

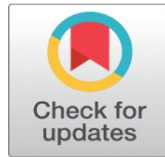
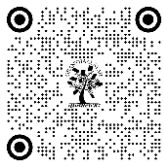
SURPASSING THE SURFACE: AESTHETIC AND PSYCHO-SOCIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF FLOOR DRAWING ART KALAMEZHUTHU IN KERALA OPHIOLATRY

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ABSTRACT

This research article titled “Surpassing the Surface: Aesthetic and Psycho-Sociological Implications of Floor Drawing Art Kalamezhuthu in Kerala Ophiolatriy” explores the aesthetic sensibilities and psychosociological implications of floor drawing art, Kalamezhuthu, the ritualistic art form in Kerala ophiolatriy. It focuses on the profound connections between art, culture, and human experience in the context of performance and folklore. This study unravels the complex interplay of symmetry, colour symbolism, and design principles that define these artworks through a comprehensive analysis of the aesthetic sense embedded in floor art arrangements. By delving into the visual elements and artistic techniques employed in the creation of floor drawing art, the research illuminates how these arrangements serve as a visual language through which spirituality and tradition are expressed and preserved. Moving beyond aesthetics, the paper delves into the psychological implications of engaging with ritualistic floor art, highlighting how these artistic practices and the pictorial effect foster a sense of community, collective identity, and cultural continuity. Furthermore, this study examines the performative aspect of ritualistic floor art drawing, exploring how these artistic practices are embedded in the fabric of daily life and ceremonial occasions in Kerala. By examining the aesthetic and psychosociological dimensions of ritualistic floor art in Kerala, this research underscores the transformative power of art in shaping individual and collective identities, fostering a sense of belonging, and preserving cultural traditions. This study seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of how ritualistic floor art surpasses its surface beauty to resonate with deeper layers of meaning and significance.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Psychological Sensibilities, Liminality, Folklore, History and Cultural Studies

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1. INTRODUCTION

Ophiolatriy, the worship or veneration of snakes, is a practice deeply rooted in the cultural and religious traditions of Kerala, South India. The significance of ophiolatriy in Kerala can be attributed to the legacy of mythological narratives, cultural beliefs, worship practices and ecological considerations that shape the people’s relationship with these enigmatic creatures. Reptiles, especially snakes, have been the significant form of adoration, reverence and fright; in other words,

the such things appear in different ways and attain a level of significant totem in many of the places in northern and southern parts of India. (Janardhanan,121). [1]. The ritualistic worship of snakes in Kerala takes place in various forms, such as the popular Nagaradhana. Many literary genres, historic artworks, sculptures, folklore, architecture, and other forms of expression all prominently feature snake reverence. The ancient civilizations incorporated snakes into their social structures. (Kurup,43). [2]. Snakes are believed to be divine beings, associated with fertility, protection, and auspiciousness, and worshipped as guardians of the natural world. The deep reverence for snakes is reflected in the prehistoric time. Ancient civilizations in different parts of the world treated and considered serpents as a part of their ecosystem and societal concerns. (Egyptian Wad jet, Chinese Nuwa, Incan Amaru, Mayan Kukulcan, Indonesian Nyi Blaring, Indian Ashtanga, Ireland/Celtic Corra, Germanic Jormungand, Roman Angitia etc.) Sarpam thullal is often performed by the Pulluvar caste and the chief aim of such ritualistic performance is to affirm the belief that the person who does this offering may prevent the curse of serpent Gods. When a member of their own family destroys, violates, or neglects their sacred serpent grove, they are subject to the serpent curse. Any acts in the sacred grove that provoke the gods and bring about a curse include felling trees, clearing away dirt, smashing stones, allowing a menstrual woman or someone of lesser grandeur in, and forgetting the naga houses and shrines (Neff, 64). [3].

2. OPHIOLATRY AND SARPAM THULLAL IN KERALA

The mythical components of nagaradhana essentially focused and followed on the instructions given by Parasurama. He described certain step by step levels of worship and taught them to the brahmin class. It comprises into different stages, mainly three levels

- 1) The folk those who are earnestly believe in the divine nature of naga worship assemble in a particular place that place is venerated by pouring holy water that prepared with chantigs and atemporary building is erected (Panthal). People prepared different colour pigments for drawing floor art designs, typically about the images of serpants, named 'sarppakalam' with colours collected and made by natural components. Colours specifically signify and associate with symbolic implications; green pigment typifies fertility, and that colour is extracted by crushing bright green leaves, the white colour indicates sinlessness and that is created by rice flour, black shows strength and that is prepared by charcoal, yellow denotes faith and is made from turmeric, and red displays anger and that is extracted from a mixture of turmeric powder and lime. The members of pulluva folk consider the drawing of sarppakkalam as their traditional right and the part of their clan's legacy.

Figure 1



Figure 1 Colourful Floor Art Pictures with Sarppakalam. [4].

- 2) After the completion of drawing the pulluva people used pulluva veena (similar to violin) and pulluvan kudam (pot like structure having long strings that can be made vibrate by fingers). All such traditional instruments are used only with ritualistic intentions and here their sounds are believed to be essential for the invocation of divine serpent spirits.

Figure 2



Figure 2 Pulluvan Pattu Performance by Pulluva People.[5]

- 3) The virgins here invoke the serpent deities and whenever they enter into the mood of divine trance then they begin to sway in a quite fiendish manner just like the movements of serpents. All these movements are escorted by the musical tunes and songs created by pulluvan ,generally known as pulluvan pattu. Pulluvan pattu invokes the serpent gods and it is believed that anyone standing near the sarppakalam is blessed or possessed by the deity. When asked, the performers become in trance and identify themselves as Nagaraja, Nagayakshi or other serpent deities and bless the gathering (only in north Kerala tradition). The ritual reaches its peak when the floor drawing is rubbed off completely by using the flower of the areca nut tree. The piniyal who sat upon the drawing of hooded snakes began to move in slow pace and later sway. It was quite phantasmagorical: their half-opened eyes, their quivery hands, their flowing hair, and their unsteady state. They moved swaying bodies everywhere inside the kalam as if the drawings of the snakes had moved up alive. They rubbed off the kalam by dragging their bodies up and down, pulled the leafy decorations, swayed and moved around. The music, the musicians, the dancers, and the audience were captivated into a realm of musical magic with the powerful aroma of myth, reality, and surreality (Padma Jayaraj, 11). [6].

Figure 3



Figure 3 Performance of Sarpam Thullal by Young Girls. [7].

3. AESTHETIC SIGNIFICANCE OF 'SARPPAKKALAM' IN KERALA

The art of 'Sarppakkalam' in Kerala is characterized by its intricate and mesmerizing snake-like designs that adorn the floors of homes, temples, and other communal spaces. The aesthetic appeal of 'Sarppakkalam' lies in its ability to transform ordinary surfaces into vibrant and visually captivating artworks. The swirling patterns and vibrant colours used in 'Sarppakkalam' designs evoke a sense of harmony, balance, and beauty, reflecting the artistic skill and creativity of the individuals who create them. The geometric precision and intricate detailing of the 'Sarppakkalam' designs demonstrate the rich cultural heritage and artistic tradition of Kerala. By examining the aesthetic significance of 'Sarppakkalam', we can appreciate its visual allure and artistic complexity that contribute to the cultural landscape of the region.

Figure 4



Figure 4 The Art of Sarppakkalam in Kerala.[8].

The most important feature of this ritual is the large-sized ashtanagakalam (eight serpent floor drawing-eight serpents named Vasuki, Anantha, Gulika, Padma, Sankhapalaka, Mahapadma, Takshaka and Karkodaka), the large kalam upon which the future prosperity is believed to be erected. The kalam drawing is similar to South Indian kolams, ritual drawings in front of homes. They are definitive spaces that show a supernatural implication (Neff, 64). Like the kolam, the kalam probably represents a universe in a microcosm. The women who sit in the kalam enter from the west and face east, facing the central force of the cosmos. "The audience faces west to worship God, . . . aligning themselves correctly about the structure of the universe as a whole" (Neff, 69). From the participants' point of view, the kalam serves as a pictorial representation of the deities to be worshipped. For the deities who are called, it attracts them, houses their offerings, and confines and holds their power. The floor drawing in sarpam tullal is the central aesthetic motif of the ritual performance, the element toward which all ritual action is directed, including the attention of participants.

The accretion of a greater number of elements and substances is an important principle in pambin tullal, the more elaborate the drawing, the more pleasing it is to the deity and participants. This principle can also be seen in the accretion of substances for the puja offering. within defining limits the more substances, the better. The number of days the ritual is commissioned, the length of time the specialists and family members fast, and the more pomp with which the event is

presented are all examples of investments that have the potential to increase the overall efficacy of the ritual performance.

The structuring and ordering of central events are a key factor in achieving the efficacy of the ritual. In ritual action the successive manifestations of the sacred progress from passive to active. The power and presence of the deity move from residing in a passive, inexpressive stone, to the more actively engaging visual embodiment in the kalam, to a living manifestation of its power in the possession of the piniydl. The two Nayar women and the other participants and observers ideally move from passive to active involvement in the ritual performance through their increased engagement with aesthetic works. The sacred frame is aesthetically and ritually manipulated to make possible this level of action attributed to the presence of the deity.

Pulluvar informants state that the otherworldly physical atmosphere created by the kalam, the ritual canopy, the lighting, food and incense, the rhythm of the pot-drum, and the elaborate dance of the Pulluvan lure the serpent deities from their home in the sacred serpent grove. These aesthetic media also engage taravadu members and serve to structure their potential experience. The Pulluvan's elaborate dance demonstrates the possibilities of the deities' power, thus setting the stage for the possession. He dances around the boundary of the kalam, which will "contain" the possessed women, in the space between the kalam and the taravadu members who are present for the event. His dance fills the performance space with action and movement, novelty and surprise, visually extending the action outward from the floor drawing to the participants.

According to informants, it is primarily by the use of these media that the two women become possessed by the deities. When the women are sitting in the kalam watching the heads of the serpents, the light, the smell of the incense and camphor, the food and flowers, the rhythm of the kudam, and the words of the song cause the heads of the serpents to move. The serpents in the drawing then prompt the women to do the tullal, to wipe out the kalam. The destruction of the kalam is an act of symbolic removal of the serpent curse. The combination of aesthetic communication, physiological effects of fasting, potent ideas of religious belief, and the precedent of tradition (the words of the song) contribute to the potential achievement of the possession state, deemed necessary to signal the successful realization of the goals of the performance. The use of the aesthetic elements affects the other participants, subjectively organizing and structuring their immediate perceptions, potentially creating a sensory as well as cognitive reality through the manipulation of experience. The success of the performance depends on collective belief in the efficacy of the ritual.

The experience of possession by the piniyal and the experiences of the audience are potentially celebrative and transformative of the desired ends of the ritual performance. While the aesthetic elements potentially establish an immediately engaging experience for the participants, other important elements sanction, substantiate and give meaning to the experience, such as the powerful recitations of myths in songs and prayers, and the sanctioning power of other, more powerful deities propitiated here. All of these exist before and outside of the event and come into play in the event to inform the experience. The achievement of the presence of the deity, the ultimate and most powerful manifestation of which is the possession of the women, is the culmination and climax of all of these elements which charge and affirm the event.

4. PSYCHO-SOCIOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF 'SARPPAKKALAM' ART

Beyond its aesthetic appeal, 'Sarppakkalam' art in Kerala holds profound psycho-sociological implications for individuals and communities. The act of creating 'Sarppakkalam' designs is often a meditative and therapeutic experience, providing a space for individuals to express their creativity, emotions, and cultural identity. The intricate process of drawing snake-like patterns on the floor can be a form of mindfulness practice, promoting relaxation, focus, and mental well-being. The communal aspect of 'Sarppakkalam', where multiple individuals come together to create elaborate designs, fosters social bonding, cooperation, and a sense of community.

The trance (performers are taken over non-human beings) position in *sarppam thullal* offers a space to articulate suppressed desires and sexual drives. Though ritual is a voluntary performance, the passageway offers liminal pleasure to the frenzied performer. Liminality is defined as the altered or in-between space to believe real and possible. In this trance and frenzy position, the individual possessing a liminal stage enjoys a space unquestioned by normative society. The liminal phase facilitates the transmission of vibrant energy during the trance performance in *Sarppam thullal*, which is further communicated in an intense performative language. The freedom provided by the ritual evokes the desires in the unconscious and provides a vent to the suppressed feelings in the displaced codified language of the ritual. (Freudian displacement) Here in this ritual, the identification with the snake and assumption of its movements, provide the possibility of a displaced expression of the performers' suppressed desires.

The symbolic significance of snake motifs in 'Sarppakkalam' designs can represent various cultural beliefs, mythological narratives, and spiritual ideologies, influencing social practices and values within the community. By exploring the psycho-sociological dimensions of 'Sarppakkalam' art, we can understand its role in shaping individual identities, social interactions, and cultural expressions in Kerala.

5. CULTURAL TRADITIONS AND HERITAGE PRESERVATION THROUGH 'SARPPAKKALAM'

'Sarppakkalam' art in Kerala is deeply rooted in the cultural traditions and heritage of the region, serving as a means of preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge from one generation to the next. The practice of creating 'Sarppakkalam' designs is often passed down through oral traditions and familial teachings, reinforcing cultural values, beliefs, and aesthetics. The motifs and patterns used in 'Sarppakkalam' designs often draw inspiration from nature, mythology, and religious symbolism, reflecting the diverse cultural influences that have shaped Kerala's artistic tradition. By continuing the practice of 'Sarppakkalam', communities in Kerala uphold their cultural identity, celebrate their artistic legacy, and sustain intergenerational connections. The public display of 'Sarppakkalam' designs in festivals, ceremonies, and rituals serves as a form of cultural expression, communication, and communal celebration, reinforcing the sense of belonging and shared cultural heritage within the community.

6. THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE OF 'SARPPAKKALAM'

Sarppakkalam is a captivating ritual that unfolds with a remarkable aesthetic appeal, captivating the senses of all who witness it. The ceremony takes place in the serene and verdant settings of Kerala's traditional homes, known as Nalukettu, or the snake-infested groves, called Sarppakkavu. The visual spectacle begins with the intricate decorations that adorn the sacred spaces. Colourful rangolis, or elaborate floor designs, are meticulously created using natural materials such as rice flour, flowers, and leaves. These vibrant patterns not only enhance the aesthetic appeal but also serve as a symbolic representation of the harmony between humans and nature. The centrepiece of the ritual is the elaborate Sarppakkalam, a stone or metal sculpture that depicts the serpent deity. These sculptures are often adorned with ornate jewellery, intricate carvings, and vibrant colours, captivating the onlookers with their exquisite craftsmanship. The skilled artisans who create these Sarppakkalam are revered for their mastery in preserving this traditional art form. As the ritual unfolds, the rhythmic chants and the soothing melodies of traditional instruments, such as the Chenda and the Ilathalam, create an enchanting atmosphere. The synchronized dance performances by the Theyyam artists, with their elaborate costumes and mesmerizing movements, further enhance the aesthetic appeal of Sarppakkalam.

Figure 5



Figure 5 Image of Sarpa Worship. [9].

7. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Most details of the performance action are strictly scripted and prescribed and have to pass the ownership of the offering to them, an exchange symbolized by handing over a red cloth that the main Pulluvar performer, the Pulluvan, attaches to the canopy above the drawing area. The offering attracts the serpent deity and attaching it invests the Pulluvar with the power to act on behalf of the yajamanan in the ritual performance. By participating in the creation and display of floor art arrangements, individuals forge connections with their society and ancestors, tapping into a shared cultural memory that transcends generations. Floor drawing art in Kerala, known as 'Sarppakkalam', holds a unique and significant place in the cultural heritage of the region. 'Sarppakkalam' involves the creation of intricate, snake-like designs on the floor using coloured powders, rice flour, or flowers. This traditional art form not only showcases aesthetic beauty but also has profound psycho-sociological implications that reflect and shape cultural norms, social practices, and individual identities in Kerala. This article aims to delve into the aesthetic and psycho-sociological dimensions of 'Sarppakkalam' exploring how this

art form transcends the surface to embody deeper meanings and significance within the cultural context of Kerala.

Kerala, the southern state of India, is known for its rich cultural heritage and diverse traditions. The ritualistic snake worship ceremony 'Sarppamthullal' and its accompanied floor art drawing 'sarppakkalam,' deeply intermingle with the cultural inner core of native Kerala common folk. The use of natural elements, such as fresh flowers, tender leaves, and fragrant incense, adds to the sensory experience, evoking a sense of harmony and connection with the natural world. The flickering oil lamps and the gentle breeze rustling through the foliage contribute to the ethereal ambience, transporting the participants and onlookers to a realm of spiritual and artistic transcendence.

Sarppakkalam holds profound psycho-social significance within the cultural landscape of Kerala. The ritual serves as a powerful medium for the expression of beliefs, values, and the deep-rooted connection between the community and the serpent deities. At the core of Sarppakkalam lies the reverence for the serpent, which is deeply ingrained in the collective psyche of the Keralite people. The snake, often seen as a symbol of fertility, protection, and spiritual wisdom, is honoured and venerated during this ceremony. The ritual provides a platform for the community to connect with the divine and seek blessings, protection, and prosperity. Participation in Sarppakkalam also fosters a sense of community and social cohesion. The ritual brings together people from diverse backgrounds, fostering a shared sense of identity and belonging. The collaborative efforts involved in the preparation, organization, and execution of the ceremony reinforce the social fabric and strengthen the bonds within the community.

Furthermore, Sarppakkalam serves as a platform for the preservation and transmission of traditional knowledge and practices. The ritual is often accompanied by the recitation of ancient texts, the sharing of oral histories, and the demonstration of traditional skills, such as the intricate art of Sarppakkalam-making. This intergenerational exchange ensures the continuity of cultural traditions and the passing down of invaluable knowledge to future generations. The ritual also plays a significant role in the spiritual and psychological well-being of the participants. The act of engaging in ceremonial practices, such as offerings, prayers, and meditations, can induce a state of mindfulness, calm, and inner reflection. The collective experience of the ritual can also foster a sense of belonging, community, and a deeper connection with the divine and the natural world.

Additionally, Sarppakkalam serves as a platform for the expression of cultural identity and the affirmation of traditional values. The ceremony provides an opportunity for the community to come together and celebrate their heritage, strengthening their sense of pride and belonging. The preservation of Sarppakkalam is crucial for the safeguarding of Kerala's rich cultural heritage. This unique ritual is not merely a symbolic practice but a living testament to the resilience and adaptability of the state's cultural traditions. One of the primary ways in which Sarppakkalam contributes to the preservation of cultural heritage is through the sustenance of traditional art forms and craftsmanship. The intricate Sarppakkalam sculptures, the captivating Theyyam dance performances, and the meticulous creation of rangolis are all integral components of the ritual. By actively engaging in these practices, artisans and performers ensure the continuity of these specialized skills, passing them down through generations.

In recent years, there have been concerted efforts by various stakeholders, including the government, cultural organizations, and local communities, to actively promote and preserve Sarppakkalam. These initiatives include the establishment of

cultural centres, the organization of festivals and workshops, and the documentation of the ritual's history and practices. The ritual's visual splendour, the rhythmic chants, and the harmonious integration of natural elements create an immersive experience that transports the participants and onlookers to a realm of spiritual and artistic transcendence.

8. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, 'Sarppakkalam' art in Kerala transcends mere surface decoration to embody aesthetic, psycho-sociological, and cultural dimensions that enrich the cultural fabric of the region. By exploring the intricate designs, symbolic meanings, and social practices associated with 'Sarppakkalam', we can appreciate its aesthetic beauty, meaningful symbolism, and cultural significance within the context of Kerala. Beyond the aesthetic appeal, Sarppakkalam holds profound psycho-social dimensions, serving as a platform for the expression of beliefs, values, and the deep-rooted connection between the community and the serpent deities. The ritual fosters a sense of community, social cohesion, and the preservation of traditional knowledge and practices.

Furthermore, Sarppakkalam serves as a platform for the preservation of traditional knowledge systems. The recitation of ancient texts, the sharing of oral histories, and the transmission of ecological wisdom related to the serpent deities and their natural habitats all contribute to the safeguarding of invaluable intangible cultural heritage. The sarppam thullal like rituals indirectly help to protect the natural system of preservation by somehow ascribing the hallow of divinity to the creatures. Traditional beliefs related to flora and fauna also help to safeguard natural environment, which is integral to the cultural concern of kerala community. The reverence and protection accorded to these natural sanctuaries ensure the conservation of biodiversity and the maintenance of ecological balance.

The psycho-sociological implications of 'Sarppakkalam' art highlight its role in promoting mindfulness, social cohesion, and cultural expression among individuals and communities. Furthermore, the cultural traditions and heritage preservation associated with 'Sarppakkalam' underscore its significance as a living art form that connects traditions with present practices in Kerala. Through this holistic exploration of 'Sarppakkalam' art, we gain a deeper understanding of its multifaceted implications and enduring impact on the cultural landscape of Kerala.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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