

Eco-Ritualistic Cosmologies and Subaltern Performance: Deconstructing the Tradition of Kaliya and Kalichi in Northern Malabar

Dr. Haripriya M, Assistant Professor, Department of History, N.S.S. College Manjeri,
Malappuram, Kerala, 676122

Abstract

This paper investigates the eco-ritualistic and performance traditions of Kaliya and Kalichi (alternatively known as KaliyanumKalichiyum or KaliyanuKodukkal) practiced within the socio-cultural landscape of Northern Malabar, Kerala. Occurring on the eve of the monsoon month of Karkidakam (Karkidaka Sankramam), this tradition manifests in two distinct yet interrelated modalities: a localized, domestic agrarian ritual involving the symbolic pacification of meteorological anxieties, and a highly stylized, public subaltern performance within the Theyyam and Thirayattam idioms. Utilizing a framework that bridges ecological anthropology, subaltern studies, and performance theory, this study maps how agrarian communities historically negotiated natural precarity, systemic material scarcity (Panja Masam), and caste stratified labor structures. By examining the material culture of the ritual—such as the fabrication of zoomorphic and labor-centric ephemera from jackfruit and banana flora—and the textual performativity of the Kaliya Kooval (ritual invocation), we argue that the tradition serves as a repository of indigenous ecological knowledge and an artistic venue for subaltern self-assertion.

Keywords: Kaliya and Kalichi, Northern Malabar, Karkidakam, Eco-Ritualism, Subaltern Performance, Theyyam, Agrarian Folklore, Cultural Anthropology.

1. Introduction: The Cartography of Monsoon Rituals

The southwestern coast of India, particularly the region of Northern Malabar encompassing the contemporary administrative districts of Kozhikode, Kannur, and Kasaragod, possesses a distinctive cultural matrix fundamentally calibrated by the rhythms of the Southwest Monsoon. Within the classical anthologies of Sangam literature, this geographical expanse shares a structural and ecological lineage with the Marutham (agrarian) and Kurinji (mountainous) landscapes, wherein human ontology is inextricably bound to environmental equilibrium. Historically, the transition of the sun into the zodiac of Cancer, marking the commencement of the Malayalam month of Karkidakam (mid-July to mid-August), signified

a period of acute socio-environmental vulnerability. Termed colloquially as the Panja Masam—the month of scarcity, relentless precipitation, architectural decay, and endemic epidemiological outbreaks—Karkidakam necessitated both material adaptation and cosmological intervention.

It is within this liminal chronological window, precisely during KarkidakaSankramam (the transitional eve), that the tradition of Kaliya and Kalichi emerges as a vital cultural institution. Operating concurrently as an intimate, domestic agrarian rite (KaliyanuKodukkal or 'Offering to Kaliyan') and as a theatrical, subaltern performance art within sacred groves (Kalan-Kalichi Thira), this tradition embodies the complex mechanisms through which the communities of Malabar negotiated existential precarity. While mainstream historical narratives often sideline these localized vernacular practices, structural analysis reveals them to be critical sites for the preservation of ecological memory, subaltern agency, and performance-based resistance against systemic caste hierarchies.

This paper seeks to provide a comprehensive academic deconstruction of the Kaliya-Kalichi tradition. By deploying concepts from ecological anthropology, performative studies, and subaltern historiography, we examine how the material artifacts, linguistic structures, and bodily movements associated with this tradition collectively constitute a sophisticated indigenous discourse. We argue that Kaliya and Kalichi are not mere relics of a pre-modern "superstition," but are dynamic, highly organized performative strategies that codify human-nature cohabitation and subaltern identity in Northern Malabar.

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

To unpack the multi-layered significance of the Kaliya and Kalichi tradition, this study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical apparatus. First, we draw upon Julian Steward's and Roy Rappaport's formulations of cultural ecology and eco-ritualism. Rappaport's pioneering work demonstrated that ritual practices within indigenous societies often operate as cybernetic feedback loops that regulate environmental resources, mitigate anxieties regarding ecological unpredictability, and maintain psychological resilience during periods of systemic stress. In Northern Malabar, the material scarcity of the monsoon is counterbalanced by an elaborate symbolic economy that translates meteorological anxiety into a relational dialogue with personalized entities—Kaliya and Kalichi.

Second, this paper utilizes Subaltern Studies frameworks, particularly Ranajit Guha's concept of the "subaltern consciousness" and James C. Scott's theory of "hidden transcripts." The public performance iterations of Kaliya and Kalichi within the Theyyam and Thirayattam traditions are enacted primarily by marginalized communities, including the Cherumar, Pulayar, Malayan, and Vannan. Historically confined to bonded agricultural labor under feudal land tenure systems (Janmi-Kudiyam systems), these communities utilized the sacred,

liminal space of the ritual to critique, parody, and temporarily subvert dominant caste structures. The performance thus becomes an artistic archive of subaltern history, preserving narratives of labor, survival, and social friction that are absent from elite historiography.

The methodology employed for this research is qualitative, relying on extensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted across selected villages in Kozhikode and Kannur districts between 2024 and 2026. This includes semi-structured interviews with traditional ritual practitioners (TheyyamKoladhari), community elders, and agrarian laborers. Furthermore, a systematic textual and linguistic analysis of the oral performance texts (Thottam Pattu) and ritual chants (Kaliya Kooval) was undertaken alongside a material-culture analysis of the ephemeral artifacts constructed during the domestic performance of the rite.

3. The Socio-Economic and Ecological Metaphor of Karkidakam

To fully comprehend the structural necessity of the Kaliya-Kalichi ritual, one must examine the material realities of the historical Malabar region during the month of Karkidakam. In an agrarian economy primarily dependent on paddy cultivation, the heavy monsoon downpours of June and July brought field labor to a standstill. The primary harvest (Kanni Koythu) was months away, causing domestic grain reserves to plummet to their lowest annual levels. Consequently, the period was characterized by pervasive nutritional deficiency, food insecurity, and economic stagnation, earning it the moniker KarkidakaPanjam.

Simultaneously, the ecological landscape underwent a violent transformation. Excessive humidity, waterlogging, and vectors of waterborne pathogens precipitated widespread outbreaks of fevers, gastrointestinal disorders, and livestock casualties. The physical structural integrity of the traditional thatched dwellings (Ura-purakal) was constantly threatened by severe gale-force winds. In the collective psychology of the region, these destructive meteorological forces were not viewed merely as abstract physics, but as manifestations of volatile, dislocated cosmic energies that required containment, negotiation, and pacification.

Table 1: Structural Binary of Seasonal Transitions in Traditional Malabar Culture

Ecological/Socio-Economic Axis	The Liminal Phase (Karkidakam)	The Regenerative Phase (Chingam)
Material State	Scarcity (Panjam), Economic Stagnation	Abundance (Onaam), Harvest, Wealth
Meteorological Condition	Destructive Rain, Fierce Winds (Kaliya)	Mild Sunshine, Clear Skies
Epidemiological Profile	High Disease Morbidity, Livestock Mortality	Rejuvenation, Health, Vitality

Ritualistic Orientation	Apotropaisim, Pacification, Expulsion	Inauguration, Celebration, Welcoming
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As illustrated in Table 1, traditional societies constructed a binary cosmological framework to organize their seasonal experiences. Karkidakam represented a chaotic, dangerous, yet highly creative interregnum that preceded the celebratory abundance of the month of Chingam (marked by the harvest festival of Onam). The tradition of Kaliya and Kalichi acts as the pivotal transitional mechanism. It allowed communities to confront the destructive aspect of nature, domesticate its chaotic energy within localized spaces, and symbolically usher in a period of structural renewal and stability.

4. The Domestic Rite: Material Culture and Symbolism of KaliyanuKodukkal

The domestic manifestation of the tradition, known universally as KaliyanuKodukkal (The Giving of Offerings to Kaliyan), is a highly localized, kinship-oriented ritual performed on the final dusk of the month of Mithunam, precisely at the transition to Karkidakam. This ritual is unique because it is largely conceptualized, organized, and executed by the children and younger members of the household. This youth-centric organization suggests an implicit cultural mechanism for the cross-generational transmission of indigenous ecological and agricultural knowledge.

4.1 The Materiality of Crafting the Micro-Agrarian Universe

During the daytime hours of the Sankramam, participants gather raw materials derived entirely from the immediate botanical environment. The primary components include banana stems (Vazhappola), jackfruit leaves (Plavila), arrowroot leaves (Koova), and coconut leaf midribs (Eerkil). Utilizing these organic materials, the children craft elaborate miniature models that represent a microscopic version of their agrarian world:

Zoomorphic Replicas: Miniature representations of cows, bulls, and water buffaloes are constructed by folding and pinning jackfruit leaves with short pieces of coconut midribs. These represent the critical livestock assets of the household.

Agrarian Implements: Tiny plows (Kari), yokes (Nukam), hoes (Kaikottu), leveling boards, and ladders are carved out of banana stems and coconut leaf midribs.

Architectural Models: Small, functional enclosures representing cattle sheds (Ala) and grain stores are assembled out of woven leaves and twigs.

The choice of these specific flora is semiotically significant. The jackfruit tree (*Artocarpus heterophyllus*) and the banana plant (*Musa paradisiaca*) are foundational keystones of the homestead ecology of Malabar, serving as vital nutritional safety nets during times of famine. By fashioning the essential infrastructure of agricultural production out of these precise

materials, the community establishes a profound symbolic equivalence between their ecological resource base, their labor apparatus, and the cosmic entities they seek to address.

4.2 The Ritual Performance: Kaliya Kooval and Space Appropriation

At dusk, as light gives way to twilight, these handmade organic models are placed systematically upon a large, fresh banana leaf. This assemblage is carried to the southwestern quadrant of the residential compound (Parambu)—a direction traditionally associated in Vastu-Shastra and Dravidian folklore with death, ancestral spirits, and primordial chthonic forces. The specific site chosen is typically the base of a mature jackfruit tree, designated for this specific night as the Kaliyan Plavu (Kaliyan's Jackfruit Tree).

A family member lights a three-headed traditional torch, known as the Arippachoottu, made from tightly bound, dry coconut leaves. The torch bearer waves the flame around the base of the tree to cleanse the space. At this moment, the assembled family begins a rhythmic, high-pitched howling and chanting sequence known as the Kaliya Kooval. The oral text, delivered in a vernacular dialect of Malayalam, is structured as a direct imperative address to the spirit:

"Kaliya Kaliya.... Koo... Koo..."

Chakkemmangeimthannechuponne...

Aaleimadiyaareimthannechuponne...

Aala nirachumpashukkaletharane... Koo!"

This performative text functions as a formal contract or diplomatic negotiation with the personified entity of the monsoon. The linguistic structure contains two distinct operational modules: an act of preservation and an act of propitiation. By uttering "Chakkemmangeimthannechuponne" (Leave us our jackfruits and mangoes as you pass), the community establishes a boundary that guards their nutritional survival assets against the destructive winds. The phrase "Aaleimadiyaareimthannechuponne" explicitly references the human inhabitants and the subaltern agricultural laborers (Adiyar), demanding their physical protection from illness and seasonal death. Finally, the petition shifts toward prosperity: "Aala nirachumpashukkaletharane" (Grant us cattle to fill our cowsheds), transforming a moment of existential crisis into an opportunistic request for fertility and economic growth.

Once the invocation concludes, the torch is extinguished in the earth. The miniature tools and livestock models are left at the base of the tree, signifying that symbolic custody of the farm has been given over to Kaliya. The participants return immediately to the safety of the domestic residence. Crucially, a strict taboo dictates that no person may look back toward the

Kaliyan Plavu until the following dawn. This spatial taboo marks a complete psychological separation between the human domestic sphere and the wild, untamed ecological forces outside, ensuring that the dangerous spirit is contained within the external perimeter of the homestead.

5. The Public Sphere: Kalan-Kalichi Thira and Subaltern Performance Aesthetics

While the domestic KaliyanuKodukkal internalizes the negotiation with nature within the domestic unit, the public performance of Kalan-Kalichi Thira (or Kaliya-KalichiTheyyam) externalizes this dynamic within the institutionalized space of the Kavu (sacred grove). Here, Kaliya and Kalichi transform from formless meteorological anxieties into highly vivid, corporeal characters within the rich pantheon of Malabar's ritual theater. This transition from a private domestic rite to a public performance art shifts the focus from purely ecological anxieties to structural questions of social hierarchy, caste labor relations, and subaltern historicization.

5.1 Iconography, Costuming, and Somatic Performativity

In the performance traditions of Kozhikode and Kannur, Kaliya and Kalichi are portrayed as a rustic, working-class couple belonging to a subaltern agricultural community. Unlike the grand, regal deities of Theyyam (such as PottanTheyyam or Kathivanur Veeran) who wear large, towering headdresses (Mudi) and intricate facial paint, the visual grammar of Kaliya and Kalichi emphasizes a deliberate minimalism and earthy realism.

The performer enacting Kaliya applies a dark black or deep charcoal base paint across the visage and torso, accented with stylized lines executed in white rice paste (Chayilyam and Manayola). This somatic dark color pallet directly references the black rain-bearing clouds of the monsoon, linking the actor's body back to the natural element. The costume utilizes natural components: skirts fashioned from woven tender coconut leaves (Kuruthola), unrefined waistcloths, and ornaments made from simple dried seeds and wood. Kalichi, the female counterpart—traditionally performed by a male actor embodying the female gender through specialized costuming—wears a rustic bodice and holds a winnowing basket (Muram) or a traditional harvesting sickle, the defining tools of subaltern female labor.

The somatic performativity of the characters stands in sharp contrast to the highly controlled, geometric movements of mainstream classical performance arts like Kathakali. The dance movements of Kaliya and Kalichi are characterized by heavy, low-centered footwork, mimics of manual agricultural labor (such as digging, sowing, and harvesting), and unpredictable, ecstatic leaps that mirror the wild gusting of monsoon winds. The musical accompaniment, driven by the frantic, polyrhythmic syncopations of the Chenda and Elathalam, creates an

immersive acoustic environment that heightens the sense of a world undergoing a seasonal, chaotic upheaval.

5.2 Theatrical Dialogues: Subverting Feudal Hegemonies

The defining feature of the public performance is the extended, semi-improvised dialogue (Urayatuka) that takes place between Kaliya, Kalichi, and the spectators, who are historically composed of both upper-caste landlords (Janmis) and subaltern caste groups. The narrative content of these dramatic exchanges is frequently humorous, deeply satirical, and intentionally irreverent. Kaliya and Kalichi act out scenes of everyday domestic life, marital squabbles, economic struggles, and confrontations with arbitrary authority figures.

Through these sharp comic interludes, the performance enacts what James C. Scott defines as a "hidden transcript" brought to the public stage. The subaltern performer, temporarily elevated by the mantle of ritual possession, can openly critique the greed, moral corruption, and cruelty of the landlord class without fear of retributive violence. For instance, a common performance motif involves Kaliya demanding his historical wages in grain from the temple trustees, comically counting out imaginary debts, and exposing the unfair measuring practices used by upper-caste overseers. The performance space thus becomes an inverted social arena where the marginalized laboring body claims absolute moral authority over the wealthy, feudal elites.

6. Ecological Anthropology: Ritual as a Resource Management Matrix

When evaluated through the lens of modern ecological anthropology, the dual traditions of Kaliya and Kalichi function as a highly adaptive cultural resource management matrix. Rather than attempting a futile mechanical battle against the overwhelming physical power of the Southwest Monsoon, the pre-modern communities of Northern Malabar developed a sophisticated ritual psychology based on the principles of relational co-management and homeostatic balance.

The mathematical representation of such a system can be understood by evaluating the relationship between ecological stress (S), community resource reserves (R), and performative ritual expenditure (E). In a closed agrarian economy, as ecological stress increases due to severe monsoon conditions, the community's psychological resilience decreases unless balanced by a compensatory cultural mechanism. The performance of the ritual (E) effectively increases the psychological stability index, neutralizing the negative impacts of ecological stress (S) by providing a structured framework for emotional expression, communal solidarity, and future planning.

Furthermore, the tradition enforces an ecological ethic of conservation. The identification of specific trees as sacred hubs (Kaliyan Plavu) and the collective spatial setting of the Kavu

ensure the preservation of localized biodiversity pockets. The sacred groves where these rituals occur serve as critical ecological sanctuaries, preserving endemic flora, microfauna, and natural water reservoirs that are vital for the surrounding agricultural ecosystem during the subsequent dry seasons.

7. Comparative Analysis: Domestic Rite vs. Public Performance Art

To appreciate the multifaceted nature of the Kaliya-Kalichi tradition, it is valuable to systematically contrast its two primary manifestations. While both emerge from the same foundational ecology of Karkidakam, they operate within different structural parameters, utilize distinct spatial dimensions, and achieve complementary cultural objectives.

Table 2: Comparative Analysis of Domestic and Public Manifestations

Analytical Dimension	Domestic Rite (KaliyanuKodukkal)	Public Performance (Kalan-Kalichi Thira)
Primary Spatial Domain	The Private Homestead (Southwestern Parambu)	The Sacred Grove (Kavu) or Temple Grounds
Primary Actors	Children and Kinship Members	Professional Caste Performers (Koladharis)
Material Medium	Ephemeral Flora (Banana Stems, Jackfruit Leaves)	Somatic Paint, Costuming, Musical Instruments
Socio-Cultural Focus	Ecological Anxiety, Preservation of Domestic Assets	Subaltern Self-Assertion, Structural Critique of Caste
Linguistic Style	Chanted Invocation (Kaliya Kooval)	Improvised Theatrical Dialogue (Urayatuka)

As demonstrated in Table 2, the tradition functions as a comprehensive cultural system that covers both the private and public lives of the community. The domestic rite stabilizes the interior home, using family participation to teach young children the community's agricultural values. Meanwhile, the public performance handles relationships between different social classes, using the open space of the sacred grove to challenge social inequality and reinforce a shared community identity.

8. The Contemporary Crisis: Ontological Fractures and Decolonial Reclaiming

In the contemporary era, the rapid forces of globalization, urbanization, and the capitalist transformation of Kerala's agrarian economy have induced significant fractures in the traditional lifeworlds of Northern Malabar. The widespread conversion of agricultural paddy fields into residential real estate and commercial projects has drastically eroded the material

base of the ritual. The historic homestead compounds (Parambu) are shrinking, leading to the rapid disappearance of the Kaliyan Plavu and a steady decline in the domestic practice of KaliyanuKodukkal.

Furthermore, the modern institutionalization and commercialization of Theyyam for global cultural tourism have led to what structural critics describe as a process of "sanitization." In this process, the raw, subversive, and political dialogues of subaltern characters like Kaliya and Kalichi are frequently muted or edited out to cater to upper-class audiences and tourist tastes. The radical subaltern critique of caste exploitation is often replaced by a sanitized, purely aesthetic appreciation of the art form, stripping the performance of its historical sting.

However, recent interventions by subaltern cultural collectives, local folklore research bodies, and activist networks in Malabar are working to challenge this loss of meaning. There is a growing effort to reclaim these traditions as vital tools for environmental and social critique. Activists are pointing out that the ecological message of the Kaliya-Kalichi tradition—which emphasizes living in balance with seasonal changes and protecting natural resources—is highly relevant today as we face modern climate instability, erratic monsoons, and environmental degradation. Reclaiming the tradition is not about clinging to an idealized past; it is an active effort to revive indigenous ecological wisdom and preserve a history of subaltern resilience.

9. Conclusion: Re-Centering Vernacular Epistemologies

The tradition of Kaliya and Kalichi in Northern Malabar stands as a brilliant testament to the intellectual sophistication, artistic creativity, and political resilience of the region's historical agrarian communities. By bridging the intimate, domestic spaces of the home with the open, theatrical arenas of the sacred groves, the tradition creates a comprehensive cultural framework for handling environmental precarity and navigating social inequality.

Through its unique material culture, symbolic language, and powerful bodily movements, it challenges the eurocentric view that separates human culture from the natural world. Instead, it offers an integrated perspective where human labor, seasonal weather, and community art are part of a single, continuous ecosystem. As modern society grapples with deep environmental crises and ongoing social divisions, the values embedded in the tradition of Kaliya and Kalichi offer vital insights into how we can build a more sustainable, balanced, and socially just world.

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