

Serpent God Worship Ritual in Kerala

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Abstract: Serpent god worship is common in parts of India, like Kerala, Bengal and Karnataka. In Kerala, one way of worshipping serpent gods is by laying symmetrically designed floor drawings, that are called 'Kalams', with bright and colourful powders made from natural objects. Beautiful pictures of serpent gods are drawn using these powders on ground smeared with cowdung in the first phase of the ritual. Following this, a senior priest consecrates the floor drawings and two types of physical performances follow. The three performances are orchestrated by wild rhythmic music, using folk instruments. In the next stage, a verbal recitation is followed by the main performance of the ritual, the dancing of the female oracles.

Serpent god worship is common in the states of Kerala, Karnataka and Bengal in India. It is complementary to nature worship in the Saivite tradition. "Love and adoration more than fear or dread seem to be the main features of this faith and there are so many unexpected features which are the same time common to it all the world over".(Fergusson 3). Anthropologists like him disagree with the position that serpent god worship has much demarcation from the two prominent creeds in Hinduism (Fergusson 102). At the same time, an outstanding expert in ophiolatry, C.F Oldham says, "The worship of the Naga or hooded serpent is general amongst the Dravidian people of the south" (Oldham 152). "Worship of serpents is found to be deeply rooted in the traditional culture of Kerala as an ancestral affair" (Kavalam, 68). Laying colour floor drawings or 'Kalams' with minute specifications and in elaborate

picturesque designs is one method to express piety among rural folk and it reveals great diversity of cultural discourse.¹



Figure 1 A fully drawn Kalam in the light of metal lamps

This tradition is passed on through the generations and exists today for nothing if not for reasons of piety and artistry. Julian Huxley has commented that when desired results are achieved from some activity, it becomes a ritual (Huxley 8). Often the artistic aspect is dominated by the ritualistic and vice versa, and a coexistence of both make the tradition effective. It is typically Indian in that two forms of traditional cultural expression, the visual and verbal, are used with spiritual overtones. Some of these practices underwent years of transformation and appropriation to acquire independence. Evidently, fear of powerful forces led people to revere them, later continuing as worship of material realities like animals, trees, serpents etc. All rituals practised by humanity have a theatrical dimension to them and the general belief is that theatre has its origins in ancestral rituals. "The ritual did not merely consist of the singing of songs or recitations in honour of the gods; it involved a complex round of ceremonies in some of which there was undoubtedly present the element of dramatic representation" (Keith, 23). Keith gives a brilliant distinction between the ritualistic and dramatic dimensions of the folkloric arts. "A drama proper can only be said to come into being when the actors perform parts deliberately for the sake of the profit also; if a ritual includes

elements of representation, the aim is not the representation, but the actors are seeking a direct religious or magic result”.



Figure 2 Another Kalam

Colour floor drawings are manifestations of different purposes like worship, rituality, tantric rites and fertility rites. They are used even to ensure safety in pregnancy. Kerala folklorist Dr. M.V. Vishnu Namboothiri, remarks, “Colour floor drawing tradition in Kerala has a number of variations and bifurcations. They are mainly intended to propitiate piety, fertility rituals, tantric rites and often black magic”. (Namboothiri I). The three-dimensional pictures drawn are concrete representations of otherwise abstract shapes of the absolute. Floor drawings for tantric rites are geometrically structured using points, triangles, straight lines, circles and squares. They are geometrical representations of idols, either expanding from or contracting to a centralized middle point. In the floor drawings for serpent god worship, in addition to geometrical figures, curved lines are used to shape body organs of the deity, in appropriate proportions. During the process of worship, exquisite designs of floor drawings co-exist with oral texts and musical texts. The recited oral texts explicate evolution and functions of the deity as well as prayers in supplication to it. Colourful texts of varied designs and sung verbal texts are integrally related. Simultaneously, physical performances take place and, hence, like other ritualistic enactments, the three components—myth, performance and visual—merge in the case of the serpent god worship ritual.

Important deities in India are installed and worshipped in carefully constructed temples with very strict specifications. Serpent gods are worshipped in forest groves, in the middle of microcosmic 'idyllic chronotopes' that vary from a few square feet to some square meters in expanse and are thickly populated with plants and trees, popularly called in Kerala as 'Sarppa Kav'u', meaning 'the serpent grove'.

Symmetrical stone idols in squares and angles called 'Chitrakuda' are left open to the elements, and are considered very powerful as they are exposed to air, sun, rain, and all other forms of living and non-living forces. It is a factor that betrays their receptive and responding capacities, the spiritual strength and the benevolence. They easily bestow the qualities of both preservation and destruction to the believers. There is no sanctum sanctorum to distance the worshipper from the worshipped. Serpent gods being part of nature and guardians of the soil, every item used to propitiate them must be natural, not just the forest grove space in which they are housed. No artificiality of any kind is permitted. Worship in constructed temples is rarely seen and idols are placed directly on the ground.

The ritual of worship is conducted and performed at forest grove temples and the temples of other deities. Occasionally, it is performed at individual houses, if some family member or the whole family takes oaths to offer oblations in the form of floor drawings to serpent gods. Usually in case of disease or trauma of any kind among believers, people pledge the serpent god deities floor drawings as thanksgiving if their needs are met and problems solved. J.P.H. Vogel, an expert in the serpent lore of India, says, "...and the serpents are periodically propitiated by songs and dances called 'Nagam-Pattu'. The performance of such songs in private houses is supposed to be effective in procuring offspring" (Vogel 20). C.F. Oldham goes a step further and says, "...that the hooded serpent was held sacred as a totem of the people who claimed descent from the sun-god, and thus came to be worshipped as a deity" (Oldham 206). Main performers are young girls, the female oracles, below the age of fifteen. They begin a life of penance and austerity two weeks in advance to train the mind and body for the holy performance. Non-vegetarian food is prohibited, along with items of boiled rice, spices etc. Raw rice, fruits, vegetables, and milk form their diet during this period. They stay aloof from social and family contacts for a fortnight to concentrate completely on spiritual matters to preserve sanctity. The belief goes that during the actual performance of the ritual the spirits of serpent gods enter their bodies enabling them to perform a stylized way of dancing. After the mesmeric dancing, they give divine solutions and clarifications to complaints and doubts of the believers, who make the audience. To perform this divine mission of clairvoyance, they

have to condition their mind and body during the fortnight of preparation. The social anthropologist Radcliff Brown has pointed out that in rituals generally the performer transforms into the deity (Brown 30). Usually, the only activities they indulge in are chanting mantras, texts and names in praise of different gods. "They are trained to acquire the capability of purifying and intensifying the texts of mantras by continuously repeating them. The entire individuality of the person can be transformed as and capsulized into a mantra, so that his person will be dissipated as to reach the sublimated heights of trance-physicality" (Kavalam 46). This is in contrast to other rituals, when performers appropriate other functions too.

The spot where the colour floor drawing is to be laid is decided beforehand and prepared by smearing it with the paste of cow dung many times, and leaving it open to the sun. Cow dung is considered to possess purifying ability. The field of performance is about 1.5 to 2 square meters wide. Pillars made with strong branches of 'Devils Tree' are fixed at the four corners and the support and strings connecting them decorated with coconut palm fronds, the leaves of mango and banyan, with flowers and new cloth.² This is the open stage for the ritual to be performed. It is an improvised structure temporarily put up at the same level as the ground. The level implies the equality of the incarnations of god and the audience comprising believers. People go close to the stage and join the female oracles towards the end of the performance.

Multicoloured powders from natural ingredients are used to decorate the ground spaces. The semiotics of the bright powders follows.

Material	Colour	Meaning
Leaves	Green	Fertility
Turmeric	Yellow	Faith
Rice	White	Purity
Burnt rice chaff	Black	Strength
Turmeric+ Calcium Carbonate	Red	Anger

They draw colourful pictures of serpent gods in the mural style. The sheer artistry is passed on through the generations and practised by Pullugas, a minority sub-caste.³ Conducting this ritual is considered to be the sole right of this community. "The aesthetic attempts of Pulluva community may not be counted as pure art, since a vast majority of them are ritualistic" (Namboothiri, 23).



Figure 3 Beginning of Drawing

Members of this community act as the priests for all rites related to the worship. Higher castes have also begun doing the same rites, but in entirely different ways.



Figure 4 In the middle of the art

They use no tool for drawing the colour floor except perforated coconut shells to apply the powder. Drawings are infinite in variety and freshly drawn for each performance. Intertwined bodies of serpent gods with

raised heads are some of the exquisite visuals created. Drawing for a single performance take 3-4 hours to finish and constitutes the first activity of the ritual.



Figure 5 A kalam nears completion

Stretched for a few hours, this feat elicits both pious and artistic responses from the audience who is present throughout. Symmetry of composition and brilliant colour mark this artistic representation. But, from the artist's perspective, existence of this visual text is painfully short lived, as the lifespan of the floor drawing is restricted to the duration of the ritual. The eyes of the represented godly figures are 'opened' only after all the final changes are made and it is considered a holy rite. After the 'eye-opening ceremony', a floor drawing is viewed as a living deity. The floor drawing is laid to the accompaniment of folk instruments played to a fervent rhythm. The instrumental music is "loud, pulsating, and evocative. The powerful beat rising from the Pulluva Kudam (a pot with strings attached)

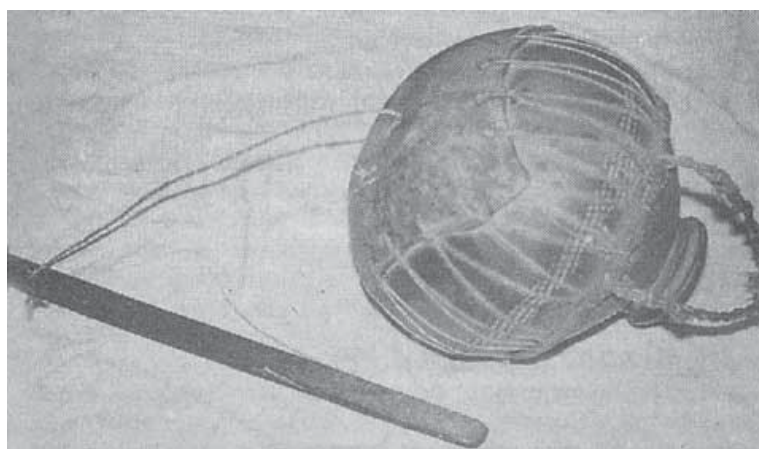


Figure 6 Pulluva Kudam

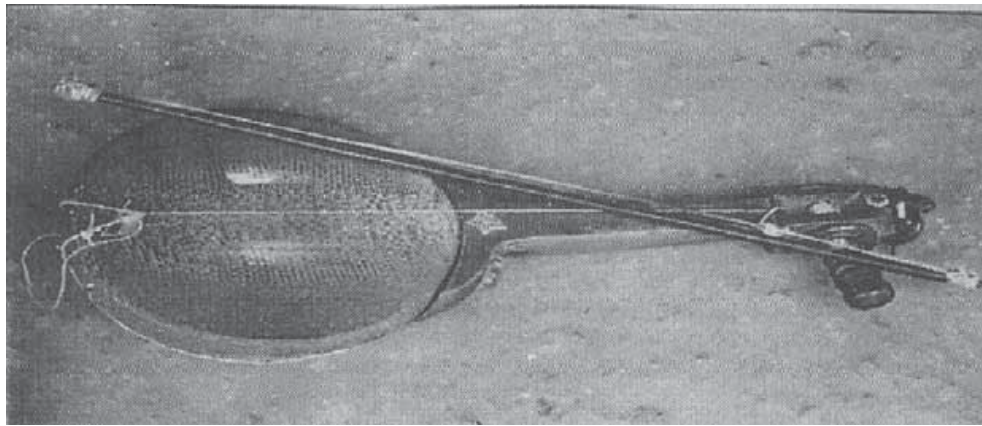


Figure 7 Nagaveena

the whining of Naga Veena (one-stringed instrument like a violin) and the clanging of kuzhi thalam (cymbals) form the prelude to the ecstatic folk drama" (Pushpa 2). Visual and auditory components of poetic imagery influence each other. The instrumental concert, reverberating to great distances, is the second phase in the ritual. If the colours and dimensions of the pictures are keen and sharp, the resonance and frequency of the concert penetrate the whole locality.



Figure 8 Kalam after completion

When the floor drawing and the accompanying concert end, the third step of the ritual begins. It takes the form of mythical songs, sung aloud by the priests. "All thoughts relating to colour floor drawings will be

complete only if reference is given to the songs sung by the practitioners as part of the ritual. The verbal text formed by them are the repositories of the heredity of a populace and the cultural asset of a country” (Namboothiri IV). This makes the first and important verbal text of the worship. This poetic text begins with the invocation of the muse and develops into elucidations of the benefits of serpent god worship and the perils of neglecting them. Elders often quote a famous couplet to show the appreciation serpents have for musicality:

“They know the beauty of oral songs

The calf, human infant and serpent” (Namboothiri 23)

The songs act as inviting calls to all folk to join the ritual, and raise the prayers to divinity to a potent and vibrant level. Songs are orchestrated using the same instruments. There is a widespread saying in Kerala villages that goes like this, “The lyre repeats only what the Pulluva sings” (Namboothiri 22). The male priest plays the lute and sings two lines and his female counterpart repeats the same lines, playing on the stretched strings that are tied to the mouth of a large vessel, popularly known as ‘Pulluva Kudam’.⁴



Figure 9 The instrumental concert

This musical performance is continued for about half an hour and they stop as they finish a particular oral text. These texts have local variations and are different in relation to each drawing. Like all other oral discourses, these songs are not written. Hence, like all oral traditions, they have highly fluid themes and music and are believed to purgatory effect upon the minds of the audience. As pointed out by the experts, “Pulluva songs

are clear evidences to prove the theory that art can have cathartic effect upon human emotions" (Namboothiri 24). Oral literature shows wide variations regionally also.



Figure 10 Kalam lit with metal lamps

One remarkable variation between performing arts and the ritualistic arts is that the latter does not presuppose an audience. Often, unhesitatingly, everybody is counted upon to be a performer. In serpent god worship, the audience partake of its performance only at the concluding stage. Until then, they remain audience, silently watching all activities beginning from the preparation of the stage/spot of ritual. Awakened by the instrumental and verbal musical discourses, they squat around the stage. After composition, the floor drawing is consecrated. The main priest walks briskly around the stage many times, sitting at particular points around the floor drawing and goes through the rite of pooja in a performative manner.



Figure 11 The Consecration of the spot

He throws rice grains, oscimum leaves and water to the floor drawing, chanting mantras for about fifteen minutes. Instrumental music continues in the background at this time. It is succeeded by the spectacular 'wing dance' (muram uzchichil) the fourth major step in the ritual. One young priest enters with a wing-shaped large plate made of bamboo. Rhythmically, to the accompaniment of instruments, the performer dances in an intensely stylized way, exhibiting his physical flexibility and swinging the wing-shaped contraption repeatedly in the air. It represents the wings of the divine bird 'Garuda', who is the enemy of serpents. The serpent spirits can come to the stage only if their enemy is appeased by poojas. This performance, walking, dancing and running around the stage, is an activity to please the Garuda god. It continues for half an hour.

After this, a member of the priest community enters with a torch made with rags dipped in oil and lights it. It forms the fifth stage in the ritual structure. He performs a dance in acrobatic style holding the fire. The lit end of the torch frequently touches various parts of his body, though he is not hurt. He moves around the kalam with rhythmic steps with the flaming whisk in his hands. This performance of the flame dance (thiri uzchichil) imitates the body movements of the hooded snake.



The dance is traditionally choreographed with music alone. Except for the wild rhythm of folk instruments described above, no song is sung at the time of the flame dance.

Now the stage is all set for the group performance of the band of female oracles who are central to the ritual. The girls who underwent

rigorous penance are led to the stage. Until then, they have been kept aloof behind closed doors. The audience welcomes them with wild applause, shouting and whistling. Usually there will be three girls attired in white, and they are the only performers who can occupy centre-stage. The chief priest gives directions and they squat on large plantain leaves, placed above the colour floor drawing. Strict stipulations of austerity give the chief participants necessary spiritual orientation. They deliver no verbal text in the beginning, but hold bunches of areca nut flowers in their hands. The music performed is delivered from one side of the stage. The group of priests now begin to sing in praise of serpent gods, inviting them to enter the bodies of the girls, who act as oracles mediating between divinity and audience.

Songs sung aloud supported by wild rhythm of instruments soon bring the group of girls into a state of trance. Sitting centre-stage, for about half an hour, they concentrate only on their responsibility as performers, in the context of wild music and random persuasions by the priests. They are never conscious of their audience. In this state of extreme concentration, in this trance state, their bodies begin to vibrate making the audience believe that divine power has come down to enter the bodies of the main performers. As they become more active, their heads move to and fro as they remain squatting on the ground. They move very slowly simulating serpents with their untied hair and rub down the pictures of the serpent gods using the areca nut flowers. "The maidens who sat cross legged among the patterns of hooded snakes began to sway. It was surreal; their closed eyes, their trembling hands, their flowing hair, and their sleepy state. Their swaying bodies moved everywhere as if the pictures of the snakes had risen alive" (Pushpa 2).



Figure 12 Ready for the trance

The intensity of music and their self-identification with serpent gods make them perform the hypnotic dance. Because “the performers of the rites assumed for the time being personalities other than their own” (Keith 23). The picture is rubbed out completely within 20 to 25 minutes. When the ground is clear, the main priest asks if they are satisfied with the colour floor drawings given as oblation. Usually they express satisfaction and he directs the audience to ask any kind of question regarding their problems and difficulties in life. Continuing in trance, the girls give suitable answers and solutions, referring to some incidents in the private life of the audience. References to the very personal matters in their life and family convince the audience of the veracity of the oracles. With the mediation of the female band, they believe, they can directly communicate with the gods they worship. At this stage, the audience take part in the performance. “All of them partake the symbolic events with due belief and without questioning the rationality or suitability of the activities taking place” (Kavalam 45). When the gods come down and believers directly approach them, an interactive text is created. The belief is that divinity comes down to assist mortals using the bodies of performers as physical media. This second verbal interactive discourse of the ritual consists of deliberations of specific problems between actors and the audience.



Figure 15 Trance Acting

Necessary directions for future life are received and, in keeping with the request of the main priest, when the interaction is over, the oracles satiate themselves with the holy drink ‘guruthi’ made by mixing the powders of lime and turmeric in water.⁵ Then they lie down on the ground, tired, and are taken away inside. A folklorist in Kerala comments, “At the peak state of trance acting, the maidens make predictions and solutions regarding the future of the worshippers. It is sometimes the most interesting and dramatic of the whole ritual. Finally, the maiden oracles, after rubbing the whole floor drawing with their locks and areca bunches, lie down

completely exhausted" (Pisharoti 49). The full course of the performance is completed by the girls in this surreal drama as they clean the ground with the areca nut flowers and their own hair. The total duration is about three to four hours including preparations of stage and laying the floor drawing. If required, the entire course is repeated in the same night. If one more enacting is done, it will take until next morning to finish.

Summary of elements of serpent god worship ritual

Item	Participation	Specification
Stage setup	Members of priestly community	Unelevated. On ground. Four sides open. Close to nature. Temporary and improvised. 2-3 square meters. Propped.
Arrangement of the stage	Same	Bottom stage covered by colour floor drawing. Decorations using leaves, flowers and cloth. Lit by coconut oil lamps.
Participants-audience	Believers. Cross section of the society	Common folk with two-fold interest. To interact with divinity. Identifies with performances. Join in performance in the final stage.
Performers	1. Members of priestly community 2. Unmarried girls	Never identifies with the characters. Great scholars in pooja texts. Physical aspect emphasized. Experts in oral delivery. Lead a pious life dedicated to serpent gods. Have accepted serpent gods as their family deity. Female oracles. Actors become characters. Spiritually conditioned. Mediate between gods and common people.
Text	Members of the priestly community	Narrative songs. Varies at different performances. No fixed text. Mythic and pious. Spiritual orientation.

Deity	Serpent gods	Democratized. Interferes with audience's personal realms
Music	Members of priestly community	Invoking and invigorating. Wild rhythms. Creates full bodied environment. Performance tuned to music. Folk instruments used.

Performances		
1. Floor drawing composition	Members of the priestly community.	Geometric symmetry. Bold colours. Immense artistry. Morphic representation of divinity. Three dimensional. 3-4 hours to complete.
2. Concert	Same	Supports stage craft and two acrobatic performances. Half-hour duration. Group performance. Wild rhythm. Two traditional instruments.
3. Narrative songs	Same	Mythical text. Oral tradition. Flexible. Changes according to place and singers. Divinity praised. Group activity. Half-hour duration.
4. Wing dance	Same	Acrobatic. Half-hour duration. Single performer. Secular tone. Audience oriented.
5. Flame dance	Same	Acrobatic. Half-hour duration. Single performer. Adventurous. Audience oriented.
6. Trance	Maidens	Group performance. Meditative action. Half-hour duration. Spell of charm. Identification with characters. Interactive with audience.

Notes

¹ Kalam literally means a round artistic drawing filled in with some substance. The drawings to appease serpent gods are not done not in full circles but vary according to the particular picture that is drawn.

² The sacred plant with the botanical name 'Alstonia Scholaris' is commonly called 'Devils Tree', since it is associated with witches in legends and folk myths.

³ Pulluvas are the traditional priests who are said to possess the right to do all kinds of poojas related to serpent gods. The knowledge of the rites, songs and drawing of kalams are not formally taught, but passed on through successive generations.

⁴ Pulluva kudam is a round vessel owned and used by the female priests of the pulluva community. It is covered with thick leather that is stretched and tied a string across the mouth. When the female priest forcibly strikes the tight string with a stone rod, a sound is produced that can resonate to great distances. Pulluva veena is the instrument played by the men. It is like a country lyre.

⁵ Guruthi is a deep red concoction that is believed to represent human blood and hence implies sacrifices given to deities in ancient times seeking fertility or destruction of the enemy. It is a favorite drink of goddess Kali and the serpent gods.

Appendix (Oral song)

To the Serpent God

Thou Lord Shiva, and Parvati
Thou Serpent Virtue and Grace
Thou pretty Serpent Maiden
The serpents at eight directions
Awake and arrive to the earth.
We bow at your ornamented feet
Graced with anklets
Thou noblest and worshipful family god.

For thou under the earth
Having seven-hundred-distance depth
Serpents and Bhoothas dwelling there
And for demons and celestial singers,
We chant this ode of address.
We bow at your ornamented feet
Graced with anklets
Thou noblest and worshipful family god.

Thou Mother Goddess Earth
 Reigning supreme over the universe
 Attired in river Ganges
 Stars garlanding thy neck
 The planets lighting you
 Sun and Moon thy holy lamps.
 We bow at your ornamented feet
 Graced with anklets
 Thou noblest and worshipful family god.

Thou whose locks contain the universe
 Beginning from the eternal blues
 Ending at the oblivion of abyss
 At the sight of thou Lord Shiva
 Induce fun, frolic and joy
 We bow at your ornamented feet
 Graced with anklets
 Thou noblest and worshipful family god.

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