

HYBRID SPACES IN POORAKKALI: MYTHOLOGICAL NARRATIVES AND CONTEMPORARY REALITIES

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Poorakkali, a ritual performance central to the Pooram festival in Northern Kerala, particularly in Kannur and Kasaragod, serves as a dynamic cultural artifact blending mythological narratives with contemporary socio-political themes. Traditionally, the performance begins with devotional songs rooted in epics like the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Krishna Leela, reinforcing its sacred essence. However, as it unfolds, Poorakkali transcends its ritualistic framework, incorporating narratives of historical and socio-political relevance, such as the Indian independence movement, World War, farmer strikes, and local histories. This fusion creates a hybrid space where mythology and modernity coexist, transforming Poorakkali into a site of cultural memory and resistance.

Objective: This study aims to examine the hybrid nature of Poorakkali by analyzing its interplay between mythological narratives and contemporary realities. It seeks to explore how the performance negotiates between cultural preservation and socio-political commentary, contributing to both tradition and transformation.

Methodology: This research adopts a qualitative approach, incorporating ethnographic fieldwork, interviews with performers, and textual analysis of Poorakkali songs and oral narratives. The study also employs theoretical frameworks such as Foucault's concept of heterotopia and Bakhtin's dialogism to analyze the dialogic interaction between the sacred and the secular. An intersectional perspective is used to examine how gender, caste, and regional identities shape the performance and its reception.

Ultimately, this study positions Poorakkali as a living cultural practice that bridges the past and present, offering insights into the interplay of ritual, space, and resistance.

Keywords: Poorakkali, hybridity, mythological narratives, contemporary themes, ritual performance, cultural resistance, heterotopia, dialogism, Mappila Pattu, Kerala folklore, socio-political narratives, subversion, tradition and modernity, hybrid space, cultural adaptation.

Introduction

Poorakkali is a ritual performance mainly practiced in the Kannur and Kasaragod region of Kerala. It is usually performed as part of pooram festival, it is a festival of spring/ fertility. It is being held with all its fervour and spirit from pre-historic times onwards. It is observed irrespective of all castes and creed among Hindu communities. But at the same time the practices of Pooram fest differ from one community to another. Pooram related celebrations are being held in the month of the Malayalam Calendar from Kumbham/Mīnam (March/April) till the culmination of Pooram festivities. But Poorakkali is not performed by all castes. As per the myth it is being performed by women, but currently as a ritual practice we see it as being performed by men from the OBC community such as Thiyya, Maniyani (Yadav), Chaliyan, Aasari, Moosari, Thattan, and Kollan.

As a performance tradition, it embodies both religious devotion and community engagement. The evolution of Poorakkali into a hybrid space where mythology coexists with contemporary socio-political themes presents an important area of study. The objective of this paper is to analyze how Poorakkali functions as a hybrid space that integrates mythological and historical narratives with present-day concerns, thereby preserving cultural memory while enabling socio-political discourse.

Ethnographic Insights and Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology incorporating:

- Fieldwork and Observations: Attending live performances to document variations in storytelling and themes.

- Interviews with Performers: Gathering insights from performers to understand their perspective on the evolution of Poorakkali.
- Textual Analysis of Poorakkali Songs: Examining song lyrics to trace socio-political themes and historical references.

The data collected through these methods provide a comprehensive understanding of how Poorakkali functions as a hybrid space where cultural preservation and contemporary discourse intersect.

Theoretical Framework

The hybrid nature of Poorakkali can be examined using theoretical perspectives such as:

- **Foucault's Concept of Heterotopia:** Poorakkali functions as a heterotopic space where multiple temporalities and realities coexist. The ritual performance blurs the boundaries between past and present, sacred and secular, making it a dynamic site of cultural negotiation.
- **Bakhtin's Dialogism:** Poorakkali as a dialogic practice fosters an exchange between different voices—mythological, historical, and contemporary. This intertextuality allows the performance to remain relevant across generations.
- **Hybridity (Homi K. Bhabha):** Poorakkali as a hybrid cultural medium that assimilates diverse influences, including Mappilapattu, to create a dynamic performance tradition.

Mythological Foundations of Poorakkali

Poorakkali myths are rooted in Hindu mythology. Poorakkali myths prominently feature the tale of 'Kamadahanam' or the burning of Kama. When the world was suffering from the chaos created by Tharakāsura, the leader of the Rakshasas, the Devas sought a solution to restore order. They realized that only Lord Shiva, the ruler of Kailasa, could vanquish Tharakāsura. So they devised a plan to have him fall in love with and marry Parvati, which would lead to the demon's defeat. To accomplish this, Kama was asked to stir Shiva's desires with his divine weapon, Sammohanastra. However, Kama's attempt to enchant Shiva failed, and he was incinerated by Shiva's fiery gaze. With Kama's demise, passion, desire, and procreation waned, weakening the lineage of beings. In order to bring fertility in earth, the Pooram festival was celebrated, where maidens from Earth, Heaven, and the Underworld (pathalam) engaged in severe fasting to resurrect Kama. They offered various flowers while performing rhythmic movements during their prayers. The name Poorakkali is thought to have originated from this sacred practice of maidens pacing rhythmically while observing rigorous fasting. This Kama myth is mainly upheld by Thiyya Community. Whereas among Maniyani community, they have another myth which suggests that Poorakkali is an art form linked to Poora, a divine dancer (devasthri). They regard Pradyumna Charitam as its historical foundation. According to this view, Pradyumna, the son of Lord Krishna and Rukmini, is seen as an incarnation of Kama, and his birth is believed to have restored desire and passion to the universe. Another legend attributes the origins of Poorakkali to the celestial dancer Poora. As the story goes, when Lord Krishna visited Heaven, he was captivated by Poora's enchanting dance performance and invited her to Earth to teach the Gopikas of Vrindavan. Communities that adhere to this version believe that the eighteen maidens who fasted for Pradyumna's rebirth emulated the Gopikas' dance, as taught by Poora. The differing interpretations of Poorakkali's origins reflect the diverse beliefs of various communities.

The initial phase of Poorakkali performances includes devotional songs and ritualistic storytelling, emphasizing its spiritual essence. The art form comprises 18 nirams (steps) and is followed by recitations of Ramayanam, Ganapatipattu, Aandum Pallum, and other traditional songs. The first 18 nirams and

Vankali draw inspiration from the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata, as well as Krishna Leela. Through synchronized movements and chants, performers invoke divine blessings, establishing Poorakkali as a sacred ritualistic art form. For example

Onnam Niram(fisrt part)
Narayena narayena narayaenaya
Namoo thatha thathitha (2)
Vaasudeva narayaenaya narayaenaya
Namoo thatha thathitha (2)
Kannanunni gopalakalan
Kannimare chelavari(2)
Oo thilothai thathitha thaithaithathitha(2)
Chelakal vari mukandanarayalin
Mukalireri irunnu
Aa neela niram kavaru
Nikilesavan athinmuthirnnu

Translation of the Onnam Niram (First Part) of Poorakkali:

Narayena Narayena Narayanaya
Salutations to Narayana, Narayana, Narayana.
Namoo thatha thathitha (2)
I bow with reverence.
Vaasudeva Narayanaya Narayanaya
Salutations to Vaasudeva and Narayana.
Namoo thatha thathitha (2)
I bow with reverence.
Kannanunni, the divine Gopala
The young maidens sing in joy. (2)
Oo thilothai thathitha thaithaithathitha (2)
(Chanting rhythmic syllables in devotion)
The young maidens joyfully praise Mukunda (Krishna),
Standing in reverence before him.
The enchanting blue-hued Lord,
The supreme being, radiates his divine brilliance.
From Vankali, Ramayana
Melleyoru katha nalla ramayanam
Cholluvanennilullorallalakatenam
Ellaninthane pukalvona maigaran
Ekathan padm vandichu chollunen
Vellapalugu meyi vellum saraswathi
Vedaswaroopini vazkante navinmel

However, Poorakkali is not limited to its devotional essence. The performance structure allows for an organic progression from the mythological to the contemporary. The flexibility in storytelling and oral traditions permits the inclusion of new narratives, transforming the ritual into a dynamic cultural medium.

Contemporary Realities in Poorakkali Despite its mythological origins, Poorakkali has evolved to incorporate themes that reflect contemporary socio-political realities. Several Poorakkali songs celebrate

the freedom struggle, paying homage to local and national leaders. The anti-colonial sentiment is interwoven with traditional narratives, making the performance a site of resistance and national identity. In angaham, chayal, pada versions of Poorakkali, the songs are made out of themes from history like that of world war, the Partition of India, the Indian Independence struggle, farmer strikes, etc.

A tune concerning the concept of national sovereignty is outlined below.

Ambika nandana bodaran thuna
Ambujakshi vaniyam barasenayil
Ammudiyil thirayennapole nithyam
Chemme vasichuda nammarasenayil
Ammavane konnora bugakshachithe
Nannayi thunakenam menamayodeyenum
Deshiya nashadoshamakatuvan
Aashuvanagunenpatha pangeruhe
Pathoru nalpathuvalsaram mumpilayi
Uthamanayoru budhiman gandhiji
Ethipidichathu british koyimayil
Nennettu vageetindia paatam padikumbol
Jinnasahabam muhammadyammanan
Naadu nashipikan jaathi vazhakakki
Eto hariyilorohari indiye
Vittutharanamenothiyathu moolam
Dakshina pakisthaniloru bagavum
Vittu koduthithu budhiman gandhiji
Ottu kalam vanu jinna sahebathil
Kashmayi jinna mruthiyadanja kalam
Pattalarkkali bharanam pakisthanil

Farmer Strikes and Local Movements can also be seen. The struggles of farmers, workers, and marginalized communities are reflected in Poorakkali, illustrating the adaptability of the performance in addressing contemporary issues.

In thuruthi kazhakam, their vadakan pooramala contain songs which depict farmer strike (karshakasamaram)

Keralamennude naadu kelvipukaznnullanaadu
Janakodi karshakar romancham kolluna kanakam vilayunna bhoomi
Kochukudillil kaziyum pattinipavagalenum
Thoratha veyilum mazhayum sahichavar theeratha velakal cheyithu
Poratha koolichothichal theerathakashtathayayi
Manimeda keru sughiku muthalalar marddichothukkuna kazcha
Kanamithelayidathum veerode munnotupokam
Nalithu vaikathe nalayee paridam thozhilalivargathinakum

Translated version is given below:

Kerala, my land, a land renowned in tales,
Where millions of farmers rejoice in the golden harvest.

In tiny huts, the starving poor struggle to survive,
Enduring the scorching sun and relentless rain.
They toiled endlessly, never ceasing their labor,
Yet when they demanded their rightful wages, they faced only hardship.
While the wealthy relished comfort in their grand mansions,
They crushed the workers under their feet.
But let this not deter us—let us march forward with courage,
Without delay, for tomorrow belongs to the working class.

In certain instances of chinthu song, we may observe a greater occurrence of worldly melodies about the topography of Kerala.

Kerlamante naadu
Keradrugalthan naadu
Kayalum kunnun puzhakalum onich
Charutha charthunna naadu
Konnakal pookunna naadu
Poovalikoovuna naadu
Poomarakootagal poomazhapeyikum
Ere manohara naadu

Translated version is given below:

Kerala is my land,
A land as pure as crystal.
A land where lakes, hills, and rivers
Come together in harmony.
A land where golden showers bloom,
Where birds sing their sweet melodies.
A land where flower-laden trees
Shower petals like gentle rain—
A truly beautiful land

Some Poorakkali songs describe the traditional methods of rice cultivation, including the preparation of the fields, the planting of the seeds, and the harvesting of the crop. These songs not only provide a detailed account of the agricultural process but also reflect the community's respect for the land and its resources.

In Pallu pattu of Poorakkali
Ellammeganorukeedam bhramichidenda
Nillathe nam krishipani thudageedenam
Nalla vakkiganekettu kuzhagi shambu
Pallanmarkku thalavanayi chamanju kondan
Kalyarakum bhoothavrindamathu nerathu
Ullasamarnathuneram paramapallan
Pallanmare vilichevamarulicheyithan

Translated version is below:

Do not wander aimlessly in confusion,
Instead, let us begin our agricultural work without delay.
Listening to wise words, Lord Shambu (Shiva) himself,

Once took the form of the leader of the Pallan community.

The Bhootha spirits also gathered at that moment,

Rejoicing in that grand occasion.

Calling upon the Pallan people, he bestowed his grace upon them

The various varieties of rice seeds are mentioned in one of the Aandum Pallum songs of Poorakkali.

Manivithu vari nelvithu

Puchavithazhakan vithu

Kiripalakanum ponnariyanum

Panchamoorkan mundamurikan nalla

Jeerakasala vithu

Pallakan soorya vithu

Ippadi vithellame

Alannathu veereyayi

Aya vithukalokkave vagi

Mayamatta vilayum kurithu

Ponnupallanmar pallimarodum

Chennudan paramapallan kayyil

Onnozhiyathe vithellam nalki

Pinne kalakal kondupponedan

Chernnu pallanmar pattanam pookar

The Poorakkali song in Andol Kunnamachal demonstrates the incorporation of Mappilapatu influences.

For example,

Aadiyiladi mutti

Ishalode mazhapeyithu

Aa mazhak mulachoru perunthamara

Aa thamara mulachagu

onnurandu cheppavumbol

Kottapurathe kunjammadum

oontaliya moosankuteem

Randalum koodiyagu

Randu vatti thamara nulli aaa..

Poorakkali, as a heterotopic space in Foucault's terms, embodies the coexistence of multiple temporalities and realities, making it a hybrid cultural medium. As Foucault states, heterotopias are "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (Foucault 24). While rooted in devotional and mythological traditions, the performance does not remain static; instead, it fluidly transitions from sacred narratives to contemporary concerns. This dynamic transformation allows Poorakkali to act as a living archive, preserving not just mythic tales but also reflecting ongoing socio-political discourses. The inclusion of historical events like the Indian Independence struggle, World Wars, and the Partition of India within the angaham, chayal, and pada versions of Poorakkali demonstrates how the ritual expands beyond its religious essence. As Foucault suggests, heterotopias are "linked to slices in time" that reflect both preservation and transformation (Foucault 26). By interweaving traditional devotion with themes of resistance and identity, Poorakkali becomes a space where the past and present are constantly negotiated.

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism further substantiates this hybridity, as Poorakkali thrives on the interplay of multiple voices—mythological, historical, and contemporary. Bakhtin asserts that "the life of the word is contained in its transfer from one mouth to another, from one context to another" (Bakhtin 293). The oral tradition of Poorakkali permits a continuous exchange between performers and audiences, allowing the performance to incorporate new themes while maintaining its foundational structure. This is evident in chinthu songs, where worldly melodies and references to Kerala's topography, agriculture, and regional identity are woven into the performance. The mention of various rice seeds in Aandum Pallum songs illustrates how Poorakkali captures the lived realities of its community, merging folklore with agrarian knowledge. Additionally, the integration of Mappilapattu songs within Poorakkali underscores its intercultural adaptability, highlighting the interactions between Hindu and Muslim folk traditions in North Malabar. Bakhtin notes that "every cultural act lives on the border of different times and places" (Bakhtin 345), a notion that resonates with Poorakkali's dynamic incorporation of multiple traditions. By incorporating Islamic, Persian, and Arabic influences through Mappilapattu, Poorakkali enriches its narrative framework, demonstrating a pluralistic approach to storytelling.

Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity further reinforces Poorakkali's identity as a culturally fluid performance tradition. Hybridity, in Bhabha's sense, is the creation of new cultural forms through the interaction of diverse influences, leading to a third space where original meanings are challenged and transformed. As Bhabha states, "Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities" (Bhabha 112). Poorakkali, by assimilating elements from multiple traditions—including Mappilapattu, historical narratives, and contemporary social themes—functions as this third space. The performance not only preserves indigenous traditions but also actively reshapes them by integrating marginalized voices, anti-colonial sentiments, and cross-cultural elements. The inclusion of farmer struggles, worker movements, and regional histories within Poorakkali songs exemplifies how it operates as an evolving discourse, negotiating between tradition and modernity. As Bhabha posits, "It is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated" (Bhabha 217). Thus, Poorakkali's hybrid nature allows it to bridge historical legacies with contemporary concerns, ensuring its relevance as both a ritualistic and socio-political art form.

Conclusion

Poorakkali exemplifies the confluence of tradition and modernity, functioning as a hybrid space where mythological narratives and contemporary realities coexist. This dynamic interplay reinforces Poorakkali's role as a site of cultural memory, resistance, and transformation. By analyzing the performance through theoretical frameworks and ethnographic data, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how ritual art forms adapt and evolve to remain relevant in changing socio-political contexts.

Ultimately, Poorakkali is not just a ritual performance; it is a living cultural practice that embodies the voices of its time, preserving the past while engaging with the present. This hybridity makes Poorakkali a powerful medium of expression, resistance, and cultural continuity in Northern Kerala.

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