

Visual analysis of ritualistic art form of Kerala: Sarpam Kalemezhuthu (snake floor writing/design)

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Abstract

Snake worship is a revered practice in the Hindu religion; it takes deep cultural and ritualistic roots in several places in Asia. Snake worship, as a practice, is reinforced with found sacred snake groves, statues made out of stone and, other ritualistic practices such as sarpam kalemezhuthu-pattu/thullal (snake floor writing, songs and dance). It is iconographic and predominantly found in the state of Kerala, India. Sarpam kalemezhuthu-pattu/thullal amalgamates forms of dance, music and, visual art into a single ritual. Sarpa kalam (snake floor writing/design) is the artistic segment of the ritual. This paper seeks to study the visual characteristics of sarpa kalam and attempt to analyze form and the meanings it may derive.

Keywords: Art, Form, Media, Iconography, Image, Sarpa kalam, Visual design, Ritual, Writing

Heritage and background

Many cultures and sub-cultures around the world worship nature. Ancient civilizations realized earlier on that to conserve the relationship with nature, giving due reverence was necessary. Outside of what is required for basic survival (food and shelter), embedding the regular practice of worship into the culture was essential for the harmonious co-existence with nature. These age-old traditions have been

passed on for centuries from one generation to the other. Since folk culture, ritualistic worship, and other artistic practices are fading amongst scores of capitalistic media, it is crucial to understand and archive its significance so that these cultural traditions can live on for future generations to appreciate (Powell, 1998).

Building reverence towards an image

The word fear often goes synonymous with reptiles, and it is habitually associated with the animal snake. However, that is not always the case when it comes to the Hindu religion. In India, snake worship is an ancient and primitive practice dating back 3000 years and holds a deep cultural, ritual, and spiritual root. One can find the prominent presence of sarpam (snake) with various Hindu gods such as Vishnu, Shiva and, Bhagavathi (divine goddess). In Hindu folklore, individual prominence is given to snake deities and regarded as powerful divine creatures. Snake deities represent various spiritual aspects of life, from creation to eternalness (Borah S., 2017).

Sarpa kavukal (sacred snake groves) a revered space

In the Malayalam language, kavu means a grove or garden. Snake groves are found all over Kerala and come in various shapes and sizes. And many snake groves in Kerala are considered sacred. These found groves provide worshiping ground for different types of snake deities. These groves are rarely pruned and are often left untouched to preserve the natural habitat of the snake. The wilderness around the snake grove often invokes a sense of stillness and serenity to the space. This sensation augments the mysticism and sanctity of the snake grove. Some snake groves are situated next to sacred Peepal trees (known to symbolize Lord Vishnu). Due to the wilderness around them, they visually appear to be unmanaged. However, the snake deities' divinity requires a different kind of management which involves ritualistic maintenance. The responsibility of supervision of the snake groves is a collective affair. It predominantly belongs to Brahmin or Nair (Dravidian) communities, an entire village, single or a group of ancestral families known as Tharavadu. These sacred groves offer space both literally and ideologically for the communities to gather, conduct and, impart a multitude of the socially and culturally significant value system for all the generations involved.

Sarpam kalamezhuthu-pattu/thullal (snake floor writing, songs and dance)

The literal meaning of sarpam/naga means snake or serpent, kalam means picture/image, ezhuthu refers to the act of writing, pattu means songs and thullal means performance and dance. Therefore, in the analysis of the kalams the word ‘writing’ will replace ‘drawing’.

Although ritualistic maintenance of the sacred snake grove consists of various elaborate worship methodologies. The approach of conduct can slightly differ from one grove to another. The ceremony is usually organized to appease the snake deities to protect the family or community from any harm and to ultimately bring prosperity. Sarpam kalamezhuthu-pattu/thullal is one of the most elaborate worship methods practiced. Although the objective of this paper is to examine the visual elements of the floor writing (kalamezhuthu) practice, it cannot be an insular study because of the nature of the ritual. As mentioned earlier sarpam kalamezhuthu-pattu/thullal is an amalgamation of art forms such as music, dance, and visual art. Therefore, it is imperative to understand kalamezhuthu with reference to the music played and the dance performed. The Pulluvas, a Hindu group in Kerala, is recognized for their knowledge of the rituals and art forms required to conduct sarpam kalamezhuthu-pattu/thullal. Therefore, they are invited to the serpent temples or sarpa kavu to administer the rituals. The Sarpam kalamezhuthu-pattu/thullal ritual progresses in stages and the entire ritual can take anywhere between five to six hours, or several days to complete. Preparations begin much ahead to procure all the essential materials required to make the ritual fruitful. Once the auspicious date is finalized the Pulluvar community is informed of the same. There are several subdivisions within the community, however, the majority is known as Nagampatikal (people who sing snake-songs). Therefore, this community possesses the right to conduct all the rituals of snake gods. They are specially trained through generations and retain the knowledge of the ritual, songs, and images impressed in the form of kalams. Some families and/or individuals from the Pulluvar community are specially trained to perform this ritual. And for many centuries this community has been performing this ritual for many families, communities, temples around Kerala that possess the sarpa

kavu (sacred snake groves).

The preparation begins with the Pulluvass designing the kalam on the prepared surface. The surrounding area is also adorned with incense, oil lamps, flowers, and other natural embellishments made out of leaves, etc. These embellishments create a visually striking ambiance surrounded by a mystical aura. A priest and a team of Pulluvan performers carry out various rituals around the completed kalam design. These rituals are intrinsic and elaborate and include offering reverence to other deities such as Lord Ganesha, Sun god, and other elements of nature. The priest begins the worship by reciting hymns and other oral texts alongside musical discourses known as kalam pattu (songs praising the gods). Handmade instruments used during the performances include Pulluvan veena' (a one-stringed violin), Pulluvan kudam (earthenware pot with a string attached to it), and thalami (bell-metal cymbals).

The entire ritual and performances are centered around the kalam. The performance develops in stages starting with muram uzhichil (wing dance) that represents the Garuda (a kite or an eagle) who is also known as the nemesis of sarpa (snake) in Hindu mythology. Thiri uzhichil (flame dance) is followed after the wing dance. The dances are rhythmic, acrobatic as the priest circumambulates the kalam. The performer moves his body flexibly and elegantly to imitate the bird and snake. Towards the end of the ritual, two to three maidens transcend into liminal space and perform kalam mazhkel (erasing the floor writing) as they align with the rhythmic music and enter the kalam. It is believed that the serpent gods commune through these maidens (Saju). The maidens emulate the movements of a serpent and erase the entire kalam using their long hair, body, and areca nut flower as the brush. This process of erasing is both physically and mentally taxing on the maidens, and they collapse towards the end and conclude the entire ritual.

Iconography in Sarpa kalam

An image comes from an image. An image has the potential of being a universal language. And so, many philosophers in the past have studied images in various capacities to decipher them. According to Thomas Blount, an image can be an artificial reference either in

painting or sculpture. A visual representation of the likeness of an object/subject on photographic material or an electronic display. We have always lived in a visual world, and for most humans, the moment we are born, one of our first instincts is to open our eyes and make sense of our surroundings visually. Thus begins the journey of image. We start looking at forms very similar to breathing. How far an individual visually reads an image is dependent on how one educates oneself with the derivation of their surroundings. We, humans, are genetically hardwired to look, for which we have eyes. After looking comes seeing, and this is where the definition of reality comes into question (Berger, 1972).

An image can strengthen the potential of visual communication, which arises in the mind before the character becomes visible. The practice of using images as primary means of communication traces back to prehistoric cave painting. Humans commonly reiterate nature, and the mimetic representation of nature to create the desired image. Cavemen notably drew images for their hunting, thinking about its' symbolic power and recent centuries consume it as an act of narration (Heibutzki, n.d.). Every image has its cultural roots, but these have been evolving everywhere through the ages. Sometimes it's easy to interpret the images, and sometimes it is impossible to realize.

Iconography, borrowed from Greek roots, refers to the study of images. Iconography primarily aids in the historical documentation of sacred symbols via imagery (Schleimer, 2008). Hindu religion heavily relies on images to epitomize gods and demigods. Therefore, icons play a pivotal role in devotion for Hindus. These sacred symbols embody the spiritual realm and represent the divine truth that is superior in nature. Symbolism assists the expression of reality that brings two realms; the transcendental (niskala) and the material (sakala) together. Thus, Hindu icons contribute towards creating a visual language that is comprehensive to venerate the divine (Achari, Simha Publications , 2015).

Regarding the visual art in question, the icon of the snake, or naga is of primordial significance. The snake deities represent divinity, life and death, and eternalness. Snake deities are constructed or fash-

ioned in various styles, using simple geometric symbols and sometimes combining them with the human form. Stone sculptures found in the snake groves carry the quality of permanency, therefore, provides a physical space for devotees to worship and conduct rituals. The ritual of sarpam kalamezhuthu-pattu/thullal is conducted on specific calendars and special occasions. Kalam design is specific to the sarpam kalamezhuthu-pattu/thullal ritual and is temporary. Unlike sculpture, kalam is more graphic, stylized, bold, and colorful because of the method and materials (powders). Therefore, kalam as an art form is visually enticing. Although the sculpture or the kalam design is not realistic in appearance, the icon of the serpent is undeniable.

Material realm appealing the Transcendental realm via Visual Imagery

Sarpa kalams are highly stylized graphic designs written on a prepared floor at the entrance of serpent temples or in the courtyards of ancestral tharavadu (families) where snake grove subsists. These kalams can vary from three meters and above and are designed using handmade pigments or powder. Predominantly, five colors are used to create the kalam, also known as Panchavarnam. The five colors symbolize the five physical elements, air, water, fire, earth, and sky known as Panchabhutham (the basis of all cosmic creation). The five colors evoke the Panchendriyam, the five sensory organs of the human body, eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and skin.

The use of contrast colors in kalams brings out a vivid and vibrant image of the serpent. Kalam starts with a layer of black produced from burnt rice husk that serves as the canvas. After which, the image of the serpent and other decorative elements are created layer by layer. The body of the snake is depicted with green to match the natural shade of the snake. To create the color green, leaves of four different trees (also regarded as auspicious for worship) are ground. White and yellow colors made from rice and turmeric powder highlight and outline the body of the serpent. And to obtain red shade, turmeric is mixed with calcium carbonate. Today, artificial colors such as pink, orange, blue enhance the aesthetics of the writing. The kalam is written by hand and by tapping drilled coconut shells filled with different colors.

The Pulluvas are highly skilled in creating three-dimensional compositions. The obvious prominence is given to the large, coiled structure of the snake which is centrally placed in the kalam. Some other decorative elements surround the image such as flowers, dots, and lines, circles to augment the overall composition. The reference for the image of the snake is taken from Hindu mythology such as Lord Vishnu's Anantashayanam (Lord Vishnu resting on a five-headed, hooded, and coiled serpent) and Ashtanagas (a group of eight revered serpents). And sometimes according to the number of days the ritual takes place, the number of heads of the serpent keeps increasing; as many as 82 days. There are as many as nine snake deities some of which include Nagaraja (snake god), Nagayakshi (snake goddess), Maninaga (serpent with a jewel on top of the hood). Some of the commonly found kalams are Ananthashayanam kalam, Ashtanaga kalam and Nagayakshi kalam.

Understanding the role of form in Sarpa kalams

"In relation to art, the term form has two meanings: it can refer to the overall form taken by the work – its physical nature; or within a work of art, it can refer to the element of shape among the various elements that make up a work" (Tate, n.d.). The study of form in art is often independent of the subject matter. It focuses on the building blocks of form i.e., line, shape, value, color, texture, and space. And so, form in visual art connotes a three-dimensional object/subject in space and creates the illusion of volume. There are two kinds of form, geometric forms, which is mathematical and organic forms that are free-flowing (Lisa, 2021). The paper shall seek to study the visual form of three types of sarpa kalams, the Ananthashayanam kalam, Ashtanaga kalam, and Nagayakshi kalam.

Ananthashayanam kalam

In an Ananthashayanam kalam, precise measurements aid in the creation of large, geometrically seamless, and curvilinear serpent structures. Although exaggerated, the long, intertwined coils and the large hood represent real cobra snakes' bodies and movements. The body of the serpent is written with thick green lines, then outlined with yellow and red shades topped with highlighting white dots. The overall composition and choice of colors characterize the scales found on a

real serpent Each of the heads depicted in an Ananthashayanam kalam is different in color to create a stark contrast from each other. And, the serpent illustrated in the kalam is five-headed with a centrally positioned dominant head. The centrally positioned head is predominantly green in color and broader than the rest. In the Ananthashayanam kalam, the coiled body is meticulously written with geometrical accuracy and commonly fitted into an imaginary square. The coiled body. Although, designs can differ visually from kalam to kalam, such as differences in sizes of the squares, differently shaped serpent bodies. Some artists take creative freedom as they get imaginative with their composition. The overall composition is illustrative of cosmic symbolism

Ashtanaga kalam

The literal meaning of ashta is eight and naga is a serpent and kalam is an image. The Ashtanaga kalam is written to symbolize Kadru's eight living decedents out of Thousand. In Hindu mythology Kadru is known as the granddaughter of Lord Brahma. Unlike the Ananthashayanam kalam, the composition of Ashtanaga kalam is circular and eight hooded heads of the serpents are given individual and equal prominence. The five common colors used remain the same as the other kalam, unless some artificial colors are added to brighten. Geometric shapes are employed in Ashtanaga kalam as well, however, the color pattern and shape of the serpent can differ from Ananthashayanam kalam. The form of the serpent retains the curvilinear style, but, the overall composition can appear to be loosely structured and has a tendency to seem as a free-flowing form and not restricted within a square like the Ananthashayanam kalam. Ashtanaga kalam is also highly stylized as the serpent bodies tend to circle and are built around a centrally positioned Shiva lingam (icon of Lord Shiva) or other patterns. Ashtanaga Kalam provides more room to enhance the composition visually with other decorative symbols and structures.

Nagayakshi kalam

Nagayakshi kalam (snake goddess) is visually different from that of the other sarpa kalam designs. The Nagayakshi kalam represents the deity in atypical form. It epitomizes the form of the goddess in a para-human-like figure. This form embodies the amalgamation of

nature and the higher divine. The torso of the goddess's body is written human-like and the bottom half is written snake-like with a long sleek coiled body. The goddess' top half of the body is written with yellow turmeric, adorned with jewels and a crown on the head. These adornments are demonstrative of power and regality. While the bottom half represents the union with a serpent is often written in red. Although the bottom half depicts the serpent, depending on the stylistic choices, it is sometimes presented as though covered with rich clothing material. In Nagayakshi kalam the breasts of the goddess' are highlighted by making it three-dimensional as the turmeric color is piled into a small conical structure. This method makes the viewer aware of the female form. Changes in the form of the goddess can depend on the artists' design variation or belief/style system of the community; they also tend to differ from area to area. The objects and number of arms may vary at times. From time to time the goddess is drawn with four arms, each holding different objects such as lotus flower, sword, snakes, and other auspicious elements. The goddess's face often carries a solemn expression that is capable of evoking a sense of stillness in the viewers and leave them captivated. These distinctions of both halves and their union are written in contrasting colors. This output juxtaposes the image yet delivers a congruent quality overall. The kalam of the goddess Nagayakshi delivers a powerful impression as it represents an entity that holds mystical powers. To maintain focus towards the image of the deity, the decoration towards the outside frame is often minimal. However, the overall composition is attractive and creates a harmonious balance within the entire image.

Conclusion

1. Sarpa kalams employ both geometric and organic forms to create the desired image. This aids in creating a visually engaging form.
2. Although, the study of form and symbolism have contrasting outcomes. I believe in the case of sarpa kalam designs, neither can be studied in isolation. Therefore, form creates a symbol, and a symbol creates an icon and an icon creates meaning.
3. To understand the world around us, we humans create images. It is through these images we negotiate our place within a particular

space. And, these negotiations aid in establishing a sense of reality. Although such form of art appears to be primitive, they narrate the story of the land, history, and its people. Visual narration tends to have a stronger impact as the visual language is easier to grasp and has the tendency to transfer beyond words with a sense of universality. While the purpose of sarpam kalamezhuthu-pattu/thullal is to appease the snake gods and to receive blessings, it could have a transcendental purpose all the same. When the ritual is conducted within a tharavadu (ancestral home) or as a community, a sense of unison is cultivated as one sits surrounded by family members and neighbors. In such spaces, the ritual is more inclusive in nature as individuals from diverse communities join and enjoy the performance as the night air fills with incense, colors, songs, dance, and many visual attributes. The sarpam kalamezhuthu-pattu/thullal is a spectacular ritual and when experienced in person, one can truly sense the merger of the physical and spiritual realms. The striking colors of the kalam, the resonating songs, and the performance tends to remain with the audience beyond the moment.

According to Er. M. Unnikrishnan, President Thrissur Pooram Ekopana Samithy, “the open air, dark midnight sky, complete silence except the vibrant music from ishara gentle breeze, light and shadow from pantham (a torch made out of cloths wound conically over spiral rod on a brass vessel), the flat treatment of Naga-kala /three dimensional pictures of Devi-kalam, the angle of depression. The spectators may turn psychedelic and may feel that the picture will turn live/personify any moment.”

Building art around faith is an age-old tradition in Indian history. And this can be found within many communities following different faiths. Kerala is home to a multicultural space. Therefore, such rituals and practices must be revered and protected.

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