

Socio-cultural perspectives to the sacred groves and serpentine worship in Palakkad district, Kerala

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Sacred groves (*kavukal*) are seen through out Kerala, having varied forms, cultural practices and belief systems. The vegetation in the groves is highly varied viz. mangroves, fresh water swamps, or other tropical forest types. Deities worshipped in the groves are also highly varied. One such type is the sacred grove dedicated to serpent God and serpent worship is considered to be one of the oldest and most prevalent forms of nature worship in the world. While serpent worship is seen through out India, only in Kerala, people worship serpent in the sacred groves dedicated to them called, *Sarpa kavu*. The study brought out three broad types of groves in Palakkad, viz. the primitive, the recent and the sacraments devoid of groves. Worship, rites and rituals associated with the grove include both primitive ones like *Noorum palum*, *Kalamezhuthupattu* and the *Vedic* types like *Sarpa bali* and *Payasa homam*. Beside these, the myths and beliefs associated with serpent worship are also discussed in detail. The study brings to light the existence of groves devoid of any vegetation, indicating that sacred groves can be relicts from a past socio-cultural epoch, which served to transmit the cultural heritage generations from pre-historic time. Conservation of natural resources in the past involved many *taboos*, rituals and other religious practices and sacred groves was such a traditional socio-cultural mechanism aiming at nature conservation that integrated socio-cultural aspects for conservation.

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The ways and forms of worship by the primitive societies being varied in different part of the World, nature worship was a common practice. Man worshipped varied wonders and mysteries in nature due to many reasons necessary for his survival¹. Living in close interaction with nature, ancient man knew that natural resources are necessary for his survival and well being, and its misuse would be disastrous. In due course, this nature worship evolved as one of the means of conservation of natural resources, where the resources acquired a sacred or sanctified status. Different forms of this nature worship are supposed to be deeply rooted in the Megalithic times when man was transforming from hunter-gatherer to food producer. Evidences suggest that early civilizations even created reserves to protect wildlife or natural habitats by instituting cultural and religious practices, for which the belief system gave a helping hand².

Sacred groves

The concept of sacred groves might have been conceived with the spread of agriculture, when slash and burn system gained momentum²⁻⁵. Though sacred groves are fragments of the original vegetation of a region, groves with artificial regeneration and groves formed entirely of planted trees are also available^{1,4,6}. The size of these groves ranges from a few sq m to a few sq km of undisturbed forest patch and the vegetation ranges from a few trees of a species, to a single species covering the whole area and a consortium of trees of different species^{4,7}. Sacred groves are found far and wide world over with varied religions and forms of social and economic organizations in Africa, Asia, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Polynesia and the Americas^{4,6}. Seen scattered throughout the Indian sub-continent, they are more concentrated along the Khasi and Jaintia hills of Northeastern Himalayas, Western Ghats, Aravalli hills and Central India⁸. Associated with the diverse cultures in India, sacred groves are known under different names: *Dev* in Madhya Pradesh,

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Deorais or *Deovani* in Maharashtra, *Saranas* in Bihar, *Orans* in Rajasthan, *Sidharavana* or *Devarakadu* or *Pavithravana* in Karnataka, *Kavu* or *Vallikkettu* in Kerala and *Kavu* or *Kovil kadu* in Tamil Nadu^{1,4}. They are generally dedicated to different gods, goddesses, spirits, demons, ancestors or serpents⁷⁻⁹. It is believed that the groves are under the protection of the presiding deity and anyone harming the plants or animals in the grove would be the subject of their wrath.

Sacred Groves of Kerala

Sacred groves (*kavukal*) are seen through out Kerala, having varied forms, cultural practices and belief systems. *Kavu* in Malayalam vernacular means a garden or a consortium of trees¹. This primitive tribal culture of pre-Dravidian era is mostly distributed along the plains and lower elevations, i.e. from sea level to 450 m altitude, near human settlements and away from the forests^{1,3,6,10}. Kollam, Alapuzha and Pathanamthitta districts in the South and Kannur, Kasarkkode and Kozhikkode districts have been described as the 'hotspots' of sacred groves in Kerala¹⁰. Even though the groves are more or less disturbed and reduced in size, many of them are still rich in biodiversity^{5,11,12-15}. The vegetation in the groves is highly varied, viz. mangroves, fresh water swamps, or other tropical forest types⁵. Deities worshipped in the groves are also varied and based on the nature of the deity, sacred groves are known under different names. The sacred groves of Kerala have been broadly classified into *Ammadaivakavukal* (Mother goddess), *Purushadaivakavukal* (Male gods), and *Mrigadaivakavukal* (animal gods)¹. Mother Goddess worshipped in the groves is *Kali*, known under different names like *Bhagavathi*, *Durga*, *Bhadra*, *Chamundi*. Male Gods worshipped in the groves are *Vaishnava* gods, *Shaiva* gods, *Gramadaivangal*. The animals worshipped in the grove are tiger and snake (serpents). Some examples for sacred groves are *Bhagavathi Kavu* (goddess *Bhagavathi*), *Durga Kavu* (the forest goddess-*Vanadevatha* or *Vanadurga*), *Ayyappan Kavu* or *Sastha Kavu* (god *Ayyappa*), *Madan Kavu* or *Yekshi Kavu* (spirits, demons) and *Sarpa Kavu* (serpents)^{1,10}. There are also groves without any deity, being dedicated to the Universal creator¹⁶. Management of the groves is highly varied, there are groves that are owned and managed collectively either by a village or by a community, some are under a single or group of ancestral families^{6,17}. Seen associated with these

groves are some art forms like *kalamezhuthupattu*, *theyyam*, which has been well documented for North Kerala^{1,6,15,17-19}.

Sarpa Kavukal (serpent sacraments)

Serpent worship is one of the oldest and most prevalent forms of nature worship in the world¹. Apart from India, they are seen in countries like Egypt, China, Sri Lanka, Japan, and Java. Even though serpent worship is seen throughout India, only in Kerala, people worship serpent in the sacred groves dedicated to them called, *sarpa kavu* and has developed along with it a distinctive way of worship, rites, rituals and art forms. Even though this pre-Dravidian culture of serpent worship is 3,000 yrs old, it became widespread and popular only after the appearance of well organised of Brahmin settlements in Kerala in the 7th-8th century¹. Though sacred groves of Kerala have been studied from the point of view of biodiversity in general, sacred groves of Palakkad district have not received much attention.

Study area

Palakkad district is the largest district of Kerala lying between 10°15' and 11°15' North latitudes; 76° and 77° East longitudes. The place name Palakkad is presumed to have derived from *Palai kadu* (Tamil), which denotes a dry landscape dominated by scrubs and bushes of *Palai* (*Alstonia scholaris* / *Wrightia tinctoria* / *Holarrhena pubescence*)²⁰. Culturally, the district is a confluence of many communities and agriculture (especially rice) is the major source of subsistence; so the socio-cultural set up has been moulded on the agriculture and related activities. Historical and archaeological evidences suggest the existence of Buddhism and Jainism in the district some 1,000 yrs ago²¹. Palakkad forms a natural gap in the Western Ghats and thus connects the West coast with the Deccan plateau. The average annual rainfall of the district is around 2,397 mm and hottest month is March when mercury shoots up to 38° C. The soil type is highly diverse with clay gravel soil of lateritic origin occurring in major parts of the midland region, forest loam soil in the high lands and black soil on the eastern side, which is an extension of the black cotton soils of the Deccan plateau.

Methodology

Field surveys were conducted for gathering information associated with sacred groves with an

emphasis on socio-cultural aspects. Socio-cultural background of the sacred groves were collected through PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal), RRA (Rapid Rural Appraisal) and personal interviews with the elder people of the neighbouring areas, *Karnavars* (elder people of the traditionally known age-old families), *Pulluvas*, a traditional community (who perform *kalamezhuthupattu*, a ritual associated with the groves), and *Namboothiris* (a priest hood community) involved in serpent worship.

Observations

The sacred groves of Palakkad are predominantly dedicated to serpent deities and are popularly known as *Sarpa kavu* (Figs 1 & 2). The idols worshipped in the groves are *Nagaraja*, *Nagayakshi*, *Chithrakooda kallu*, *Maninagam*, *Anjana maninagam* and in some cases, there is only a termite mound. Adjacent to some groves are often seen deities like *Ayappan*, *Sivan*, *Bhagavathy*, *Durga*, *Bhrahmarakshas*, called co-deities. In almost all the groves, the deities are seated beneath a tree at the entrance of the grove, either on granite or on a cemented platform or directly on the soil. During the survey, studied 27 sacred groves may be categorised into three different types as: *Primitive Groves*, seen in the *tharavadu* (traditional age-old families) maintained through ages and conserved under strong belief systems. The vegetation is either a low elevation evergreen one or a deciduous one with little disturbance and the extent of groves ranged anywhere between 80 m² -22,258 m²; *Recent Groves*, built and maintained as *prayaschitham* (atonement) for getting the blessings of some angry serpent gods, that existed in the area once, and left unattended, destroyed or forcefully removed in between. They are of recent origin, anywhere between 10-50 yrs old, with an extent of few sq m. Some of these have a single tree or often devoid of vegetation, and reinstated by a process known as *kudiyiruthu* (consecration); *Sacraments devoid of groves*: The ones with termite mounds and devoid of deity or grove, where serpents is believed to be living in the mound. Such sacraments seen near houses and villages are left undisturbed, and retain mainly scrub growth. People protect these for fear of the curse from serpent gods and goddesses. Out of the 27 groves, 11 belonged to the first type, 10 to the second type and 6 to the third type.

As any other spiritual institutions, purity of mind and body are of utmost importance in the *Sarpa kavu*

for pleasing the deities. Any form of cutting or removal of trees or their parts in the grove is prohibited, lest it should invite calamities in the family. Blighted patches or pustules all over the body, blindness, leprosy; loss of fortune, lack of progeny, etc. are thought of as a result of the displeasure of serpent gods. Even natural catastrophes like flood or drought, affecting the entire community are also considered a result of displeasure.

Though serpent worship is done throughout the year, the month *Vrischikom* (a month in Malayalam calendar; spanning November 15-December 15) is regarded auspicious, when special offerings are given to the serpent gods. However, no rites and rituals are performed during the month of *Karkidakom* (July 15-August 15). Formerly this prohibited period used to span from the latter half of *Edavom*, *Midhunam* and *Karkidakom* (June 1-August 15) matching with the Southwest monsoon. It is believed that rainy season is the period of enjoyment for serpent gods and should not be disturbed, and prohibition period has this basis. In the *kavu* owned by *Namboothiri* and *Nair* families, the eldest female member of the, who is free of death, birth and menstrual pollutions, performs daily worship by lighting earthen oil lamp in front of the deity at dusk. Rites and rituals associated with the *sarpa kavu* were found to be of two types. In the *sarpa kavu* owned by *Namboothiris*, rituals are in *Vedic* style, involving *manthra* (phrases invoking gods) and *thantra* (symbolist signs). In the *sarpa kavus* of *Nair*, *Ezhava* and *Thandan* (some castes of Kerala), the rites and rituals are in primitive style, which comprises *Noorum palum* as it is popularly called, and *pulluvan pattu* (*kalamezhuthupattu*) and *pambu thullal* (*thullal*).

Noorum palum is a unique ritual performed in the *sarpa kavu* by one of the senior members of the family or priests. However, the process of consecration and transfer of the serpent deity to a new location can be done only by the two privileged *Namboothiri* families in Kerala—*Pathirikunnathu Mana* (Palakkad) and *Pambumekkattu Mana* (Thrissur). *Noorum palum* are offered on the *Aayilyam* star of every month or once in a year in any of the twelve months except *Karkidakom*. *Noorum palum* is a preparation of water, milk, rice powder and turmeric powder; poured all along the idol and also offered in front of the deity. Along with this are also offered, raw rice, unbroken coconut fruits, betel leaves and areca nut. This ritual is seen in all the

sarpa kavus except the ones owned by the *Namboothiri*, where daily rituals, of *Vedic* style replace it. In those *kavu* of *Namboothiris* where there are no daily rituals, offerings are given once in a year in *Vedic* style, called *Vellari nivedyam*. Burning of oil lamp in front of the deity every day at dusk, is however universal. *Pulluvan pattu*, also known, as *Kalamezhuthupattu* is another ritual associated with the *sarpa kavu*, being performed by the people belonging to the *Pulluva* community, who are considered as very ancient, seen associated with serpent worship. This is a very expensive ritual, generally performed once in a year or as and when found necessary. Once in a year, it is performed during the Malayalam month *Vrischikam* (November 15 to December 15). The different stages of this include *kalamezhuthu*, *pooja*, *pattu*, and *thullal*.

Kalamezhuthu is the preparatory initial stage of the ritual, during which, colourful pictures of serpents (*sarppakalam*) are made using powders of various colours from easily available natural material (Figs 3-5). One among the *Pulluva* acts as the chief priest for the ritual and through out this ritual he is assisted by a group of helpers called the *paniyalukal*. These *paniyalukal* are girls or women from the family of the people who owns or manage the grove and intends to conduct the ritual; their number would always be odd in the order. All these people should purify themselves by abstaining from all worldly pleasures for 41 days, and on the 41st day, the ritual begins. Designs generally used for *sarppakalam* (dedicated to serpent god) are *Ashtanagakkalam*, *Nagayakshikkalam*, *Sarpayakshikkalam*, *Bhasmakkalam*, *Sudarsanakkalam*, *Santhathikkalam*, *Nagarajakkalam*, *Nagakanyakkalam*, and *Ananthasayanam*. The components of *Ashtanaga* (8 serpents), *Ananthan*, *Vasuki*, *Gulikan*, *Sankupaalan*, *Thakshakan*, *Mahapadman*, *Padman*, and *Karkkodakan* are considered divine serpents protecting our earth. The *Ashtanaga* are again classified into *Brahmana* (*Ananthan* and *Vasuki*), *Kshathriya* (*Gulikan* and *Sankupaalan*), *Vysya* (*Thakshakan* and *Mahapadman*), *Soodra* (*Padman*, *Karkkodakan*), employing the nomenclature used in the caste system. Representation of serpents of all castes in a single *sarppakalam* is said to indicate the cultural unity of the society. Also these eight serpents are designed in a highly tangled form, indicating that none can live without the others as all are interconnected, but having their own roles.

The *kalam* is drawn either in front of the sacred grove or in a near by temporary structure with thatched roof. The festival site is cleaned, decorated with leaves of fig tree, mango, areca palm, betel, young unopened leaves of toddy palm (*Borassus flabellifer* Linn.) or coconut palm, young unopened inflorescence of areca palm. The floor is waxed with a coating of mud, on which designs are made with *panchavarna podi*, constituting five different colours (*pancha*=five, *varnam*=colour, *podi*=powder), made of natural materials. The colours are yellow, white, red, green and black, representing the five natural elements of this universe. When the *kalam* is ready, the *nilavilakku* (the traditional oil lit brass lamps) is lit, marking the beginning of the ritual. With this starts *pooja*, the process of invoking the serpent gods in to the *kalam*. Invocation is done by silent prayers and floral offerings along with water. For this, only selected flowers and leaves; flowers of *thechi* (*Ixora coccinea* Linn), leaves of *thulasi* (*Ocimum sanctum* Linn), flowers of *thamara* (*Nelumbo nucifera* Gaertn.) and leaves of *koovalam* (*Aegle marmelos* Correa ex Roxb.) are used. This is followed by offering of food (*Noorum Palum*) to the gods invoked in the design followed by tender coconut, mature coconut, raw rice, fruits, and milk.

The serpent gods who have been invoked in the *sarppakalam*, are supposed to have been satisfied by the offerings, and are now supplicated with devotional songs to get their blessings. The songs, *Pulluvan pattu*, are sung by the husband and wife of *Pulluva*, who also plays certain musical instruments (*kudam*, *veena* and *ila thalam*). Now the helpers will stand with the tender inflorescences of areca palm in their hands, concentrating in the songs and the *kalam*. In the limited light of the *nilivilakku*, the song and the typical drumbeat transform these helpers to a hypnotised state. With this, they slowly swing their body and dance like a snake, and at climax, they rub off the *kalam*. This hypnotised dance is called the *thullal* or *pambu thullal*. The same procedure of *kalamezhuthu*, *pattu*, *thullal* will continue for the whole period in the morning as well as in the afternoon. In the *sarpa kavu* owned by *Namboothiri*, worship involves another *Vedic* ritual called *Sarpa bali*, where cooked raw rice is offered for all serpent gods of the universe with *manthras* and *thanthra*. As atonement for killing snakes, serpent or cutting or damaging plants in the grove, another ritual called *Payasa homam* is performed, where the *payasam*

(sweet pudding) is offered in the holy fire (*homam*). It is believed that *agni* (the fire god of the *homam*) acts as a messenger for all gods and goddesses and the highest way of pleasing gods and goddesses is by performing *homam*. Thus *Kalamezhuthupattu* is altogether absent in the serpent worship of the *Namboothiri* and if at all, it is performed in an entirely different way. Here, people belonging to the *Kuruppu* community perform the *Kalamezhuthupattu*; these people perform *Bhagavathy pattu* and *Sarpa pattu* in the sacred groves of the *Namboothiri*. Though *Bhagavathy pattu* is performed occasionally, *Sarpa pattu* has not been performed in the *sarpa kavu* for the past 30-40 yrs due to the non-willingness of the performers. This is because the general belief goes that while making designs of serpent gods, if any mistake is made, he will lose one year from his life. As the women members of the traditional *Namboothiri* community are prohibited from public appearance and moving freely in public, the *thullal* part is altogether absent.

Discussion

The areas under *sarpa kavu* are degenerating fast due to many reasons including the cost for performing the rituals, modernisation, 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. Invariably the eldest member retained the *kavu* and continued performing the rites and rituals for the deity. During annual rituals, all members get together to please the resident deity. Now a days, the worshippers are unable to continue the rituals as they are expensive and also for want of knowledgeable people to perform these rituals. Fearing the curse of serpent gods and unable to perform the rites and rituals, the gods of the groves are translocated to nearby temples following astrological conventions. With this the grove is converted for other land uses, resulting in the loss of vegetation also.

Sacred groves are regarded as biodiversity refugia, when 80% of the groves studied in Kerala are less than 0.02 ha in area and groves with more than 5 ha area constitutes only 3%¹². Also, many sacred groves shows high diversity index value for plants, which may be due to factors like the edge effect as a result of fragmentation, anthropogenic pressure by way of

pilgrimage^{5,11-15}. Some groves are a source of living for the community by way of collection of minor forest products under the supervision of the priest of the grove^{5,22}. When such groves form a resource for a particular community with religious fencing and supervision, there will be only utilisation and not extraction. Unlike this, in almost all other natural forests all the people in and around the forest compete for the forest resources, resulting in the depletion and ultimate loss of resources. Sacred groves are known under different names based on the deity to whom the grove is dedicated. In some of the groves the deities exist together with the co-deities. Although all the deities are of equal status the rituals and rites are offered to only one. Mistakenly, some relationships between these deities like patron deity, assistant deity, main deity and sub-deity have been suggested^{16,17}. Some researchers presumed that the sacred groves of North Kerala are associated with the gods other than serpent deities and those of South Kerala with serpent gods while others hold the view that 30% of the sacred groves in Kerala are dedicated to serpent gods and 60% to the sub-deities (co-deities)^{16,17}. In the groves of Palakkad district, however, all the groves are dedicated to the serpent gods, though in some cases, other deities are also seen as co-deities. Females are prohibited from entering the sacred groves in the other regions of Western Ghats and in the Northeast, but in the *sarpa kavu* of Palakkad belonging to *Namboothiri* and *Nair* communities, the eldest female member of the family lights oil lamp every day^{5,23}.

Ecologically, these mini forest (sacred groves of olden days) endowed man with all the service of a tropical forest ecosystem. Food chains and food web inside these groves kept the population of the wild life under control. Disappearance of groves threatened the very existence of the wild animals; especially the snakes, which were once useful to man in the biological control of pest in crop plants. With the disappearance of the groves, more than the biological diversity, the entire culture transmitted across the generations is lost forever. 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*^{1,17,19,24}. In the present situation, where these rituals are being performed only rarely due to economic constraints and for want of people knowledgeable to perform



Fig.1 Sarpa Kavu- Deity in grove

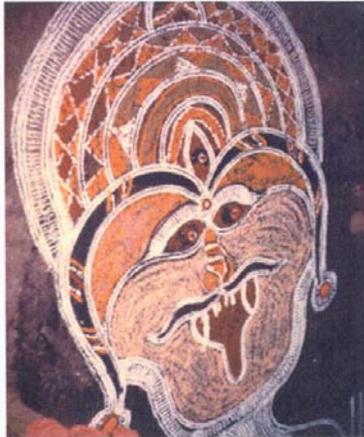


Fig.2 Sarpa Kavu-Deity under single tree

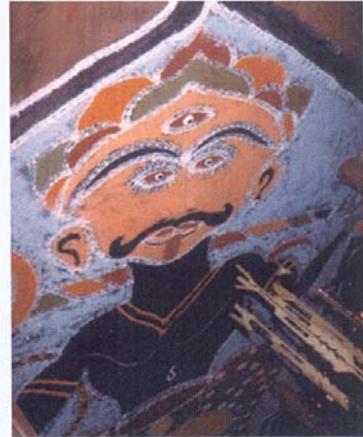


Fig.3 Bhadrakali Kalam



Fig.4 Pootha Kalam



Fig.5 Pootha Kalam



Fig.6 Deity without canopy cover



Fig.7 Transformation of grove into a temple



Fig. 8 A newly consecrated grove

these rituals, these traditional art forms will be lost forever. Against the legal and instrumental modalities employed in the conservation of protected areas today, it is a wonder that these groves of Megalithic origin have survived till date on socio-cultural fencing. Each community and each region has its own cultural identity, making them distinct; although the goal of all communities is human welfare.

The number of sacred groves of a region fluctuates as new one appears a fresh and many old ones are lost (Figs 6-8). Though vegetation varies from natural forest to pure plantations, the study brings to light the existence of groves devoid of any vegetation^{6,25}. The fact is that more than centres of rare biota, sacred groves are centres of cultural heritage. When forests were cleared for agriculture, these sacred groves were the only place left for meditation, which in due course became centres of worship and later temples^{4,5,25-28}. The idols of serpent gods and goddesses usually inscribed with *shad chakra* described by ascetic *yogis*, or with *Siva lingam*. Activation of *kundalini* through advanced *yogic* practices are said to lead to enlightenment. *Kundalini* power is described to ascend in spirals, and these serpent idols symbolised *kundalini* and not snake *per se*. The hooded serpent in charging position is the symbolism of attainment of enlightenment; and is of common occurrence in Buddhist and Jain cultures. So, there is every possibility that the serpent deities worshiped in these *sarpa kavus* are really the headman of a lost culture, who has reached the higher levels of meditation.

Conclusion

Sacred groves are relicts from a past socio-cultural epoch, which served to transmit the cultural heritage generations from pre-historic time onwards. Conservation of natural resources in the past involved many taboos, rituals and other religious practices and sacred groves was such a traditional socio-cultural mechanism aiming at nature conservation that integrated socio-cultural aspects for conservation. The changing lifestyles and rapid modernization are death traps for the age-old conservation practice.

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