

Colour symbolism in ritual art

A study on Kalamezhuthu, the ritual painting of Kerala

S P E C I A L P R O J E C T

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Internal Examiner

Guide

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'M. K. S.', written over the 'Guide' label.

22nd March 1996

to the unknown artists of rural India

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is a study on the ritual painting of Kerala known as Kalamezhuthu. It goes on to the symbolic significance of the five colours (panchavarnam) used for making the painting by listing with various rituals, practices and deities prevalent in Kerala. It is concluded that the colours represent the symbolic nature of the process of Kalamezhuthu - creation (red), preservation (green) (as in kashita - white/black) The other two colours represent the earth goddess (yellow) and (white) (black).

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Abstract

This is a study on the ritual painting of Kerala known as Kalamezhuthu bringing out the symbolic significance of the five colours(panchavarnam) used for making the painting by linking with various rituals, practices and believes prevalent in Kerala. It is concluded that the colours represent the symbolic nature of the process of kalamezhuthu - creation(red), preservation(green) and annihilation(black). The other two colours represent the earth goddess(yellow) and fertility(white).

1.0 Ritual art

The concept of ritual in modern sociological theory agrees with Mircea Eliade: '*Ritual is an enactment of a myth*'. Rituals constitute one of the major elements of the folk-lore of a country the study of which gives insights to the ethnographic, cultural, anthropological and sociological aspects of the evolution of its society. As one goes through the different stages of his life, right from birth to death, he undergoes through many a number of rituals, most of which can be termed ritual arts as they have acquired the essential aesthetic ingredient needed for its function. The arts have their origin in rituals, be it performing arts or plastic arts. If one removes the ritual content from a ritual art, it becomes lifeless. It is the ritual content of the art that makes it vibrant and powerful and studs it with symbolic significance.

2.0 Ritual art of India

2.1 Philosophy

The ritual arts of India in all its forms has an inward seeking quality. It is a 'marga', a path through which one quests the truth for its direct experience. There may be infinite number of paths, all leading to the same. The experience is a state in which one realises his oneness with the universe, an understanding that the microcosm is the same as macrocosm.

Indian ritual art is a repeated experience. It accepts the mysteries of existence, never questions. The logic is that the universe is so infinite that whatever you do it already exists. Hence it is the pattern which is optimum is of importance, not the individual process. Just as lotus blossoms the same way each time, the ritual does not question its pattern, it is beautiful in its own as is the lotus each time.

The works of art created for ritual or the rituals themselves are not to be measured by aesthetic criteria, they are essentially functional. Drawing the same analogy with lotus, it can be said that just as the lotus is born beautiful without being conscious of its beauty and never judged by Sun or a beetle, the ritual art is born without being conscious of its aesthetic qualities, but for its function.

Indian ritual art is a simplification - a method by which the undifferentiated

becomes perceptible. It sanctions the worship of images. The inanimate image is brought to life in performing ritual arts and the perception of god is made more simpler as a human being is possessed by the divinity.

'The central unifying feature of all Indian spiritual life is 'kriya', the timely fulfillment of ritual performance. Ritual art is the right performance, the 'kriya', without anticipation. Ritual asserts the Indian sense of community and of collaboration with the creative rhythm of the world. The concept of male - female manifestations in the microcosm as well as the macrocosm is dating back to the pre-vedic period. Purusha and Prakriti or Siva and Sakti are inseparable since they are essentially two aspects of the same principle. The aim of ritual in tantrik rites is to accomplish within oneself, the integration of these polarities.

Local indigenous cults with a symbolism and ritual practice continued to exist as a living tradition. Common to all these is the view of ritual as a stairway leading from the outer reality to the inner, from the immediate perceptible to the transcendental plane'. [Ajit Mookrjee, Indian ritual art, 1985]

2.2 Colour symbolism

Tantrik and yogic texts give a detailed account of the colour symbolism used in the icons and yantras associated with ritual and worship. This can be assumed as a working basis for most of the ritual arts of India. Tantrik symbolism attributes colours to the five grosser elements, the 'panchamahabhoota's (earth, water, fire, air and ether) which make up the universe and the three subtle elements, 'trigunas' (sattva, rajas and tamas) which generates the grosser elements.

Earth is represented by a yellow square, the yellow colour symbolising the colour of soil and square representing the most stable geometrical form. Water is represented by a silver or white crescent. White stands for the colourless nature of water and the crescent signifies the connection between water and moon, the myth of moon born out of sea during the great churning for obtaining amrutu. Fire is represented by as a red triangle, red showing the life giving colour of blood and triangle, the unsteady nature of fire, pointing upwards. The sattva guna or cohesion, purity, and preservation is symbolised by white, tamas or disintegration and inertia by black and rajas or the creative impulse by red. The icons of the deities are represented by these colours according to these gunas. Hence Siva the sattvic god is shown in white, Kali the tamasic god in black and Narasimha, a rajasvic god in red

3.0 Ritual arts of Kerala - An ethnographic sketch

Kerala is a narrow strip of land situated between the mighty Western Ghats and Arabian sea, literally green with thick vegetation. This geographical setting has made it immune to many of the cultural invasions which took place elsewhere in the country. As a result, most of the ritual arts of Kerala are found in its pristine form till today.

The real inhabitants of the land were a dark tribe of people with a Dravidian origin. They worshiped nature in its many forms of which tree worship snake worship and worship of earth goddess were the most ancient. The earth goddess got transformed into mother goddess and became the dominant diety in the form of Sakti cult. This is evident from the names given to the female dieties as 'amma' or mother. The mother goddess is closely linked with fertility cults and intricately connected with tree worship and snake worship. The mother goddess and the serpent gods are worshiped in 'kavu's, dense forest grooves found through out the state. Kerala was referred to as 'ahibhoomi' and 'nakalokam' (land of snakes) in the ancient Tamil texts. Western Ghats is also known as Sahyadri (Sa + ahi + adri) where ahi means snake. It can be assumed that snakes symbolise the connection of mother goddess with the earth goddess as the former is often ornamented with snakes.

During Aryan invation The Saiva cult became popular and got married to the Sakti cult. The brahmins who were brought in got interested in the local cults



Fig. 1 The sacred lady with elaborate headgear, pronounced lips and breasts. Terracotta, Harappa, 3rd millenium BC

and began worshiping Sakti and serpent gods. Though these cults got unified, the Sakti deities, variations of the mother goddess, still enjoys a dominant position. The matriarchal system which endures still among the orthodox nair families of Kerala points to the possible genesis of the cult of worshipping mother goddess. Matriarchal system was prevalent in the Indus Valley civilisation as is evident from the importance given to mother goddess (fig. 1).

Most of the ritual arts of Kerala are associated with the Sakti-Saiva cults. These rituals are a combination of performing arts, ritual songs and sometimes other rites like ritual paintings. Most often a performer is dressed in the form of a 'kolam' an image representing the deity with elaborate masks, make ups and costumes. The performance is generally a dance drama accompanied by ritual songs, drum beats and other instruments. Typical of these are 'Theyyam', 'Thira', 'Mutiyettu', 'Theyyattu', 'Pana' and 'Kalamezhuthu pattu'.

The dance dramas of the Vaishnava cult like 'Kootiyattom', 'Krishnanattom', 'Kathakali' and 'Thullal' are much stylised and mature and owe their origin to the more ancient Dravidian ritual arts. These ritual arts are performed by people of different castes and varies accordingly. They differ in their rituals and styles with the locality also.

4.0 Kalamezhuthu

4.1 The myth

An indomitable asura (demon) named Darika began torturing the devas(gods) and disrupting their daily routines. The devas pleaded help from Siva, the supreme god. Siva made Bhadrakali, a fierce deity from his third eye. Bhadrakali kills Darika in a terrific battle and restores peace to the world. Even after annihilating the evil, Bhadrakali could not contain her anger. The scared devas again asks Siva for help. As recommended by Siva, Subrahmanya draws the picture of the victorious Bhadrakali with the severed head of Darika in her hand using five clour powders(panchavarnam). Seeing her own picture Kali directs her anger towards it and gets pleased. Kalamezhuthu is the enactment of this ritual.

4.2 Origin

The Tamil literary works of the Sangham period(500 BC - 500 AD) gives references to the cult of Sakti worship. The tamil epic Chilappadikaram of the same period also gives reference to Bhagavati worship. The earliest reference of 'Kalamezhuthu' literally drawing picture - pattern, as 'dhoolichitra'(picture drawn with powders) is in the sanskrit text - Bhavishyat Purana written around 6th century AD. It was recently found that an ancient tantrik text called

Aryamanjushreemoolakalpam dating back to BC refers to dhoolichitra. This gives testimony to the Tantrik influence in this ritual art. Dhoolichitra also features in Abhilashachintamani(12 AD) and Silparatna(16 AD). The primitive forms of Kalamezhuthu must have been in existence atleast 2000 years ago, to become a mature art by 6th century AD.

Kalamezhuthu is a ritual originating from the Sakti cult. The myth shows the influence of Saiva cult on it. It may also be that the ritual originated after the fusion of Sakti and Saiva cults.

4.3 Process

Kalamezhuthu is often a part of ritual dance dramas like mutiyettu, pana, theeyattu etc. It is also performed in its own right along with ritual songs. Kalamezhuthu is a ritual painting done merely with fingers using five naturally obtained colour powders - red(mixing turmeric powder with lime), green(powdered dried leaves of Vaka tree),yellow(turmeric powder), white(rice powder) and black(charred rice husk powder) (fig. 2). It is associated with the worship of many deities of the Sakti and saiva cults, fertility rites, tree worship, serpent worship and rites of magic and sorcery. The commonly represented deities in kalams are the mother goddess Bhadrakali in her many forms, Ayyappan, Vettaikorumakan,Yakshis, Gandharvas, birds, serpent gods,bhootams,chathans and Hanuman.

A pandal(temporary shed) is made with a canopy of red(pattu) and white cloths and decorated with tender leaves of coconut(kuruthola), flowers and plantains. The floor is spreaded with cowdung or swept clean. The artist(kurup) first draws a yantra (padmam) similar to the Tantrik yantras and pays homage to Ganapathy. The sword of Bhagavathi is placed on a stool covered with red cloth. The artist then meditates sitting in front of a lighted oil lamp(nilavilakku) and visualises the image of the deity to be drawn using a dhyanasloka. He then quickly makes a sketch using either white or black powder up to the point to which he is completing first (fig. 3).Then he fills the in between areas using the colour powders (fig. 4, 5, 6). The dhyanaslokas describe the deity either from head to foot(kesadipadam) or from foot to head(padadikesam). The image is also drawn either from head to foot or vice versa.This is to facilitate the artist to complete the drawing with out stepping over. Once drawn lines are never erased or corrected.The last step in the drawing process is the eye opening ceremony when the artist symbolically places two grains of rice on the pupil of the eye of the deity.



Fig. 2 The colour powders used in kalamezhuthu(pannchavarnam)
Red(mixing turmeric powder with lime), green(powdered dried
leaves of Vaka tree),yellow(turmeric powder), white(rice powder)
and black(charred rice husk powder)

Fig. 3 'Kurup', the artist, making the sketch using rice powder

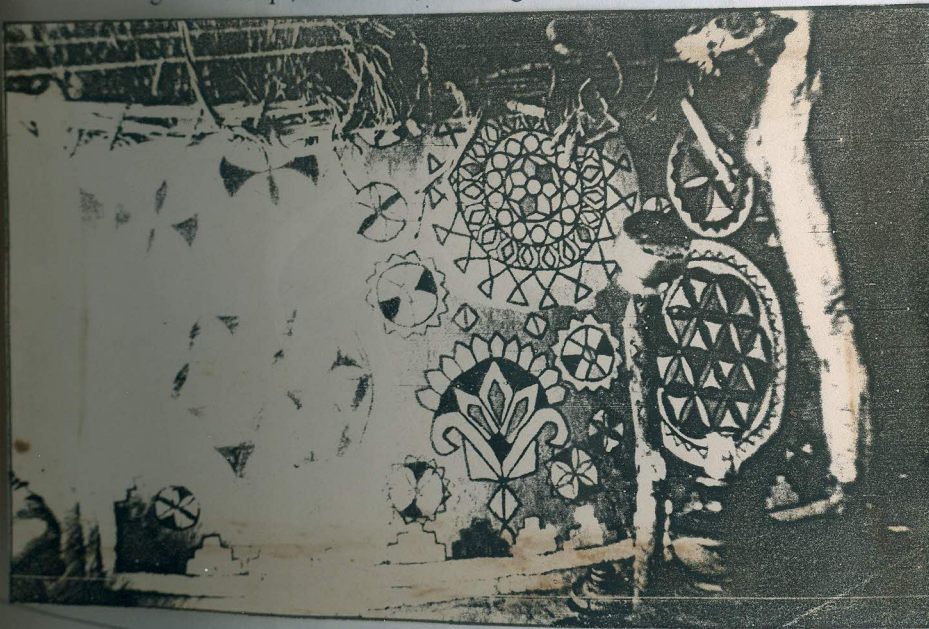


Fig. 4 The artist fills in the sketch using the five colour powders. An average sized kalam will be 3 x 3m and takes around four hours for completion





Fig. 5 and 6

Kalamezhuthu in progress

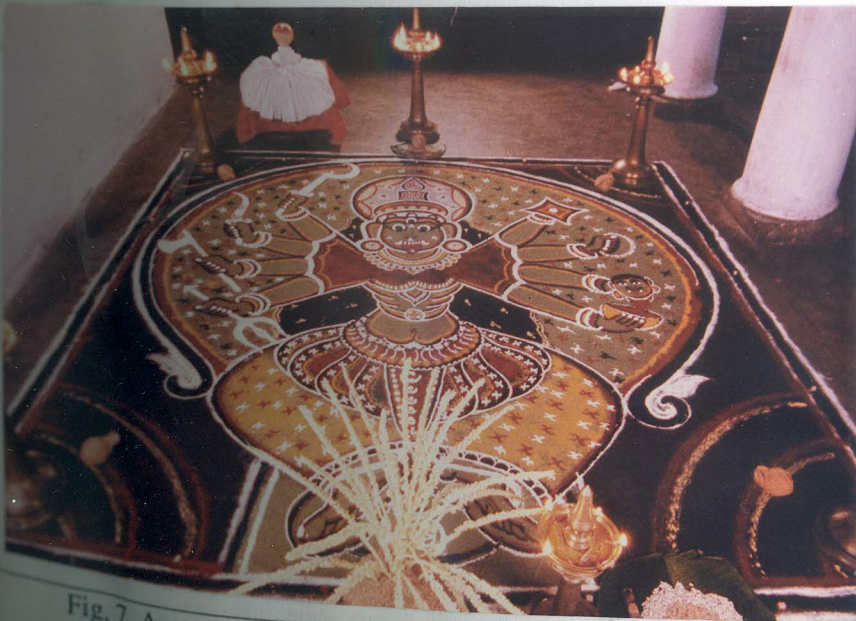


Fig. 7 A completed kalam with traditional oil lamps (nilavilakku) placed on the four sides of the kalam

Lighted oil lamps are placed on the four sides of the kalam (fig. 7). In 'kavu's the sword of Bhagathi is brought in front of the kalam. Kalampuja follows, done by the priest or the artist himself. After this the artist starts Kalampattu (ritual songs) praising Bhagavati (fig. 8). This is accompanied by 'nanthuni' a stringed instrument, percussion instruments and cymbals. Finally the kalam is erased by the kurup using arecanut flower and the mixed powder is offered to the devotees. In certain cases it is the performer of the ritual dance drama who erases the kalam (fig. 9).

In Mutiyettu and other rituals, the performing art begins after erasing the kalam. In kalamezhuthu associated with fertility rites like Kalampattu, and in those connected with serpent worship, the rituals performed are different and elaborate (fig. 10). The process of kalamezhuthu differs from place to place and also according to the castes who perform the ritual.

The different castes who perform this ritual are kurups, vannars, mannars, theeyadinambyars, theyyampadis, pulluvars, kaniyars and pulayars. The kalam made for magic and sorcery are generally yantras called padmams (lotus) resembling the Tantrik yantras. This shows the influence of Tantrik cult in this ritual.

Fig. 8 Kalamattu, the ritual song praising the goddess and describing her character being performed



4.4 Symbolism

The process of kalameruthu is three fold – the creation of the kalam, its puja and its erasure – symbolising a creation, preservation and annihilation function.



Fig. 9 The ritual erasure of the kalam done by the performer who acts the part of Bhadrakali in the dance drama Thiyattu



Fig. 10 The 'piniyal' or the subject for whom the ritual is done is seen in a hysterial trance during the kalamezhuthu associated with serpent gods.

4.4 Symbolism

The process of kalamezhuthu is three fold - the creation of the kalam, its puja and its erasure - symbolising creation, preservation and annihilation functions. In the ritual dance dramas associated, like in Mutiyettu, the killing of Darika by Kali is enacted representing the eternal theme of the victory of good over evil. The kalams connected with the worship of Bhadrakali picturises this event.

4.5 Style

The style adopted in kalamezhuthu is called 'bhoothvadi' where the figures drawn have a deliberate dwarfish nature. In Silparatnam of Sreekumaran (16 AD), it is said that dhoolichitra never gives importance to realistic images. This style is in contrast with the one adopted in the murals of Kerala where artists have used a style called chitravadi which gives importance to the overall proportions of the figures drawn. In kalamezhuthu, the colour scheme and style adopted by the artists differs to a great extent as one travels from north to south of Kerala. The northern style (Valluvanadan) gives much importance to intricacy (fig. 11) while the southern (thekkani) style emphasises on the impact of colour (fig. 12).



Fig. 11 The northern (Valluvanadan) style with intricate lines and decorations



Fig. 12 The southern (Thekkan) style with emphasis on the impact of colour

5.0 Significance

The symbolic nature of the painting. There are many cultural and geographical symbols in the painting. The central figure, Lord Venkateswara, symbolises annihilation of evil. The white and red colours symbolises fertility. The other figures, including the other deities, symbolise the other rites spread in the region. The absence of the central figure, Lord Venkateswara, is a significant feature. The yellow and white colours are used to represent the central figure. The background is dark, making the central figure stand out.

creation, this ritual is used in the temple. The central figure, Lord Venkateswara, is a significant feature. The yellow and white colours are used to represent the central figure. The background is dark, making the central figure stand out.



Fig. 13 In kalamezhuthu, the five colours used are never mixed. The striking visual effect is achieved by the harmony, balance, interplay and contrast between these colours

5.0 Significance of panchavarnam

The symbolic nature of the process of kalamezhuthu showing creation, preservation and annihilation is given to the colours used for this ritual painting. There are certain similarities with the colour symbolism used in Tantrik art, but there are differences also, which can be attributed to the cultural and geographical factors.

In kalamezhuthu, red represents creation, green represents preservation, black symbolises annihilation, yellow represents the earth goddess and white symbolises fertility. The reasons for making this conclusion are derived from the rituals, myths, beliefs and facts related to kalamezhuthu and some from other rites spread through out the length and breadth of Kerala. These are described later in separate headings.

The absence of blue colour is the most interesting aspect of the panchavarnam(five colours). Here the primary colours are red, green and yellow. The beauty of the kalam lies in the bold use of these colours together with the extremes - black and white. Hence these colours are never mixed to get a new colour. Their contrasts, interplay, harmony and balance give a striking visual effect at a superficial level (fig. 13). The fact that kalamezhuthu is shown to the devotees in the dim light of the oil lamp(nilavilakku) and it is accompanied by performing arts like Mutiyettu with the background of drum

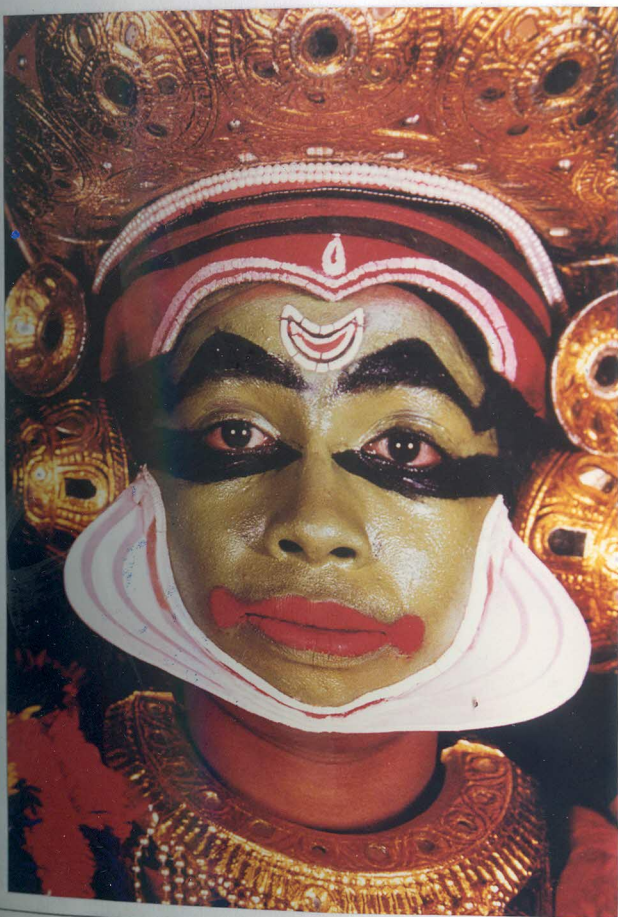


Fig. 14 The sattvic character of Siva being represented by 'pacha' (green) in Kootiyattam. The same symbolism is used in Ramanattam and Kathakali which evolved much later

beats and ritual songs, brings the spectators into a trance like state and helps them to go into the deeper meaning of the colours used. These ritual paintings are purely functional - the aesthetics involved is for creating the ambience and reverence to the deity.

The influence of panchavarnam on the performing arts of Kerala is significant. All the stylised performing arts like kootiyattom, krishnattom, kathakali and thullal used the colour scheme to its fullest potential. Out of them, use of green to represent sattvik character, black for tamas, and red for rajaswic character are well established (fig. 14, 15). The same colour scheme is used in the early murals of Kerala around 14th century AD. But later experiments in colour mixing was made and the more recent ones show many other colours (fig. 16). It can be safely assumed that kalamezhuthu has codified the symbolic use of colours and has given great impetus to whatever artform which evolved later.

5.1 Red

Red is blood, the life giving colour. It makes the inanimate live and warns of its potent divinity. It represents creation, the rajasvik tendency. Its meaning is embedded in the psyche of the country's population transgressing cultural and geographical boundaries. The use of kumkum found all over the country speaks out this.

In kalamezhuthu, it represents blood, the creative force and is linked with the blood sacrifice. In fact in some of the rituals associated with kalamezhuthu, a blood coloured liquid made by mixing turmeric powder, lime and water is given as sacred offering (kuruthi tharpanam, kuruthi meaning blood sacrifice) for the mother goddess Bhadrakali (fig. 17). This came about as a substitute for animal sacrifice as the brahmins who were later associated with these rituals preferred not to use real blood. In kalamezhuthu, the red powder used is made in a similar way as the red liquid offering is made. In most of the kalams made for Bhadrakali, she is shown seated with the blood dripping severed head of Darika in one hand. In many myths associated with kali, she is described as a blood thirsty goddess. This is evident from the names given to her like Raktेश्वari, Raktachamundi etc.

The predominant colour used in Theyyam and Thira, the performing ritual arts representing live deities is red (fig. 18). These are dating back atleast to the Sangham periods (500 BC - 500 AD). In all these ritual rites, the priest (poojari) and the oracle (velichappadu) wears a red cloth (pattu). The significance this may be the presence of deity on their body or that their body is smeared with blood. In the funeral rites also, the kin of the deceased has to wear pattu around his waste. Reference of 'veeralipattu' (red silk of the heroic warrior) is found in 'vadakkan pattu' (ballads of the warriors of the north). There is an offering called 'choppu' (red cloth) in some temples of Bhadrakali. The auspicious flower used for making garlands for Kali is a small wild red flower (thechi). In the mature form of performing arts like kootiyattom and kathakali, red is used to represent the rajasvik characters. 'Chuvanna thadi' (red beard) is given to Dussasana. The murals of Kerala also uses the same symbolism.

In kalamezhuthu, red is used for showing pattu, the head gear, ornaments, the dangling tongue and generally for accentuating the effects of lines made in yellow, white etc.



Fig. 17 'Kuruthi tharpanam', a ritual symbolising blood sacrifice, associated with Mutiyettu. The red liquid is made by mixing turmeric, lime and water

Fig. 18 A Theyyam performer representing 'Vettaykkorumakan', a heroic deity of the Saiva cult. The exuberent use of red is a particular feature of Theyyam and Thira

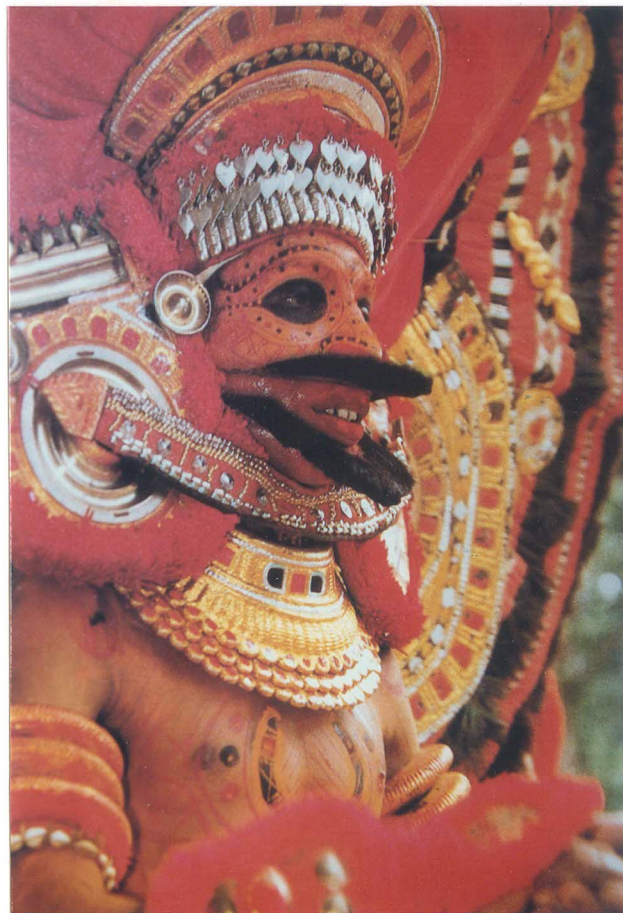




Fig. 19 Bhadrakali shown in green depicting her preservative nature after killing the demon Darika

5.2 Green

Green symbolises sattvik tendency attributed to preservation, purity and cohesion. It is interesting to note that even though Bhadrakali is described as having megha varna(colour of clouds) in the dhyanaslokas her body is shown in green except for certain fierce variations of her personality. In Mutiyettu, her face is painted black. According to the myth Bhadrakali gets pacified after she sees her own picture. It is her preservative function which is picturised in the kalams, hence a colour symbolising sattva must have been given (fig19). 'Pacha' (green) is used to represent sattvic characters in the stylised dance dramas like Kathakali, Kootiyattam and Krishnattam as mentioned earlier (fig. 20).

The emergence of green to represent sattva can be linked to tree worship. This is evident from the fact that the adobe of Bhadrakali and the gods of Saiva cult like Ayyappa and Ganapathi are 'kavu's the thick forest grooves found through the state (fig. 21). The serpent gods are also worshiped in grooves. The green powder for kalamezhuthu is made from the dried leaves of a wild tree(vaka) which shows its connection with tree worship.

Tree is dignified and given the attributes of purity and preservation. In almost all the rituals, the tender leaves of coconut(kuruthola) is used in a variety of designs. It is a major part of the costumes and head gear(muti) of Theyyams and Thira (fig. 22). In 'Patayani', another ritual dance drama, the entire mask



Fig. 20 Krishna, a sattvik character is given the 'pacha' (green) make up in Kathakali



Fig. 21 A typical temple of Bhadrakali. The place originally was a 'kavu' (dense forest grove)



Fig. 22 A Theyyam with headgear and costume made of 'kuruthola', tender leaves of coconut

is made out of the lumpy pods of areca nut tree and kuruthola (fig. 23).

Tree deities, Yakshis and Yakshans are worshiped through out India, and Kerala has numerous deities associated with trees, forests and hunting. Their worship is related closely to the fertility cults and the worship of earth and the mother goddess. The worship of serpent gods are also connected with tree worship as is evident from the fact that snakes are worshiped in forest grooves(kavus).

The tree vaka from the leaves of which the green powder is made is itself worshiped by the playar caste of Kerala, especially in the rituals associated with puberty of girls. Many other trees are also worshiped through out Kerala and deities associated with each of them. Neem is believed to be the tree associated with Bhadrakali. Trees are given zodiac signs also. There are auspicious times for planting trees and for their worship. There are also certain directions as to the place where a tree is to be planted related to the position of the house. In magic and sorcery , tree branches are used in the rituals for warding off witches. All these shows the utmost importance and reverence given to trees by the society.

Tree worship is considered to be ancient than many of the other forms of worships. Linked with the lush green vegetation of the state,it gained much more importance than similar worships in the other parts of the country (fig. 24). It can be safely assumed that the emergence of green as the symbolic colour of the preservation function is connected with tree worship.

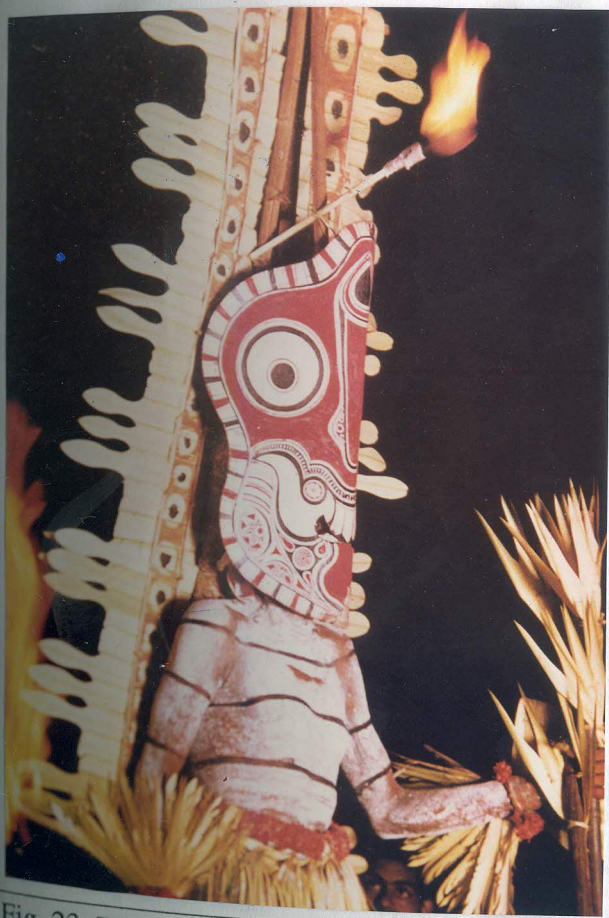


Fig. 23 The mask used in 'Patayani', a ritual dance drama is made of tender leaves of coconut and the pods of areca nut



Fig. 24 Paddy field in Palakkad, a typical scene of Kerala showing the abundance of greenary

5. Yellow

Yellow symbolises earth, the mother goddess. In Tantrik symbolism, earth is represented by a yellow square. Evidence of the sanctity of the color's significance can be seen in some of the rituals performed in Kerala.

The yellow colour used in kalamazhuthu is turmeric powder, the turmeric root comes from beneath the soil. The head gear and ornaments worn by Bhadrakali in Muniyettu is studded with golden bells. Gold again is a rich obtained from earth. Yellow is used to show the head gear and ornaments in kalamazhuthu. Yellow forms a major colour in the composition of sarpakalamis, kalamis depicting the serpent gods (fig. 25). The auspicious offering for snakes is 'moorianpalam', a mixture of turmeric powder, milk, rice powder and coconut milk. The stone idols of the serpent gods are always smeared with turmeric powder and often covered with 'maajakkodi', a yellow cloth. The association of snakes with earth is clear from the fact that they dwell in 'petta's (terrine pits) or burrows.



Fig. 25 A 'sarpakkalam' showing serpent gods knotted together. Yellow plays a dominant role in the composition and is used to represent the serpents

5.3 Yellow

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The yellow colour used in kalamezhuthu is turmeric powder, the turmeric root comes from beneath the soil. The head gear and ornaments worn by Bhadrakali in Mutiyettu is studded with golden foils, gold again is a rich obtained from earth. Yellow is used to show the head gear and ornaments in kalamezhuthu. Yellow forms a major colour in the composition of sarpakalams, kalams depicting the serpent gods (fig. 25). The auspicious offering for snakes is 'noorum palum', a mixture of turmeric powder, milk, rice powder and coconut milk. The stone idols of the serpent gods are always smeared with turmeric powder and often covered with 'manjakkodi', a yellow cloth. The association of snakes with earth is clear from the fact that they dwell in 'puttu's (termite nests) or burrows.

The head gear (muti) of Bhadrakali in Mutiyettu is called 'sarpakketu' literally snakes knotted together. Many of her ornaments are also snake shaped showing the close link between the worship of snakes and earth as the mother (fig. 26). This is understood by the fact that Bhadrakali is the daughter of Siva, the god who wears snakes around his neck. In fact snake worship and stone worship are considered as the variations of phallic worship.

'Manjachoru', yellow rice prepared by cooking rice with turmeric powder is a sacred offering for Bhadrakali. It might be that even though rice is a fertility symbol, the colour of turmeric emphasises its origin from earth. It is also given to girls on their puberty. The ritual bath of women after menstrual period is called 'manjakkuli', yellow bath as they apply turmeric powder lavishly on their body before taking bath. In Tamil Nadu and some parts of Kerala the marriage invitation cards have their corners painted yellow with turmeric powder, symbolising the auspicious nature of the function.

During Onam, which is a harvest festival linked to the fertility rites, children wear 'manjakkodi', a yellow cloth. For Vishu, again a festival associated with fertility, a yellow flower named 'kanikkonna' is the main flower used for decoration. In the morning of Vishu people take care to see that it is this flower they see first as they open their eyes, so that the rest of the year is assured of prosperity.



Fig. 26 Bhadrakali in Mutiyeyyu. The head gear and ornaments have snake forms showing her connection with the serpent gods



Fig. 27 A Kolam. Kolam is a domestic ritual of Tamil Nadu done for fertility and prosperity. It uses rice powder

5.4 White

White symbolises fertility and prosperity. In kalamezhuthu, rice powder is used for white. 'Kolam' of Tamil Nadu, 'Alpana' of Bengal and 'Mandana' of Rajasthan are all domestic ritual drawings done by women related to the fertility rites. All these ritual drawings are drawn with rice powder or rice paste (fig. 27). Rice is a staple food in all these states and has acquired a high status in the ritual rites as sacred offerings to the deities.

In kalamezhuthu, the breasts of Bhadrakali are made by heaping rice and colour applied on top of that. Breast symbolises fertility (fig. 28). 'Nirapara' and 'niranazhi' are auspicious offerings for almost all rituals. These are made by heaping rice up to the brim of the vessels used for measuring rice (nazhi and para). 'Malar', a preparation of made by frying dried rice and 'avil', a preparation made by rolling dried rice are both sacred offerings used in most of the rituals of Kerala (fig. 29).

'Ponkala' is a rice offering given to Bhadrakali. It has connections with the 'Ponkal' festival of Tamil Nadu where it is explicitly a celebration of the fertility rites. During the celebration they worship the gods of rain, sun and cow.

The 'chutti', the white ridge in the facial make up of Kathakali is made of rice paste. 'Velutha thadi' (white beard) is a sattvic character in Kathakali and Kootiyattom (Fig. 30). Here it uses the Tantrik symbolism of colours. Sattva is also referred to as sukla (semen). The tantrik texts gives the colour of fertile prosperity as white (suklapaksham).

White has played a significant role in the traditional costumes of Keralalites. 'Mundu', 'melmundu', 'neriyathu' (dhotis) are all white. In Mohiniyattam, the classical dance of Kerala, the entire costume is white (fig. 31). For some deities represented in Theyyam and Thira, the auspicious cloth worn is called 'velumban' (whitish). The custom of spreading a white cloth and black wool (vellayum karimpadavum) for receiving guests as a sign of hospitality is still prevalent in Kerala especially in the rituals of marriage.

Earlier, during the feudal tradition, the workers on the paddy field were to wear white dhotis for easy inspection from a distance. White makes a striking contrast with the fresh green colour of the paddy fields. For aesthetic reasons this contrast is amply made use of in the composition of kalamas.

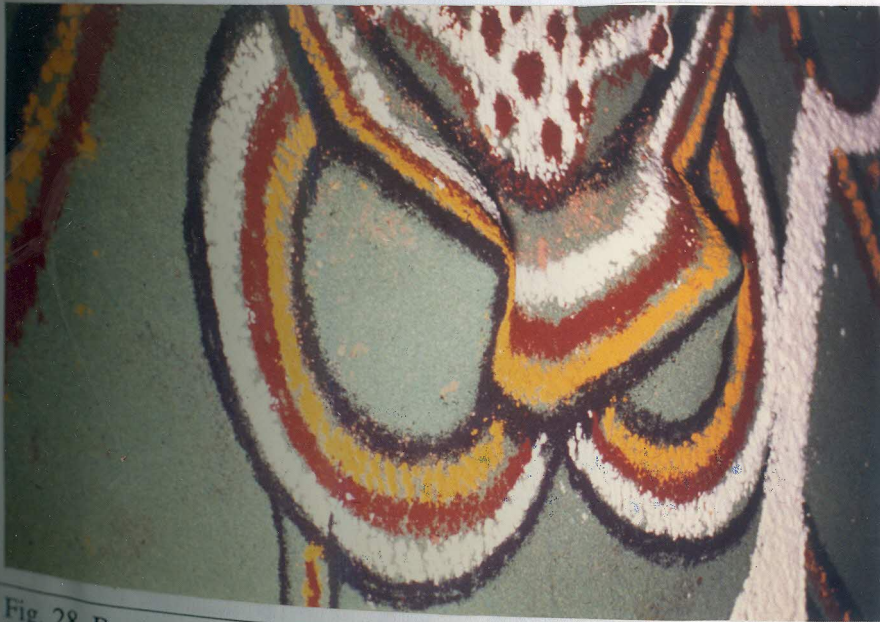


Fig. 28 Breasts of Bhadrakali in kalamezhuthuare made of heaps of rice to give a three dimensional effect



Fig. 29 The Theyyam performer breaking his fast. The offering is called 'malar', a preparation made by frying dried rice



Fig. 30 Hanuman, a sattvik character is represented by 'velutha thadi' (white beard) in Kathakali

3.5 Black

Black represents kalamezhuthu in Kathakali to bring peace to the world. This is the myth of the third eye. Siva is adorned as the third eye. Siva is the ground.

In kalamezhuthu, the black is used to show the lines of the dravida in the dhyana. White in Mutiya is black.

Some of the other colors. These are the colors of the Kathakali. The colors are as follows. In Kathakali, the colors are black, white, red, and gold.



Fig. 31 Mohiniyattam, the classical dance of Kerala. The costumes used are all white



Fig. 32 Vinida, the monkey chief, a tamasvik character is given 'Karutha thadi' (black beard)

5.5 Black

Black represents disintegration and annihilation, the tamasvik tendency. In kalamezhuthu it represents the annihilative force which succeeds over the evil to bring peace to the world. In Mutiyettu, Bhadrakali's face is painted with lump black. This suggests her origin from Siva. Siva is described as a dark god in the myths of rural Kerala, perhaps an indication of his Dravidian origin. He is adorned as the supreme god of destruction and creation symbolised by his third eye. Siva is said to be smeared with 'bhasma' ashes from the funeral grounds.

In kalamezhuthu, the black powder is obtained from charred rice husk and is used to show hair, pupil of the eye, weapons and generally to strengthen the lines of the drawings. Bhadrakali is described as having the colour of clouds in the dhyanaslokas but is shown in green symbolising her preservative nature. While in Mutiyettu, she is in her annihilative form and is therefore represented in black.

Some of the other local deities of destruction are also described as having black colour. These are evident from their names itself like Kariyathan, Karivillon, Karinkuttan etc(kari stands for black). Bhadrakali is also known as a black goddess as her names suggest - Karinkali and Karinchamundi.

In Kathakali and Kootiyattam, tamasvik characters are given predominantly black costumes and make up. 'Kari'(black) and 'Karutha kathi'(black beard) are all evil characters with an affinity for destruction (fig. 32)

In one form of 'kuruthi'(sacrificial rite) called 'karimkuruthi' offered to gods of destruction, charred rice husk is mixed with water to get a black liquid.



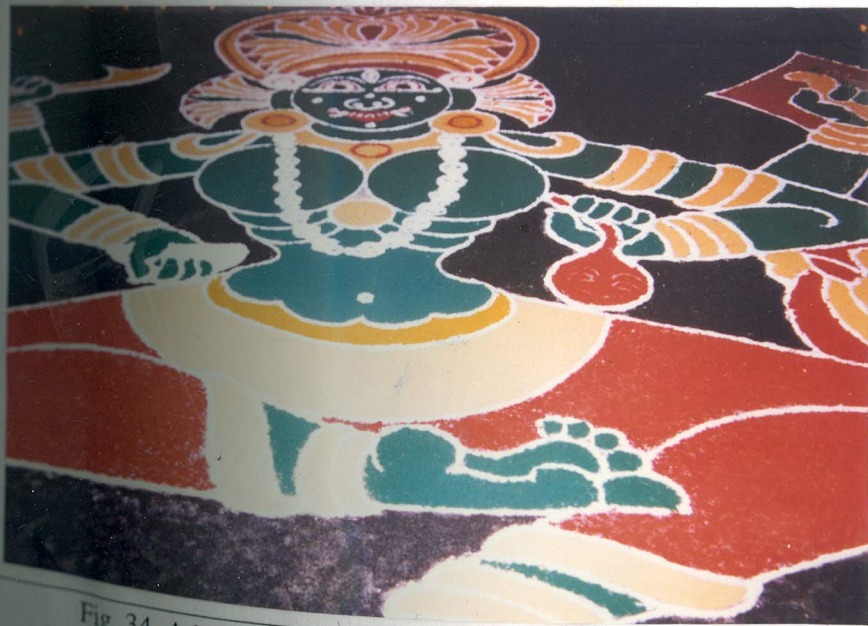
Fig. 33 Kalam drawn by a contemporary artist with a theme not used in traditional kalam

6.0 Current status

Kalamezhuthu, dating back to atleast 2000 years is still enjoying wide acceptance through out Kerala as a ritual art. Certainly the variety and number of kalam drawn is less, compared to olden days. Many of the kalam drawn for domestic rituals related to fertility rites, magic and sorcery are extinct today. The main reason being as a ritual, it has lost its significance in a changed society and as an art form it did not get much patronage. The younger generation of the families of traditional artists prefer to do jobs which are more acceptable to the current society and which provides them with a better economic status.

The exact significance and symbolism associated with the art are long forgotten. Today even the traditional artists use, apart from the five colours, saffron red from brick powder blue from tempera powder and glass powder for lusture.

Kalamezhuthu recently acquired a good spectatorship due to the efforts of the Turism department of the State government. During Onam celebration, huge kalam are drawn for the entertainment of the public at the capital city. these are often drawn by some of the well known contemporary artists. Chirayinkeel Sreekantan Nair and Omanakkuttan are among the leading artists who are associated with popularising the art. Nowadays kalam are also drawn for public functions as a visual treat.



The contemporary artists have greatly stylised the art. More often they adopt a style close to the murals of Kerala. The themes selected are not those associated with the traditional kalam, but myths and dramatic events in the puranas (fig. 33). 'Trivikramakalam' drawn by Omanakkuttan, 'Keralolpathy' and 'Ananthasayanam' by Sreekantan Nair are few among them. The contemporary artists do not conform themselves to the use of the traditional five colours, but use whatever colour they need either by mixing the five colours or by using tempora powders (fig. 34). They give more importance to proportion, visual balance and over all beauty of the kalam than to the symbolic significance of the colours.

The kalam drawn by traditional artists some times lack proportion as they are used to draw it as a ritual tahn as a work of art. They never correct or erase whatever they have drawn during the process. They not only draw the kalam but also perform other rituals associated with it like kalampattu(ritual song) and kalampuja(ritual worship). For them, the process of drawing is equally important as the end result.

Fig. 34 A kalam drawn for a public function by a contemporary artist. Greater emphasis on proportion and composition. Artificial colours are used

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