of older agrarian art tradition is further established by the fact that the time chosen for performing *Kaliyoot* after Makara Koithu (the Malayalam month of Makaram corresponds to March and in the season of the second harvest season in Kerala. Koithu is a Malayalam term for harvest) and that Kali appears under the guise of a pulaya girl (the pulaya caste is the traditional agricultural laboring community in Kerala) in the Kali drama. The object of *Kaliyoot* festival is to offer the elementary harvest to the Amma (the divine Mother), the defender of the land. It is a nine day long festival with rituals and traditional ceremonies conducted in the temple premises. The first seven days ceremonies are dramatic visualisations of stories leading to the war between Bhadrakali and Darika. The ceremonies take its peak with the eighth and ninth day ceremonies, "*Mudiuzhichil*" and "*Nilathilporu*" respectively.

On the eighth day of the ceremonies, Bhadrakali herself goes out in search of Darika, but returns at the end of the day without finding the demon king. This function is one of the most important rituals associated with the festival as on this day the deity offers blessings to the devotees directly. The famous "*Nilathilporu*"(ground fight) takes place at the ninth and last day of ceremonies which symbolize the killing of demon king Darika by Bhadrakali and thus spreading the prevalence of truth over the evil. The eighth and ninth day functions in the Kali drama festival are a visual treat and the colorful ceremonies

takes hours for completion. It is believed that there is a basic text titled *Kaliyoot Mahotmyam* authored by Kannasa Panicker narrating about the ceremonies connected with *Kaliyoot* as a devotional offering. After the construction of the stage for the chief performance the *pernu* (separate stages constructed for Kali and Darika about 50 to 60 feet above from the earth) and the invoking of the spirit of the Goddess into lamps, the chief rites of the first days begin and ends with compromising talk between Bhadrakali and Darika, known as "*Mudithalam Thullal*".

Bhadrakali Tiyyattu is a ritualistic dance usually performed in Kavus and shrines of Devi temples, mostly in the Eranakulam, Kottayam, Alappuzha and Pathanamthitta districts of south-central Kerala. Pallipurathu Kavu at Kottayam (family temple of Kottarathil Sankunni) Thrikkariyoor Mahadeva Temple, Panachimangalath Bhadrakali temple (family temple of anachimangalath Illam) near Kothamangalam, Vanarkavu at Madakkathanam, near Thodupuzha, Puthukulangara Devi Kshetram near Thiruvalla: some of the places where *Tiyyattu* is performed during annual festivals. It is also performed as an offering at temples and houses.

The performance has many parts of which - preparation of the ritual art known as *Kalamezhuthu*, (drawing the huge picture of Kali with different natural colour powders) singing songs in praise of Bhadrakali and the performance of the dance are a few. *Kalamezhuthu* is done during the day using natural coloured powders on the floor. An elaborate picture of Bhadrakali is normally made. The singing of the songs take place after the *Kalamezhuthu* is finished in front of it and may last up to three hours. For the dance a male performer dresses up like Devi or Bhadrakali, a creation of Shiva. In the performance she is just back from killing Darika and is telling the events to Shiva who is symbolised by the lighted lamp. As she was affected by small pox and has pockmarks on her face she has her back to the lamp almost throughout the performance.

"*Theyyam* (*teyyam*, *theyyattam*) is a popular ritual form of worship of North Malabar in Kerala, predominant in the Kolathunadu area (consisting of present-day Kasargod, Kannur Districts, Mananthavady Taluk of Wayanad and Vadakara and Koyilandi Taluks of Kozhikode of Kerala) as a living cult with several thousand-year-old traditions, rituals and customs. The performers of *Theyyam* belong to the lower caste community, and have an important position in *Theyyam*." (Thurston 1909:192) People of these districts consider *Theyyam* itself as a God and they seek blessings from this *Theyyam*. Most of the female *Theyyams* are the different versions of Bhagavathi or Kali. Karikkali is a *Theyyam* performed by Vannan, Panan and Kulanadi tribal communities which is believed to have originated from

the third eye of Siva and she has the power to perform magic. The *Kodumkali Theyyam* of Malabar also performs Kali- Darika Thottam in songs. This *Theyyam* is the Upasanamurthy of all the magicians and Panan community who performed with dances and songs accompanied by musical instruments. There are so many *Theyyam* shrines performing Thottam or songs on Kali, which is the worship of Kali the mother Goddess. Another name of *Theyyam* is *Kaliyattam*. This reveals the importance and prominence of Kali cult in *Theyyam* rituals.

Multifarious ritualistic art performances exist in almost the whole of Kerala, especially in Devi temples and Bhagavathi Kavus, connected with the Kali-Darika legend. The fertile imagination of the local people of the region made diverse interpretations of the myth and also developed their own styles of presenting the spectacle. The agrarian based societies desired to reflect not only their way of living but also wished to express their gratitude to Mother Kali eradicating all evils and diseases from the village protecting them and their crops, birds and animals, through these ritualistic art forms.

Every Hindu family in Kerala has its own *kula* (family) temple with their presiding deity and feels obligated to celebrate each year by partaking in the ritualistic performances not only to strengthen family bondages but also mix with fellow villagers without discriminating on the basis of caste, creed or class, forging an ideal social life for a better humanity. This is very evident in the ritualistic performance of *Mudiyettu*. *Mudiyettu* is a communal undertaking in which each caste of the village plays a specific role. The bamboo artifacts and leather hide for drums are provided by the Paraya caste while the Thandan caste brings the fronds of areca nut and coconut tree that are required for the masks and headgears. The Kaniyan community paints the masks while the Kurava community keeps the *pandam* (country torches) burning. It is the Veluthedan (Patiyan) caste that washes the clothes used for making the deity's dress, while the Marar caste readies the torches and keeps them supplied with oil. Thus each caste in the village contributes to the festival according to its traditional caste role. Mutual cooperation and collective participation of each caste in the ritual instills and strengthens common identity and mutual bonding in the community.

Conclusion

Our present day society is becoming ritually impoverished resulting in many psychological disorders. We are bereft of the healing power of ritual and myth. Rituals can be a part of spirituo-therapeutic process. Rituals also connect us with the community fulfilling our human need to belong. It also brings an individual to the most personal level, becoming a tool for spiritual, emotional and psychological

development. Rituals require thought and intent, which force to step away from the accelerated pace that most people live by and move into a space of timelessness. No matter what the religious beliefs, rituals can enhance the moments of life by giving focus and attention to those things designated as important. They bring a sense of the divine into lives and affirm and enhance the connection to the sacred however we choose to define it.

The Kali cult is a deeply rooted culture, born from the fertile creative imaginations of the forefathers, practiced for centuries together and followed by generations even in this modern world, heavily influenced by science and reason. Campbell explains this connection with the divine in *The Power of Myth*. "A ritual can be defined as an enactment of a myth. By participating in a ritual, you are actually experiencing a mythological life. And it's out of that participation that one can learn to live spiritually." (Campbell 1988:182).

It is a marvel and heartening experience to see even the educated modern youngsters of Kerala, faithfully thronging back to their native villages from whichever part of the world they live, to participate in these ritualistic performances and obtain the blessings from their deities. Most of the deities are Devi (Kali), either existing as a psychological construct or as a divine living symbol, awakening the concept of the Goddess, probably bringing positive changes to their lives.

As with any profound awakening, experience with ritual performances of the Kali cult, most likely stir the deep recesses of the psyche and shine a light into the shadows and hidden places of the heart and mind. Primal levels of passion, rage and fear are encountered while watching them.

These ritualistic performances show the deities as wrathful and aiming arrows of enlightenment, slashing through imposed limitations or debilitating patterns with a sword of truth, or raising a trident of justice against the ignorance and prejudice. The wrath they express is aimed at the negative forces that hold the people back, keeping them bound in pain and a state of suffering.

These art forms of Kerala, ritualistically performed, apart from providing aesthetic entertainment, also result in rejuvenating the people participating and witnessing them.

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