



Sarppam Paattu (Serpent Song): A Living Symbol of Kerala's Spiritual and Cultural Heritage

Dijina K.

Independent Researcher, Kerala, India

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ABSTRACT

Sarppam Paattu, a ritualistic serpent song tradition of Kerala, represents a unique convergence of spirituality, ecology, and folk culture. Rooted in ancient Dravidian practices and serpent worship traditions, this ritual art form is performed primarily by the Pulluvan community in sacred groves (sarppakkavu) and domestic ritual spaces. This study explores the historical origins, ritual practices, artistic elements, and socio-cultural significance of Sarppam Paattu. It also examines the role of women, the symbolism embedded in serpent floor drawings (kalam), and the contemporary challenges faced in preserving this intangible cultural heritage. The study highlights the ecological relevance of serpent worship and emphasizes the need for institutional support, documentation, and academic inclusion to ensure the continuity of this tradition.

1. Introduction

Snake worship, or ophidianism, is an ancient religious tradition in which serpents are revered as symbols of fertility, protection, and cosmic power. Across Asian cultures, particularly in India, serpent worship represents the cyclical nature of life and the interconnectedness of humans and nature.

In Kerala, this belief system manifests prominently through Sarppam Paattu, a ritualistic performance associated with serpent deities such as Nagaraja and Nagayakshi. This tradition, deeply embedded in agrarian and ecological practices, functions not merely as a ritual but also as a cultural expression preserving oral traditions, music, and visual art.



2. Historical Background

The origins of serpent worship in India can be traced back to the Indus Valley Civilization (2500–1500 BCE), where archaeological evidence suggests the presence of serpent symbolism alongside proto-Shiva figures (Sreedhara Menon, 2022).

Dravidian religious traditions, characterized by nature worship, further strengthened serpent worship practices in South India. Sacred groves (sarppakkavu) in Kerala became centers of ecological preservation and ritual activity. Sarppam Paattu likely evolved from these traditions as a ritualistic expression of devotion and environmental consciousness.

3. The Pulluvan Community and Ritual Custodianship

The Pulluvans, classified under Scheduled Castes in Kerala, are the traditional custodians of Sarppam Paattu. Their primary role involves performing ritual songs and playing indigenous instruments during serpent worship ceremonies.

According to Thurston and Rangachari (1909), Pulluvans played a significant role in sustaining serpent worship traditions by visiting households and performing rituals for prosperity and protection. Their oral traditions, myths, and ritual knowledge form the backbone of this cultural practice.

4. Artistic and Musical Elements

Sarppam Paattu combines music, visual art, and ritual performance. Key elements include:

Musical Instruments: Pulluvan veena and Pulluvan kudam

Ritual Drawing (Kalamezhuthu): Intricate floor art using natural colors

Ritual Songs: Devotional hymns, mythological narratives, and invocations

The musical style, though not strictly classical, resembles the Carnatic raga Punnagavarali, known for its serene and meditative quality (Ramesh, 2007). The rhythmic patterns and sound vibrations often induce trance-like states among participants, highlighting the ritual's psychological and spiritual dimensions.

5. Ritual Practices and Procedures

Sarppam Paattu is performed through a sequence of elaborate rituals:

Kalam Kurikkal – Marking the ritual space



Pāttu Kurayidal – Invocation through song

Kalam Ezhuthu – Drawing the serpent figure

Thiri Uzhichil – Ritual purification using fire

The ritual is conducted in a specially prepared structure called Manippandal. Offerings, chants, and symbolic acts are performed to invoke serpent deities. The ceremony concludes with the erasure of the kalam, symbolizing impermanence and spiritual completion.

6. Sarppakkalam: Symbolism and Aesthetics

Sarppakkalam (serpent floor drawing) is a central visual component of the ritual. Created using five natural colors, it represents cosmic and spiritual symbolism:

Red: Energy

White: Purity

Yellow: Prosperity

Black: Mystery

The designs, often depicting multiple serpents, reflect both artistic excellence and religious symbolism. These eco-friendly art forms demonstrate a harmonious relationship between culture and nature.

7. Women's Participation

Women play a crucial role in Sarppam Paattu rituals. Their participation includes:

Singing ritual songs

Drawing kalam

Performing trance-like devotional acts

Women act as carriers of tradition, ensuring the continuity of ritual knowledge across generations. While their role signifies empowerment within ritual spaces, it is also shaped by traditional norms and social structures (Nalini, 2021).

8. Contemporary Relevance and Challenges



Despite its cultural importance, Sarppam Paattu faces several challenges:

Decline of sacred groves due to urbanization

Economic hardships of the Pulluvan community

Reduced interest among younger generations

Transformation into stage performance rather than ritual practice

However, the tradition still holds ecological significance, promoting biodiversity conservation through the preservation of sacred groves.

9. Preservation and Future Prospects

To ensure the survival of Sarppam Paattu, the following measures are essential:

Academic inclusion in folklore and cultural studies

Government support and funding

Documentation and digital archiving

Community-based preservation initiatives

Preserving this tradition is not only a cultural responsibility but also an ecological necessity.

10. Conclusion

Sarppam Paattu stands as a living embodiment of Kerala's cultural, spiritual, and ecological heritage. It reflects a deep-rooted belief system that integrates ritual, art, music, and environmental consciousness. In the face of modernization, preserving such traditions requires collective efforts from communities, scholars, and policymakers. Only through sustained engagement can this unique cultural legacy be transmitted to future generations.

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