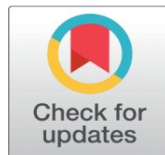
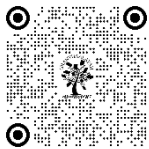


# RE-FIGURING THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF ALLEPPEY THROUGH MYTHS, LEGENDS AND FOLKLORE

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## ABSTRACT

This paper centers on the collection of folk tales transmitted through word of mouth in and around the region popularly known as the rice bowl of Kerala, namely Kuttanad, in the Alleppey district. It explores how the oral tales and myths prevalent in the region have enhanced our knowledge of the ecological, social, and political history of the region of Alleppey. The first story is related to the origin of the Kuttanad region, its culture, and history. The second tale is about the legends of “Karumadi Kuttan” and its Buddhist links. The third story is the legend of the “Perumparayan”, a popular subaltern hero of Kuttanadu. The fourth story is about the Thakazhi Sreedharma Sastha Temple at the region's cultural center, and the story of the origin of an oil potion called Valyenna. The fifth tale is about the popular Champakulam water fete which is celebrated every year as the day of the installation of the deity at the Ambalappuzha Sreekrishna Swamy Temple. These tales touch upon the different aspects of the agricultural, ecological socio-cultural, and religious life of the people of the region of Kuttanad and Alleppey, and are still alive in the memories of the people and form their cultural landscape.

**Keywords:** Folklore, Mythology, Mnemonics, Alleppey, Kuttanad, Socio-History, Cultural Landscape

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### FOLKLORE OF KERALA

Various forms of folklore are prevalent all over the world, denoting the age-old beliefs, stories, myths, memories, manners, customs, and observances of people and communities. They are largely unwritten and uncollected and have continued to exist mnemonically outside the accepted patterns of contemporary knowledge and religion, often surviving to modern times. They represent the continuum of culture through time, the passing on of socio-historic and cultural ideologies through oral expression and material practice in human societies. They become vehicles of Indigenous creativity and hold the sparkle of everyday life, depicting ancient lifestyles, agriculture, worship, war, and other day-to-day activities. Oral folktales, myths, legends, ballads, folk songs, stories, art forms, sayings, and certain aspects of material culture like food, clothes, tools, weapons, and artifacts become relevant to discussions in this area. Folklorist William Bascom has said that folklore has many functions, such as allowing for escape from societal consequences; in addition,

folklore can also serve to validate a culture as well as transmit a culture's morals and values. (p. 334) In short, they are the vehicles of a region and a people's culture and heritage, enabling a better understanding of the past, and are now considered as a valid source of history. Barre Toelken in his book *The Dynamics of Folklore* observes that "Tradition means not some static, immutable force from the past, but those pre-existing culture-specific materials and options that bear upon the performer more heavily than do his or her tastes and talents. (p. 47) The socio-history of places and people is mnemonically preserved in folklore, allowing its stakeholders to imagine and re-shape a changing cultural landscape.

## 2. REVIEW

Kerala has a rich tradition of folklore, differing vastly from region to region, thereby becoming a fascinating mosaic of alternative cultures to the dominant forms of cultural expression. It is worth mentioning in this connection that the *Aithihyamala* by Kottarathil Sankunni is a treasure trove of myths, folklore, and legends current in different parts of Kerala. Kerala's landscape is drained by many rivers, all of which flow into the Arabian Sea on the west coast. Among the rivers and rivulets, there are canals, lakes, and lagoons with mangroves and estuaries, where the beauty and essence of the cascading waters etch and carve their way to make the unique landscape of Kerala. The lush greenness of the land, the ecological diversity of the vast paddy fields, the sea, and the luxuriant forest wealth of fauna and flora are a unique testimony to the land being called God's own country. The origin of Kerala itself is embodied in the myth of the divine sage Parasurama throwing his battle axe from Gokarna in Karnataka to Kanyakumari in Tamil Nadu, and the sea miraculously receding from this region, creating a new piece of land through natural reclamation. Kerala's culture and history are replete with legends, myths, and tales that mark the cultural geography of its varied landscape. The south-central coastal district of Alleppey is one such place in Kerala, holding a unique place in its history and culture. Flanked on one side by the Arabian Sea and on the other by the low-lying paddy fields of Kuttanad, stretching up to the Vembanad lake in the north, crisscrossed by canals and surrounded by backwaters, Alleppey is truly the 'Venice of the East' and a folklorist's paradise. The main occupation of the people is agriculture along with fisheries and coir work; the lives of the people on the seashore, on land, and by the fields are entwined with their bounty and beauty.

Kuttanad is a delta region of about 900 sq. km., comprising of two regions Upper Kuttanadu and Lower Kuttanad, within Alleppey district. The land of Old Kuttanadu was partly a natural formation in the backwater lake and one of the greatest challenges for the people of the area was negotiating the treacherous muddy soil. In the traditional stages of farming in Kuttanadu the practices were developed and followed by the farmers who were aware of the special ecosystem and environmental features of the area. Since the area was below sea level, (Denmark being the only other place where this is practiced) water had to be pumped out from these fields using manually operated wooden wheels or "Chakram" that were placed at various parts of the bunds. Depending on the size of the Chakrams one or more persons sat on specially erected platforms and turned the wheel with their feet. This activity was known as "Chakram Chavittu", "chavittu" meaning "to stamp" or "to pedal". This was to be done uninterruptedly for fear of water rushing back into the field if there was a break. Sipping toddy from mud pots and singing "Chakrapattu" or the 'songs of the wheel' to keep awake, the labourers worked day and night to drain out water from the fields. This reclamation formed the paddy fields (called "Padasekharam", "paadam" meaning "field"). The laborers in the field sang songs while sowing and reaping; they are called "koithu pattu" or "Harvest Songs". The oral lore and songs of Kuttanadu are thus intimately entwined with the agricultural way of life. Another attractive feature of Kuttanadu is the backwaters and it is famous for its ritual extravaganza of water sports. The much-celebrated snake boat tournaments are held in the Champakkulam, Payippadu, Kumarakom, and Pulinkunnu regions. The large snake boats (Chundanvallam) each rowed by hundreds of men, to the accompaniment of scintillating songs, the famous "vallappaattu", are an unbelievable sight, attracting hundreds of tourists from all over the world. The main occupation of people in Kuttanadu is farming, with age-old traditions merging ever so slowly with the new. Rice is the most important agricultural product, giving Kuttanadu the name 'the rice bowl of Kerala'. More than two crops are grown alternately each year. Agriculture being the mainstay of the lives of the people of this region, their entire culture is derived from the practices and tradition of farming and living in harmony with the ecosystem. The songs, legends, festivals, religions, and cultural traditions- everything takes wing from the soil.

## 3. DISCUSSION: MYTHS OF ORIGINS IN KUTTANAD

Originally Kuttanad was part of the coastal area of the Arabian Sea, which became a shallow bay due to a geological uplift. The continual inflow of silt carried by the rivers Meenachil, Pamba, Achencoil, and Manimala over thousands of years deposited in this and gradually made it an extensive brackish water lagoon and backwater system. The soil in Kuttanad

is a mixture of sand and clay in varying proportions. This loamy soil is very fertile and suitable for paddy cultivation. There are many myths and folktales related to the origin of Kuttanad. One legend narrates Kuttanad as “Khandava Vana”, the ancient forest mentioned in the *Mahabharata*, where the five Pandavas travelled during their exile. It was once a dense forest that was later burned down to construct a city. The burned land ‘Chuttanaadu’ (“chutta” meaning “burned” and “naadu” meaning “land” in Malayalam) was later on called “Kuttanad”. It is said that charred black wooden logs can be mined from the paddy fields of Kuttanad even now. These fields are known as “Karinilam” or “coal land” and most of the place names of Kuttanad end in “Kari” which means “Coal”. If we dig the soil of Kuttanad, we get coal, thereby lending credence to the mythological stories of origin.

There is another legend, which claims that Kuttanadu was once a province of the Chera kingdom and was ruled by a powerful king named Cheran Chenguttuvan. It is said that Chera kings who had their home in Kuttanadu were called “Kuttuvans”, named after this. Another fascinating legend narrates the origin of the name Kuttanad from the Malayalam phrase ‘Kuttan Kuthia Nadu’. “Kuthuka” means “to dig the soil” and Kuttan is the person who digs it. Thus, Kuttanadu is the land made by “Kuttans”, men who created the land by digging the soil below the surface of the water. (In Kerala, “Kuttan” is also a common name, often a term of endearment used to call young men.)

#### 4. THE BUDDHA STORY

It is believed that during the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE, Buddhism was a force to reckon with, as a religion and a way of life in several parts of Kerala. It had received patronage from the Royalty and flourished for some 200 years, and although it wasn’t an established religious faith for various historical reasons, it left many lasting relics in the socio-cultural scene of Kerala. The important places of Buddhist presence were Alappuzha, Kollam and along its hinterland, where the presence of Buddhist cults, especially in Kuttanadu, tells us how Buddhism had flourished in this land. There are many fables and legends handed down over the years and the most interesting of all is the origin of the name Kuttanadu itself. It is believed that ‘Buddha’ was known as ‘Kuttan’ in those days and the name of the land took the form of “Kuttanadu” or the “Land of Buddha”.

The most important relic, which points to the presence of Buddhism in Kuttanadu came with the excavation of a granite figure of the Buddha in the classical Padmasana pose. A British engineer, Sir Robert Bristow in the 1930s, who found the statue buried in Karumady Canal was instrumental in recovering and protecting the relic, which later came to be known as “Karumady Kuttan”. Of the many folk versions of the tales about “Karumady Kuttan” and its origin, the one that is the most popular is that of a man of the ‘Paraya’ caste by the name ‘Kuttan’, who was an ardent devotee of Buddha, carved a Buddha statue in stone, which later came to be known as “Karumady kuttan”. His many sacrifices to practice Buddhism and his adoration had overflowed into the general belief of the common folk and he became a cult figure later. With the decline of Buddhism in Kerala the remnants of the Buddhist culture slowly eroded into the history of Kuttanad’s folklore. Kuttanadu being agrarian, and steeped in occult and folk beliefs, accepted Karumadykuttan as a protector of the land from the vagaries of weather, disease, and the many trials in the lives of the common folk.

#### 5. “PERUMPARAYAN”, THE OUTCASTE

Kuttanadu, like any other agrarian culture, had to bear the brunt of the caste and class discrimination practiced under the feudal system. Since the rich upper castes possessed most of the land holdings, the feudal landlords took every opportunity to wield power, and through connivance with the royalty, strictly maintained the brutal system by the rule of law and subjugation. Outcasts by birth, the agricultural labourers of Kuttanad were subjugated through brute power and socio and mythical edicts, which were sanctioned by vested interests. The most poignant of the songs and folktales of Kuttanadu tell of the heinous crimes against the lower caste labourers and their travails and their sacrifices. One such tale is the story of the “Perumparayan”.

The labouring classes were made up largely of the people of the Pulaya and Paraya castes. After the harvest, they had to offer all the produce grown out of their sweat and toil in the fields to the feudal landlords. The cultivable lands in Kuttanad which are mostly below sea level had to be protected every year from rising waters with barricades and earthen bunds. Every year during the rainy season, the bund was breached and had to be rebuilt. The Paraya laborers worked hard with bare hands to save the field from destruction. The feudal lords, with the help of the Oracle, or ‘Velichappadu’ through his divine call known as “Deviyude Arulippadu” or the “divine words of the Goddess” enticed the Paraya community to sacrifice one among them whose name was uttered by the “Velichappadu”. This cruel practice continued for years and hundreds of Paraya men were buried alive in the name of strengthening the earthen bund. With

the dawn of reformation and awareness brought about by changing times, these practices died down. The Paraya men who laid down their lives were declared martyrs and came to be known as “Perumparayan” or “the Great Paraya”. Perumparayan is still being worshipped by devotees in far-flung corners of Kuttanadu. They light a lamp in front of the stone idol and talk about the legend.

## 6. THAKAZHI SHASTHA TEMPLE

The majority of the temples of Kerala have ancient histories and are related to the myths of Parasurama who is believed to have sojourned through Kerala, consecrating temples in the representation of the local beliefs and the mythological significances. In the version of the myth in the “Aithiyamala”, on one of his journeys in the south, Parasurama installed a Sastha idol in a small temple in a place called “Odhamala”, which was later eclipsed in importance by larger temples. The temple was later reduced to rubble in a deluge and only the idol remained. During the middle of the fourteenth century, Sri Villwamangalam Swaiyar, a venerated sage and ardent devotee of Lord Krishna, who is known to have founded many of the famous temples in Kerala, was traversing by boat along the Manimala River, when he had a vision of an exemplary divine form of Sastha. He instructed the Brahmins accompanying him to dig into the swampy slush, which was by then a paddy field, and they came up with an astonishingly radiating divine idol of Sastha which was the same idol that Parasurama had installed at Odhamala. Villwamangalam instructed the learned sage Udayarka Muni, who was under the patronage of the Chembakassery Raja, to install the idol and rebuild the temple at the place where it was unearthed. The place where the Odhamala Sastha was lying interned for hundreds of years, in a swampy mire, which in Malayalam meant “pothakkuzhi” stuck to the name of the temple, as Pothakkuzhi Sastha Temple. Later the name “Pothakkuzhi” was transformed to “Thakazhi”, which is a modern village today. The temple holds priceless objects, such as the ‘Kuda’, “Kombu” or a coconut having the shape of a trunk on it, but the fame of the temple rests on the famous legend of the origin of an oil potion called “Valliyenna” which has magical powers in curing all diseases in mankind. The oral lore of the place recalls a simple and true devotee of the Lord Dharmashastha, who appeared in a dream and revealed to him a concoction of medicinal herbs and the recipe to make an oil of such worth that it was termed as Miracle Medicine, a panacea for all ills. He came to be known as “Enna Valyachan”, or “the grandfather of the oil”, whose spiritual strength prescribed the traditional processes to make the oil and the ritualistic practice of diet which went along with it, and is still practiced today. From being folklore and legend, it has risen to such import by the medicinal value of the oil. The legend of Valyenna and the importance of the temple connected with it stands out as testimony of the continuity of oral lore and the ritualistic and cultural traditions that reflect the deep-set beliefs of the village folk.

## 7. CHAMPAKKULAM BOAT RACE

The Origin of the famous Champakkulam Water Fete also has a legend behind it. The sage Vilwamangalam Swamiyar was assigned the task of selecting a suitable idol of Lord Krishna for the Ambalappuzha Sreekrishna Temple. On the ordained day of installing the idol of the Deity, the sage was displeased by the idol and rejected it outright. The sage himself propounded that an idol from Karikkulam Temple at Kurchi should be brought there. Kurchi was somewhat distant from Ambalappuzha and the journey entailed an overnight halt at Champakkulam. Chempakassery Raja from Ambalappuzha along with his entourage headed for Champakkulam in decorated boats to welcome the deity with great pomp and pageantry. The devotees assembled at the waterfront were enthralled by the stately manner in which the Deity was brought. To commemorate this event, Chempakassery Raja proclaimed that a Water Fete should be conducted annually on Champakkulam stream. Of all the boat races associated with Kuttanad, none has the uniqueness and auspiciousness of a celestial water fete as the “Champakkulam Moolam Vallam Kali”.

## 8. CONCLUSION

These myths, tales, and legends embody the life and soul of the cultural landscape of Kuttanad. Folklore is always the throbbing pulse of the people, holding in their perennial narratives and rituals the myriad facets of life, its joys and sorrows, hopes and aspirations. Uncodified and unwritten, these myths and legends are the mnemonic devices through which culture and history were encoded and passed on to posterity. While folklore can contain religious or mythical elements, it equally concerns itself with the sometimes-mundane traditions of everyday life. Folklore frequently ties the practical and the esoteric into one narrative package. As Bascom observes:

Folklore is one of the important parts that make up the culture of any given people, there is no known culture that does not include folklore. No group of people, however simple their technology, has ever been discovered which does not employ some form of folklore. (336).

This paper has been an attempt to collect and narrate the oral narratives transmitted through word of mouth in and around the region of Kuttanad, popularly known as the rice bowl of Kerala, in the Alappuzha district. The oral tales and myths prevalent in the region have contributed to our knowledge of the social and political history of the region of Kuttanadu, and the larger Kerala society, as they are very much a part of the lives of the people experientially as well as being part of their cultural tradition. The journey in search of the folklore of Kuttanadu turned out to be a very interesting and enriching one for the authors, as we met and spoke to many people, who shared their memories and indigenous knowledge with us. Kuttanadu is also mentioned in the great Tamil literary works like *Thiruvaymozhi*, *Periyapuranam*, etc which were written in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries respectively. These evidences shows that the stories regarding the origin of Kuttanad are not mere stories, but legitimate sources of alternative history. The folklore of Alleppey is related to the ecological, socio-cultural, and historical aspects of the life of the land, depicting the basic themes related to human life, such as the age-old conflict between good and evil, the ancient practices of agriculture, the power of nature and the need to live in harmony with the environment, and the continuing struggles within the power hierarchies of caste and class, thus embodying the real and living spirit of the land. In his famous comparative study on oral and literary cultures, *Orality and Literacy*, Walter J.Ong observed that the characteristic features of oral poetic expression in early societies were that it was “empathic and participatory” and “situational” rather than abstract and objectively distanced. (36-57) Kuttanad is today facing deepening crises in the sustainability of agriculture, migration of populations, pollution of the environment, destruction of its sensitive ecosystem, and erosion of cultural values and practices. Therefore, the need to keep alive the memory of a way of life, a unique ecosystem, and the sustenance it offered the whole of Kerala in the form of agricultural produce becomes imperative. The wealth of folklore thus forms the cultural landscape of the deeply internalized mental and social life of the people, which is all the more relevant today, as the physical landscape is undergoing rapid changes in the name of development, progress, and modernization. By mnemonically sustaining the social and historical aspects of particular regions and societies, folklore allows the re-imagination of the cultural landscape for its inheritors.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

None

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