



Research article

The Sacred Groves of the Serpent Gods: 'Sarpakavus' of Kerala as Indigenous Ecology

Devika B

Senior Research Fellow, Christ University.

Abstract

The worship of nature and natural entities has a rich and profound history in most ancient cultures that thrived on the planet. However, as civilizations advanced with technological and scientific innovations, the interconnectedness between nature and human beings gradually declined, and mankind separated itself from its natural habitats. But in many cultures across the world, communities still embody pantheistic traditions, thus showing a sustainable way of living with nature to the rest of the world. This paper explores the tradition of serpent worship and the practice of maintaining sacred groves known as 'sarpakavus' in the South Indian state of Kerala. 'Sarpakavu', translated as 'the sacred grove of serpent gods', are small but dense pockets of biodiversity that are believed to be the abode of serpent gods. Beyond cultural significance, these groves serve as hotspots of ecological diversity. This research delves into the cultural, ecological, and performative aspects of serpent worship within these spaces. focusing on the elaborate rituals of performance and worship associated with the serpent deities, the paper positions 'sarpakavus' (sacred serpent groves) of Kerala as an example of indigenous ecology that shows a model of a symbiotic way of living with nature. As Kerala is currently undergoing a rapid urbanization process of building highways, railways, and ports, this research highlights the need to protect and conserve the tradition of maintaining the existing 'sarpakavus' and their importance in sustaining the ecological balance of the region.

Keywords: Serpent worship, sacred groves, performance ecologies, cultural ecology, ritual performance.



Climate Action, Life on Land

Introduction

There used to be a time in the history of human civilizations when man and nature thrived alongside each other by nurturing and protecting each other. Human societies attuned their lives to the cycles of nature and the cosmos, thereby forging an intricate interconnectedness between nature and humankind. Ancient people venerated and worshiped natural entities that provided

Article History: Received: 30 December 2023. Revised: 14 February 2024. Accepted: 20 March 2024. Published: 22 March 2024

Copyright: © 2024 by the author/s. License Aesthetix Media Services, India. Distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Citation: Devika, B. (2024). The Sacred Groves of the Serpent Gods: 'Sarpakavus' of Kerala as Indigenous Ecology. *Rupkatha Journal* 16:1. <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v16n1.16>

them with life essentials like food, fodder, and natural resources, even before civilizations advanced their notions of anthropomorphic deities. The Greeks, Egyptians, Pagans, Indians, Africans, and Celts have a long history of worshipping natural and cosmic entities like the planets, stars, trees, and animals. The Sun, Moon, and Planets were revered and related to the fertility cycles of land and women; the sea and river nymphs were worshiped as nurturing deities; tree and animal spirits were worshiped as protective deities; and the earth itself was worshiped as the mother of all creations. As civilizations progressed, people began naming the spirits of nature and started attributing them anthropomorphic features (Wildwood, 2018). In the book *Primal Awareness: Reconnecting with the Spirits of Nature*, Rob Wildwood writes about the ancient pantheistic tradition;

Every manifestation of nature was seen as having a spirit which was its very essence. Rocks and crystals, plants and animals, mountains and rivers- each had a spiritual aspect and these spirits were named and visualized as spiritual beings by our early ancestors. Even the forces that set our world into motion—the gusting wind, the flowing waters, the heated earth and the icy frost - also came to be seen as separate sentient spirits. (2018)

The philosophical, scientific, and religious scriptures that posit the grand narrative of human evolution may have their own differences, but they all converge on the idea that human beings evolved from nature. The Biblical representation of the Garden of Eden as an integral part of the stories of Genesis, the Darwinian theory of biological evolution, and the pantheist philosophies of life point at ancient human beings' innate connection with nature. But due to multiple reasons like industrialization, urbanization, exploitation of natural resources, and loss of traditional knowledge, the ties between nature and human beings have severed deeper and deeper, to the point where we have manipulated nature and created artificial environments to live in. In the book *Primal Awareness*, Rob Wildwood quotes Shaman, saying,

The spirits of nature have fled! They have fled from the cities, the highways, the industry, the pollution and the man made constructions that now cover the land. But always they are trying to return, seeking a way back in - carried on a current of air or through a crack in the pavement, or to a windblown corner of wasteland, where they can establish a foothold, before emerging once more to reclaim this land. For the spirit world is timeless, its patience infinite and its influence unrelenting. (2018)

While the logical standpoint of this question can be challenged, there is no denying the fact that modern man has endangered nature itself by depleting its resources, constructing artificial environments, contaminating land and water, and making the planet inhabitable for every other living species. However, certain practices and traditions that are still followed in some corners of the world draw their inspiration from the pantheistic traditions of ancient man and still follow practices that ensure a close association with protecting and preserving nature.

This research paper discusses the tradition of maintaining sacred groves, also known as 'kavukal' or 'kavus' (kavu, singular), in the South Indian state of Kerala. These sacred groves are different from the mainstream temples of Kerala for the reason that most of them are not mainstream Hindu deities. The deities of the sacred groves are tutelary and protective deities who guard clans and families. Chamundi, Yakshi, Yaksha, Arukula, Kuttichathan, Karimkutty, Muthappan, Chathan, and Kurathi are some of the indigenous gods worshiped in the 'kavus', and most common of all

are the serpent gods, or 'sarpa daivangal'. Such 'kavus' where serpent deities are revered are known as 'sarpakavus' which translates into 'the sacred groves of the serpent gods'. In addition to worshipping these deities, people are also bound to protect their natural habitats. Even though this belief stems from a lot of myths and superstitions surrounding these indigenous deities, it has played a huge part in maintaining the ecological diversity of the land. Figure 1 is a picture of a 'sarpakavu' in Kerala, defined by lush green vegetation and indigenous medicinal species. The dense foliage of the land combined with a water body in the middle provides ample cooling to the land, which provides an ideal environment for reptiles to thrive. The vegetation and the water body mostly remain undisturbed, except for removing dry leaves and twigs occasionally. (Fig. 1)

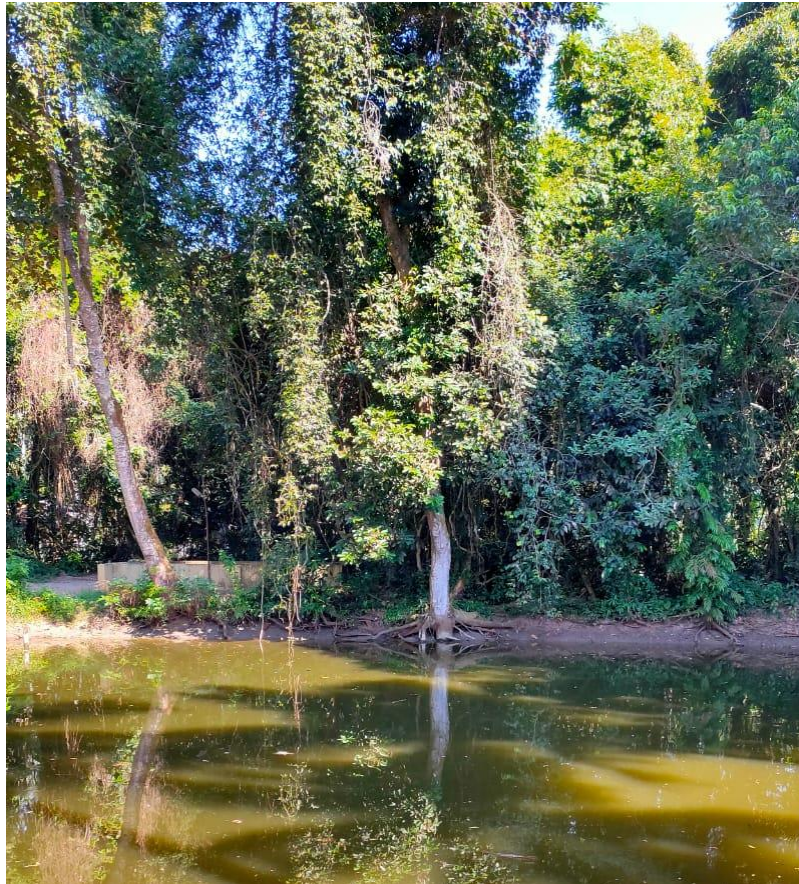


Figure 1: A sacred grove with a pond water body. (B, 2020)

Indian spiritual tradition has an age-old history of sustaining a symbiotic relationship with nature. The Khasi hills of north-east India, the Western Ghats, and the Aravalli hills have abundant numbers of sacred groves that have been maintained devoid of human intervention for a long period of time (Gadgil, 1975, p. 313). In a plea submitted by Madehav Gadgil and V. D. Vartak (1975) for the continued conservation of sacred forests in India, they identify sacred groves as climax forests, "rich in species of trees, climbers, and epiphytes" (p. 320). They write, "as such these sacred groves serve the vital function of preservation of plant species which have become very rare or extinct elsewhere" (p. 320). According to the survey conducted by the Institution of Forestry Kerala, it was observed that "in the beginning of the 19th century, there were more than 30,000 groves in Kerala" (2019, p. 10). However, they have also pointed out that "a recent survey revealed

that only less than 1000 sacred groves exist, and most of them are less than 10 m² in extent” (2019, p. 10). The decline in the number of sacred groves is owed to multiple factors, including deforestation, loss of faith, and urbanization. Therefore, it is very imperative to study the social, cultural, and ecological significance of the practice and tradition of maintaining sacred groves in the South Indian state of Kerala.

Even though the sacred groves in Kerala are enriched by the presence and worship of countless indigenous deities, this paper focused on the rituals and practices that are followed in the ‘sarpakavus’ (sacred serpent groves) for two main reasons. Firstly, the practices associated with serpent worship in Kerala have elaborate performance rituals and ritual art that have huge cultural and ecological significance. Secondly, unlike other spiritual and divine anthropomorphic indigenous deities like Yakshas or Gandharvas, serpents are considered ‘living gods’ that closely live with nature. Therefore, the ritualistic practices associated with serpent worship are more closely intertwined with nature and natural habitats than the Vedic practices of worshipping anthropomorphic deities.

This paper offers a comprehensive understanding of the symbiotic relationship between the practices of serpent worship and ecological conscience, thereby emphasizing the creation of forms of ecological power through these practices. These ritualistic practices are not only channels for spiritual expression but also demonstrate a way of life that could offer pragmatic solutions to the endangerment of ecosystems due to urbanization and other factors. This nuanced perspective expands the scope for studying the indigenous traditions of Kerala as ecological practices and places serpent worship within the broader discourse of ecological consciousness.

Serpent Worship: History and Cultural Significance

In the biblical scriptures, serpents are among the most wretched species that exist on earth. In the Book of Genesis, the famous dictum “And the Lord God said to the serpent: Because thou hast done this thing, thou art cursed among all cattle, and beasts of the earth: upon thy breast shalt thou go, and earth shalt thou eat all the days of thy life” (King James Bible, Genesis 3:14), underlines the Christian notion of serpents as creatures subjected to divine condemnation. However, in oriental philosophy, serpents play an important role in the mythological and religious landscape as divine entities. Serpentine symbolism in Hindu religious mythology is so profound that there are many temples across the country dedicated to Ashtanagas (eight serpent gods) who are guardians of the eight directions. Anantha, Vasuki, Shanghapala, Gulika, Thankshaka, Mahapathma, Karkotaka, and Pathma are the Ashtanagas. Just like human beings, the deities are also categorized into four different castes, namely, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vysya, and Shudra. (B, Paying to the Nagas; Serpent Worship in Kerala) Apart from the Ashtanagas, many indigenous serpent deities are also worshipped in the sacred groves of Kerala, namely, Nagaraja, Nagayakshi, Nagachamundi, Maninagam, Kuzhinagam, Paranagam, etc. (B, 2020)

Figure 2 shows an idol of a serpent deity worshipped in a ‘sarpakavu’. Unlike the mainstream temples of Kerala, the deities in a ‘sarpakavu’ are not placed inside a temple. They are usually positioned under trees or on the ground in a ‘sarpakavu’, signifying their connection to nature. On auspicious occasions, the deity is worshipped by offering pujah and conducting sacred rituals.

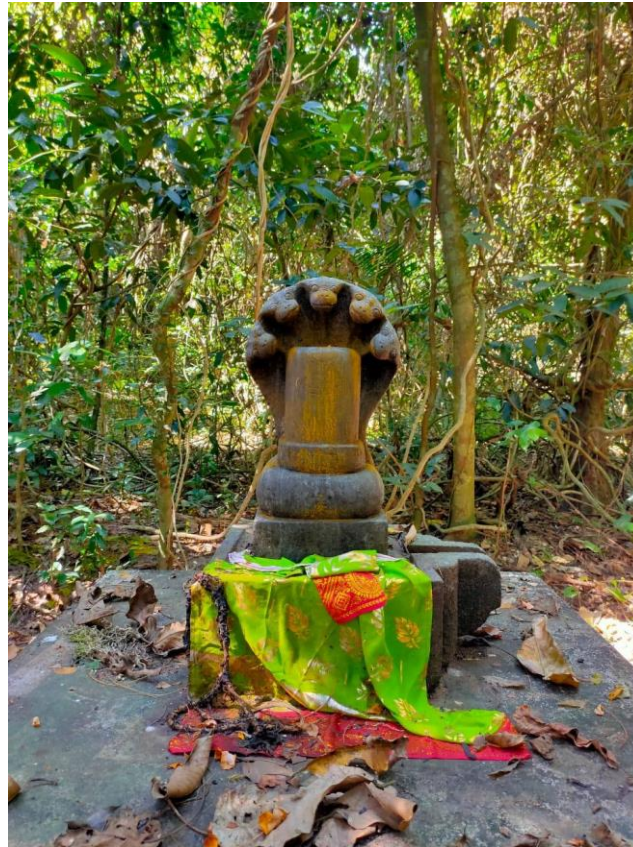


Figure 2: A 'Sarpakavu' in Kerala. (B, 2020)

In a study conducted by the Institution of Foresters Kerala, sacred groves are defined as “patches of vegetation or groups of trees protected by the local people through religious and cultural practices evolved to minimize destruction... sacred groves are community-based monuments of biological diversity” (2019, p. 6). The mythology and superstitions surrounding the many 'sarpakavus' (sacred serpent groves) of Kerala are the major reasons for their conservation and protection. Rohinikrishnan R writes in their thesis *Kavus (Sacred Groves) of Kerala: A Historical Study of Their Tradition and Culture* that “plucking of a small portion of plant specimen and even picking up dead wood and fallen leaves is a taboo and the entire patch is kept under strict vigil because the human intervention can disturb the gods and spirits and force them to a revengeful action” (p. 3). Many local legends and folklore tell stories of people who have died in 'sarpakavus' when they disturbed the peace of the deities by cutting trees or encroaching on the land. Even though these stories have no logical backing, they have scared off a lot of people from poaching and destroying these sacred groves.

According to the legends, the origin of the tradition of serpent worship dates as far back as the myth of the origin of the state of Kerala. It is believed that the land of Kerala was reclaimed by Lord Parasurama from the sea. But in the initial stages, the conflict between the Naga (serpent) occupants of the land and the Brahmin settlers that followed Lord Parasuraman made the coexistence of both communities on the land very difficult. Thus, legend has it that Lord Parasurama provided them with a solution that suggested Brahmins occupy the land and provide the Nagas with undisturbed pieces of groves where they are totally free of human intervention

(Menon, 2013). About this, Aparna R Menon writes, "the tale does not seek to portray polar opposites of the conqueror and the conquered, but rather draws on the cohabitation of both groups which is significant" (Menon, 2013).

In the cultural and religious landscape of Kerala, people worship serpents for many reasons. They do penances and conduct ritualistic ceremonies to please the serpent gods, bless them with children, and protect them from skin related diseases. Aparna R Menon writes, "writings of Edward Balfour, a Scottish environmentalist, of the late 19-th century records how "leprosy, ophthalmia, and childlessness were supposed by Hindus to be the punishment of men who in former or present birth may have killed a serpent" (Menon, 2013). This fear of the curse of serpents has been passed down through generations in the form of oral tales and folklore.

'Sarpakavus' as Indigenous Ecosystems of Ecological Power

In Kerala, many Hindu families own their own 'sarpakavus' that are maintained and protected by these individual families. Due to many reasons, a large number of these groves have been abandoned, and the deities of these groves have relocated to other temples. However, even today, there is a strong tradition of serpent worship that is being followed in many parts of the state.

About this, T. K. Gopal Panikkar writes in his book *Malabar and its Folk* that in the 'sarpakavu', "the serpent is deified, and offerings of *poojah* are often made to the reptile. It has got a powerful hold upon the popular imagination" (1900, p. 145). In most of the large ancestral houses of Hindus, a small piece of land in any corner of the yard is dedicated to the serpent gods. It could be observed that even though most families do not offer ritualistic pujas daily, certain auspicious days are celebrated by these families by conducting rituals and offerings to the serpent gods. The reserved spots for the groves are planted with trees and shrubs, and small ponds are dug to ensure that the land is cool enough for the reptiles to survive. T. K Gopal Panikkar writes,

This spot is so scrupulously reserved, that not even domestic animals are allowed to stray therein. No trees from the place are to be felled down, nor any plant whatever for that matter with any metal or more particularly iron weapons; for these are unholy things the introduction alone of which inside the sanctified area, not to say the actual cutting down of the tree, is regarded as exceedingly distasteful to these serpent-gods. (Panikkar, 1900, 146)

Apart from being mere physical spaces, 'sarpakavus' are woven into the cultural fabric of Kerala by rooting in the traditional belief systems of the community. Community engagement is crucial in maintaining and sustaining the cultural heritage and ecological well-being of 'sarpakavus'. This underlines the essential interdependence between human communities and their physical environment. On auspicious occasions that are considered special for the serpent deities, rituals like *Noorum palum*, *talichukuda*, *sarpam thullal*, and *pulluvan pattu* are conducted to appease the serpent gods. On these occasions, the members of the guardian families gather together and share their collective responsibility for protecting these groves. Thus, these rituals also function as cultural anchors that denote both religious veneration and communal cohesiveness. The gathering of guardian families during these rituals turns the holy groves into places where families congregate and share experiences, creating a sense of community and shared experience. When

families are scattered and live in different places, this kind of communal convergence becomes especially important because it acts as a link that reunites families and bridges geographic distances. As a result, the 'sarpakavus' emerge as both religious and socio-cultural spaces that are essential to the maintenance of family ties. The value of 'Sarpakavus' in cultural and religious contexts is reinforced by this communal participation, which also highlights their sociological relevance.

Researcher and scholar Devika G explores the idea of establishing 'sarpakavus' and its related practices as objective correlative to nature in her paper "The 'Sarpa Kavu' or 'Sacred Groves' of Kerala: An Objective Correlative of Nature". In the essay *Hamlet and His Problems* written by T. S. Eliot, he puts forth the idea of objective correlative as "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked" (1922, p. 93). She writes that the sacred groves are a symbol of man's symbiotic coexistence with nature. They are small pockets of ecological abundance that perform a wide range of ecological functions over time, so that they become tangible expressions of biodiversity. From the preservation of exocotic medicinal plants and providing habitats for many species of birds and animals to maintaining the humidity of the soil and controlling soil erosion, these sacred groves play a pivotal role in maintaining the ecological balance of the land. (G., 2018, p. 397) About this, Devika G writes, "since Sacred Groves acts as an objective correlative through which nature expresses itself as a protector to many species as well as humans, they must be protected so as to maintain ecological balance and provide benefit for the nature." (2018, p. 398)

Even though the preservation of the 'sarpakavus' in Kerala is primarily attributed to the spiritual beliefs of the people, the restrictions and regulations that have been practiced over centuries play a significant role in their existence. In a research inquiry conducted by R. Kamalahar as part of the doctoral thesis, it was observed that the cultural ethos that is ingrained in these belief systems prohibits any kind of resource exploitation from these sacred sites (R, 210). The researcher conducted surveys and interviews around six selected sacred groves and reports that the collection of any sort of plant or tree resource, including medicinal plants, is strictly prohibited in these sacred groves. However, the guardian families were allowed to remove dead and fallen trees, but only after consulting an astrologer to ensure that doing so would not disturb the deities. "It may be pointed out here that, even though limited biomass harvest is permissible, devotees usually stop harvesting if they see a snake or hear some peculiar noise in the Sacred Grove." (R, 210)

If a 'sarpakavu' is abandoned or ill-treated, it is widely believed that the curse of the Nagas will fall upon the family. So the belief system relies on a barter trade, where the families are supposed to protect the sacred groves of the serpent deities, and the deities will protect the families. Most of the time, when the families protecting the groves face any troubles or obstacles in their personal lives, they consult an astrologer seeking solutions. Most often, the remedy would come from maintaining the *kavu* properly and conducting pujas to please the deities. "Serpents are also considered to be fertility deities in Kerala; childless couples often perform the uruli kamazathu ritual for serpent deities to be blessed with a child. They are considered to be gods of earth, so farmers pray to them for good harvest and rain, conduct pujas and give offerings." (B, 2020)

Ritual Performances Associated with Serpent Worship

The ritual performances associated with the tradition of serpent worship in Kerala are not only religious practices but vibrant cultural narratives that draw vastly on Hindu mythological stories and local legends. As mentioned above, most of the 'sarpakavus' in Kerala do not have daily worship rituals, but rather elaborate pujas are conducted on special occasions. Performance rituals like 'sarpam thullal', 'pulluvan pattu', and 'theyyam' are performed on auspicious occasions, and they have great artistic and cultural significance. These rituals, which have been practiced in the 'sarpakavus' of Kerala over centuries, are live expressions of historical continuum.

The performance rituals associated with serpent worship in Kerala are practiced and performed by mostly specific communities of people known as the Pulluvas, who belong to the backward caste known as the Scheduled Caste (SC) in Kerala.

'Kalamezhuthu' followed by 'Sarpam Thullal' is a major ritual practiced in most of the 'sarpakavus'. 'Kalamezhuthu' is the tradition of drawing elaborate figures known as 'Kalam' on the floor using naturally sourced color powders. Figure 3 is a photograph of an artist finishing up a kalam. The artists draw elaborate motifs and figures on the ground, which are usually symbols associated with serpent worship and nature. Each color used has a distinct symbolism associated with it. The green color obtained by grinding the leaves of gulmohar and bead trees symbolizes fertility. The black color signifies strength and is made from charcoal and burned rice chaff, whereas the white color, signifying purity, is made from rice flour. Yellow made from ground turmeric symbolizes faith, and red is made by mixing lime and turmeric, which shows anger. The 'kalam' is not a permanent art piece; it is rather wiped out after the rituals are over. (B, 2020). (Fig. 3)



Figure 3: The process of 'Kalamezhuthu'. An artist finishes a drawing of a 'Kalam'. (B, 2020)

'Kalamezhuthu' is only performed by the Pulluva people since it is considered their birthright. Once the figures are completed, the Pulluva people will start performing a particular kind of folk music known as 'Pulluvan pattu' using distinct folk instruments. This song is believed to lure the serpent gods into a trance state and make them possess the bodies of the devotees who stand

around the 'Kalam'. Coincidentally or not, some devotees are believed to be possessed by the serpent gods and dance in snake-like motions in a trance state all around the 'Kalam'. According to popular belief, it is said that the serpent gods will manifest themselves on the bodies of any of the devotees and speak through them (B, 2020). Mostly, these deities (through the possessed devotees) point out any lapse in the ritual offerings and maintenance of the 'sarpakavu' by the respective families. The deities will ask the family to properly take care of the plants and trees in the groves and light lamps on specific days as part of worship. This ritual dance accompanied by 'Pulluvan pattu' is known as 'Sarpam Thullal'. Even though the traditions of 'Kalamezhuthu' and 'Sarpam Thullal' are largely associated with spiritual beliefs, they could also be identified as theatrical performances or ritual theater. From the meticulous choice of colors to the instructions conveyed through the possessed devotees, these are tangible examples of how the tradition of serpent worship forms integral components of a cultural-ecological nexus. In figure 4, it can be observed that the two women sitting inside the kalam are moving in a trance-state synchronized with the music, wiping out the 'kalam' as they move. They bless the people surrounding them and answer their questions. While acknowledging the cultural significance of this ritual, it is also intriguing to explore the scientific explanation of this ritual, in which people are believed to manifest the serpent gods into their bodies. Given the ritualistic atmosphere and the lyrics and rhythm of 'pulluvan pattu,' it is possible that a hypnotic outbreak could occur in an environment where ardent believers are vulnerable. Thus, the interplay between spiritual beliefs, and cultural performances, combined with collective experience, form the foundation of these ritual art forms. (Fig. 4)



Figure 4: 'Sarpam Thullal'. Possessed devotees dancing in serpent-like motions in a 'Kalam'. (B, 2020)

'Pulluvan pattu', also known as the ballads of the serpent gods, is a peculiar form of folk music practiced by the people of the Pulluva community in Kerala. They use specially crafted folk

instruments like 'pulluvan kudam' and 'pulluvan veena' to draw the attention of the serpent deities (B, 2020). They sing stories from Hindu mythology and folklore about the legend of serpent gods. Below is an excerpt from a 'pulluvan pattu' in Malayalam language:

Nagamalayile nagadaivangale

Kaavum kalangalum pottunna daivangale

Nagashayyayilayi vazhunna bhagavane

Naadum veedum ennum kakkane daivame...(MediaOne Lite, 2015)

This is translated as;

Hey Serpent gods of Serpent mountain,

Hey gods, who guard the sacred groves and *Kalams*

The god who lies in a serpent bed,

Please protect our lands and homes.

Another important ritual that is practiced on the northern side of Kerala is 'Theyyam', which is a ritual dance in which the artists are adorned in elaborate costumes and colors and indigenous gods are evoked through trance-like dance performances. 'Theyyam' is performed by artists belonging to the backward classes, who are usually from the Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST). When the ritual is performed, the artist is supposed to be a manifestation of God and be worshiped. In serpent worship tradition, it is believed that when 'Theyyam' is performed, serpent deities like Nagaraja, Nagayakshi, Nagakali, or others possess the body of the artist and speak through them. In the article "Carnavalesque, Liminality and Social Drama: Characterising the Anti-Structural Potential of Theyyam" Raisun Mathew and Digvijay Pandya write that "the deities represent the lower caste that continues to be exploited by the dominant groups in society. By providing a heroic identity to them, considering them as higher to the existing social system, and worshiping their existence as elevated, the performance situates itself with the downtrodden and the oppressed groups in the society" (2021, p. 4). Figure 5 is a photograph of the Nagakali Theyyam performance. The artist is adorned as Nagakali, a serpent goddess, and dances in frenzy movements, accompanied by the beating of drums and instruments. Nagakali Theyyam is a highly ritualized performance that requires the artist to undergo rigorous penance and training. The artist, who is believed to have transformed into the goddess during the performance, dances for hours, often interacting with people. This ritual is an interesting intersection of cultural expression and performance theatre. (Fig. 5)



Figure 5: A 'Theyyam performance known as Nagakali Theyyam. (B, 2020)

All three performance rituals mentioned above preserve the cultural heritage of the tradition of 'sarpakavus' through the dramatization of mythological narratives. Most of the stories associated with serpent worship in Kerala are oral narratives and folkloric accounts. The continuity of these performance rituals ensures the safeguarding and transmission of these cultural and mythical narratives to future generations. Thus, these rituals not only embody cultural expression but also integrate the dynamism of performance theater. This interplay of spiritual symbolism, performativity, indigenous belief systems, and community engagement bridges the gap between the spiritual and artistic, thus establishing them as important expressions in the domain of performing arts.

Conservation and Preservation of 'Sarpakavus'

Kerala's cultural heritage is deeply rooted in these holy groves, which operate as living archives of customary knowledge and methods. The land's cultural legacy is enhanced by the existence of such sacred groves, ceremonial customs, and native plant species. In addition, 'sarpakavus' offer vital ecological services such as soil preservation, water filtration, and carbon sequestration. The wellbeing of the surrounding populations and the preservation of the ecological balance depend on the preservation of these groves. In the article "Socio-cultural perspective to the sacred groves and serpentine in Palakkad District, Kerala," it is observed that,

The areas under sarpakavu are degenerating fast due to many reasons including the cost for performing the rituals, modernization, evolution of nuclear families at the cost of joint families, etc. Often the groves are shrunk to just where the deities are kept and the area outside the sanctum sanctorum is converted to agricultural lands or houses, thus reducing the groves to just the sacraments without vegetation. (V. S et al., 2008, 459)

The decline of the tradition of serpent worship not only affects the belief systems of the people of Kerala but will also have consequences for the ecological balance of the land. The

disappearance of the sacred groves would threaten the existence of a number of species, especially snakes and other reptiles, which are otherwise killed by human beings. Disregard for this tradition would also result in the disappearance of ritual arts like 'sarpam thullal, and 'pulluvan pattu'. As mentioned in the article "Socio-cultural perspective to the sacred groves and serpentine in Palakkad District, Kerala",

"The traditional art form, Pulluvan pattu, performed by the nomadic people of Pulluva community is seen only in the central Kerala and it is said that traditionally these people use 71 different designs for Kalamezhuthu. In the present situation, where these rituals are being performed only rarely due to economic constraints and for want of people knowledgeable to perform these rituals, these traditional art forms will be lost forever." (V. S et al., 2008, 461).

The existence of 'sarpakavus' is threatened by capitalism and the rapid encroachment of land for urbanization. These holy groves are becoming more and more fragmented and degraded due to the growth of human settlements, endangering their ecological integrity. Modernization and evolving social values are factors in the disregard and renunciation of customs connected to 'sarpakavus'.

It is crucial to include the local community in the protection of 'sarpakavu'. The transmission of ancestral knowledge and tradition to the future generation, and spreading awareness about the ecological significance of 'sarpakavus' could be of great help in preserving 'sarpakavus'. Sustainable practices may be promoted via community-led projects, awareness campaigns, and educational activities that cultivate a sense of accountability and ownership among the local communities. Cooperative research initiatives including scientists, conservationists, and local people can enhance management tactics. Advocating for stringent laws and regulations is essential to ensuring 'sarpakavu's' long-term survival. Enforcing strict laws and designating these groves as protected areas can prevent invasion and guarantee their preservation. To guarantee the survival of these holy groves, it is imperative to address the issues through policy lobbying, knowledge system integration, and community engagement. Kerala can ensure a peaceful coexistence between environment and culture by preserving 'sarpakavus' and putting strong conservation measures in place to protect them for future generations.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the nuanced aspects of serpent worship practiced in Kerala, associating it with aspects of performativity and ecological consciousness. This centuries-old tradition has contributed to the enrichment of the cultural and religious heritage of the state. Sacred groves are dynamic cultural initiatives rather than static objects, as is made clear by closely examining the complex interactions between cultural mandates and various historical trajectories. In short, the 'sarpakavu' tradition makes a significant contribution to the concept of indigenous performance ecologies by integrating ecological processes with cultural practices. It is a dynamic example of how cultural behaviors and environmental consciousness interact. Ritual performances within 'sarpakavus' become a dynamic manifestation of cultural and ecological interdependence, going beyond simple spiritual or religious practice. This intersectionality highlights how crucial it is to

maintain 'sarpakavus' as well as the distinctive tradition they stand for. It critically questions the separation of cultural and environmental issues, showing how cultural practices can actively contribute to the flourishing of both human communities and the natural world.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest.

Funding Disclosure/Acknowledgement

No funding was received to conduct or publish this research.

References

- B, D. (2020, August 20). Praying to the Nagas: Serpent Worship in Kerala. *Sahapedia*.
<https://www.sahapedia.org/praying-nagas-serpent-worship-kerala>
- B, D. (2020). [Vazhuvelil sarppakavu, Karunagapally in Alappuzha district of Kerala]. Sahapedia.
<https://www.sahapedia.org/sarppakalam-and-snake-dance-keralas-age-old-tradition-serpent-worship#lg=1&slide=0>
- B, D. (2020). [Sarppakulam (a pond in a sarppakavu) is an integral part of a kavu.]. Sahapedia.
<https://www.sahapedia.org/sarppakalam-and-snake-dance-keralas-age-old-tradition-serpent-worship#lg=1&slide=2>
- B, D. (2020). [A priest of Pulluva community drawing a sarppakalam.]. Sahapedia.
<https://www.sahapedia.org/sarppakalam-and-snake-dance-keralas-age-old-tradition-serpent-worship#lg=1&slide=17>
- B, D. (2020). Sahapedia. <https://www.sahapedia.org/sarppakalam-and-snake-dance-keralas-age-old-tradition-serpent-worship#lg=1&slide=25>
- B, D. (2020). [Nagakali Theyyam performed at a festival in Kannur district of Kerala]. Sahapedia.
<https://www.sahapedia.org/sarppakalam-and-snake-dance-keralas-age-old-tradition-serpent-worship#lg=1&slide=10>
- Eliot, T.S. (1922). Hamlet and His Problems. *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd. pp. 87-94. <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/57795/pg57795-images.html#hamlet>
- Freeman, J. R. (1999). Gods, Groves and the Culture of Nature in Kerala. *Modern Asian Studies*, 33(2), pp. 257–302. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/313169>
- M., Chandrashekara & Sankar, S.. (1998). Ecology and management of sacred groves in Kerala, India. *Forest Ecology and Management*. 112. Pp. 165-177. 10.1016/S0378-1127(98)00326-0.
- G, Devika. (2018, March 1). The 'Sarpa Kavu' or 'Sacred Groves' of Kerala: An Objective Correlative of Nature. *IJCRT*, 6 (1), pp. 396-398. <https://www.ijcrt.org/papers/IJCRT1803153.pdf>
- Gadgil, M., & Chandran, M. D. S. (1992). Sacred Groves. *India International Centre Quarterly*, 19(1/2), 183–187. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23002228>

- Gadgil, M. and Vartak, V.D. (1975). Sacred groves of India : A plea for Continued Conservation. *Journal of Bombay Natural History Society*, 72 : 314-320.
- Institution of Foresters Kerala. (2019). Comprehensive Study of Sacred Groves in Kerala. <https://forest.kerala.gov.in/images/pdf/IFK%20Report%20Kottayam.pdf>
- King James Version Bible. (1611). Germany: BookRix. https://www.google.co.in/books/edition/The_Holy_Bible/WFxoAwAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0
- Mala, Agarwal. (2016). Conserving Water & Biodiversity: Traditions of Sacred Groves in India. *European Journal of Sustainable Development*. 5. doi.10.14207/ejsd.2016.v5n4p129.
- Mathew, Raisun & Pandya, Digvijay. (2021). Carnavalesque, Liminality and Social Drama: Characterising the Anti-Structural Potential of Theyyam. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*. Pp. 1-11.
- MediaOne Lite. (2015, June 18). Pattuvazhi | സർപ്പം പാട്ട് Episode 07 [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I67Ey8LUEZg>
- Ormsby, Alison A. (2011). The Impacts of Global and National Policy on the Management and Conservation of Sacred Groves of India. *Human Ecology*, 39, (6), pp. 783–93. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41474654>.
- Panikker, T.K Gopal. (1900). Serpent Worship in Malabar. *Malabar and its Folk*. G.A. Natesan and Co Printers: Madras. Pp. 145-151.
- Raju, S. (1991). Narratives, Signs and Social Order: Nagam and the People of Keralam. *Studies in History*, 7(1), pp. 37-64. <https://doi.org/10.1177/025764309100700102>
- V. S. Ramachandran et al. (2008). Socio-cultural Perspective to the Sacred Groves and Serpentine in Palakkad District, Kerala. *Indian Journal of Traditional Knowledge*. 7(3), pp. 455-462.
- Wildwood, Rob. (2018). Primal Awareness: Reconnecting With The Spirits Of Nature. United Kingdom: John Hunt Publishing.
- Wilson, F.P. (1970). *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs* (3rd Ed.). London: Oxford University Press.
- R, Kamalahar. *Management of Sacred Groves in Kerala*. [Doctoral dissertation]. Shodhganga. <https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/handle/10603/455766>
- R, Rohinikrishnan. *Kavus (Sacred Groves) of Kerala: A Historical Study of their Tradition and Culture*. [Doctoral dissertation]. Shodhganga. <https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/handle/10603/381719>

Author bio – Devika B is a Senior Research Fellow at Christ University, Department of English and Cultural Studies. Her research interests include Cultural Studies, Inter-arts and studies in Visual Arts. She is currently working on her PhD in the area of Inter-arts, focusing on the interaction of visual and verbal narrative structures.
