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The Mother Goddess Cult In Kerala: Its Historical Trajectory, Ritualistic Expressions, And Socio-Cultural Resonance

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Abstract: These sources collectively explore the historical and sociological dimensions of Devi (Goddess) worship in Kerala, South India, with a particular focus on Bhadrakali and Kali. They discuss the evolution of these cults from ancient, possibly non-Aryan, traditions, including the influence of matriarchal societies and folk practices like animal sacrifices. The texts highlight various ritualistic art forms such as Mudi yettu, Theyyam, and Padayani, which often depict the myth of Bhadrakali slaying the demon Darika and feature male performers embodying female deities. Furthermore, the sources examine how these democratic, emotional forms of worship have interacted with and been assimilated into Brahminical and Tantric traditions, while still retaining their non-Brahmin features and community participation.

Key words: Cult, Mother Goddess, Shaktism, traditions, rituals, matriarchy

Introduction

The Mother Goddess cult in Kerala represents a deeply entrenched and dynamic religious tradition, tracing its origins to ancient pre-Vedic and Proto-Dravidian societies. It is characterized by a rich pantheon of female deities, most notably various forms of Devi, Kali, and Bhagavathi, who embody a complex interplay of benign, maternal, and fierce, martial attributes. The cult is underpinned by Shaktism, a philosophical framework that views the Divine Feminine (Shakti) as the supreme, dynamic reality. Its worship is expressed through diverse and vibrant ritualistic art forms like Theyyam, Mudi yettu, and Padayani, which often blend Aryan and Dravidian cultural elements and serve significant socio-cultural functions, including challenging caste hierarchies and fostering community identity. Sacred groves, or Kavus, are integral to this tradition, acting as vital ecological and spiritual centers. While facing contemporary pressures from urbanization and templisation, the Mother Goddess cult in Kerala continues to adapt, influencing modern arts, popular culture, and societal discourse, thereby maintaining its profound relevance in the state's cultural and spiritual landscape.

The Mother Goddess cult in Kerala is not merely a religious practice but a fundamental aspect of the region's socio-cultural fabric, deeply interwoven with its history, arts, and daily life. It reflects a unique synthesis of ancient indigenous traditions and later influences, distinguishing it from pan-Indian Hindu practices. This report aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the Mother Goddess cult in Kerala, delving into its historical evolution, the attributes of its principal deities, its philosophical underpinnings rooted in Shaktism and Tantra, its rich array of rituals and festivals, the significance of its sacred spaces, its profound socio-cultural impact, and its ongoing transformations in the modern era. Understanding this cult offers valuable insights into the dynamics of religious adaptation, the interplay of gender and power in spiritual contexts, and the resilience of traditional practices in the face of modernization.

Ancient Roots and Proto-Dravidian Influence

The worship of female deities in India traces its origins to pristine times, with archaeological evidence pointing to its prevalence in Paleolithic settlements dating back approximately 20,000 to 23,000 BCE. Further substantiation comes from the Harappan civilization, where abundant female figurines clearly indicate the existence of Mother Goddess cults, symbolizing fertility and creation. This ancient tradition, often associated with Proto-Dravidian cultures, is considered a significant legacy for the cultural and religious landscape of South India. The consistent presence of these early forms of worship, deeply embedded in the subcontinent's earliest societies, suggests a profound historical continuity for the Mother Goddess cult. This deep historical lineage provides immense legitimacy and resilience to the cult, allowing it to persist and thrive in contemporary Kerala, rather than being merely an offshoot of later Hindu developments. It is a tradition that predates and subsequently interacted with the Vedic traditions, shaping its unique character.

Aryan and Non-Aryan Synthesis

The Vedic period was primarily patriarchal, featuring only minor female deities in its pantheon. In stark contrast, South and East India maintained a robust representation of female deities. This highlights a fundamental divergence in religious emphasis between the northern Aryan traditions and the indigenous southern practices. Over time, various religious sects, including Bhagavatas and Shaktas, played a crucial role in bridging and reducing the distinctions between Aryan and non-Aryan traditions, leading to a significant cultural synthesis. This process of cultural assimilation demonstrates that the Mother Goddess cult in Kerala, while possessing ancient roots, was not static. Instead, it actively absorbed and integrated elements from incoming traditions, allowing it to adapt, persist, and flourish as a complex and dynamic blend rather than being entirely supplanted or remaining in an isolated form. This adaptability is key to its enduring presence.

Evolution in Kerala

Devi worship in Kerala has undergone a multifaceted evolution, shaped by several distinct historical and cultural streams. One significant stream emerged from the reverence for primitive war goddesses, such as Kottavai. Kottavai, as the presiding deity of eco-zones that necessitated warfare, embodied a martial nature, and her propitiation often involved sacrifices. The depiction of Devi with arms in iconography directly reflects this martial aspect. This illustrates a functional adaptation of deities to the practical needs of ancient societies, particularly those engaged in warfare or living through the advent of the metal age, where protective and

powerful divine figures were essential. This adaptation ensured the goddess's continued relevance beyond mere fertility symbolism.

Another influential stream was the primitive practice of ancestor worship, evident in the raising of megalithic tombs during the Sangam age (first five centuries CE), which served as an inspiration for later Devi worship. The worship of deities like Kali, alongside nature worship, was prevalent in ancient Kerala society. A notable characteristic of the Devi cult in Kerala is the enduring visibility of its non-Brahminical elements of worship, which persist into the contemporary period. Furthermore, the evolution of structural temples and the emergence of Tantra significantly contributed to the sophisticated development of ritualism within the Mother Goddess cult in Kerala.

Devi and Shakti: The Supreme Feminine

At the core of the Mother Goddess cult is the overarching concept of Devi or Śakti. Śakti, a Sanskrit term, translates to 'power, ability, strength, might, effort, and energy'. Devotees who venerate the Goddess as their supreme deity are known as Śāktas. Devi is revered as the embodiment of creation, fertility, and the cosmic force that preserves the world. Theologically, she is conceived as the supreme, ultimate, and eternal reality of all existence, equivalent to the Brahman concept in Hinduism. She is considered simultaneously the source of all creation, its embodiment, and the animating energy that governs it. This theological framework rejects conventional masculine-feminine dualism, perceiving nature itself as divine and Devi as the cosmos, embodying energy, matter, and soul. The philosophical premise found in many Shakta texts represents a syncretism of the Samkhya and Advaita Vedanta schools of Hindu philosophy, a non-dualistic path known as Shaktadavaitavada.

Kali and Bhadrakali: Ambivalent Power

Kali, whose name is the feminine form of kāla (meaning 'time', 'death', or 'black'), is often referred to as the 'Mistress of Time or Death'. She is depicted with a striking blend of contrasting characteristics, embodying both benign materiality and fierce martial aggression. Her iconography is frequently gruesome, featuring shriveled flesh, a gaping mouth, a lolling tongue, and garlands of severed human heads, yet she paradoxically maintains a serene smile amidst the chaos.

In Kerala, Bhadrakali, an auspicious form of Kali, holds particular significance. She is closely associated with fevers and diseases such as smallpox and chickenpox. Intriguingly, she is often depicted as "lovely" and "beautiful" even when "covered with smallpox". The foundational myth in Kerala narrates her birth from Shiva's wrath to combat and slay the demon Darika, a story central to many ritualistic performances.

Despite her canonical portrayal as bloodthirsty, popular worship in Central Kerala largely reinterprets her violence as "protective potency". Her anger is not seen as capricious but as justified, inherent, and controlled, directed solely at evil to restore cosmic order and protect devotees. For instance, while the lolling tongue is often associated with power in broader Tantric contexts, in Kerala, it is locally interpreted as a sign of shame, stemming from an incident where she accidentally touched Shiva with her foot in her fury. This reinterpretation of the goddess's attributes, transforming potential fear into reverence and trust, demonstrates a cultural mechanism to humanize and make a fearsome deity relatable and approachable for her devotees.

This highlights how communities actively shape divine attributes to align with their values and needs. While violent incarnations are theoretically believed to crave blood, many informants in Kerala strongly reject the idea of Bhadrakali herself consuming blood, asserting that guruti (a blood-mimicking liquid) is offered to her accompanying spirits rather than to the goddess directly.

Philosophical Foundations: Shaktism and Tantric Traditions

Shaktism in Kerala: The Dynamic Brahman

Shaktism stands as a major Hindu denomination in which the metaphysical reality or deity is metaphorically understood as a woman. Within this framework, the divine feminine energy, Shakti, is revered as the supreme power, often symbolized as Mahadevi, the Great Goddess. Shaktas conceive the goddess as the ultimate, eternal reality of all existence, directly equating her with the Brahman concept of Hinduism. She is considered the source, embodiment, and animating energy of all creation, into which everything will ultimately dissolve. This theological perspective fundamentally rejects traditional masculine-feminine dualism, viewing nature itself as divine and Devi as the cosmos, embodying energy, matter, and soul, and serving as the motivating force behind all action and existence.

The philosophical premise underlying many Shakta texts is a sophisticated syncretism of the Samkhya and Advaita Vedanta schools of Hindu philosophy, a non-dualistic approach known as Shaktadavaitavada. This non-dualistic understanding, where Shakti is described as "dynamic Brahman" and Devi is the "cosmos itself," represents a profound philosophical depth within the Mother Goddess cult. It offers a holistic view of divinity that is intimately integrated with the material world and human experience. This framework elevates the Mother Goddess cult beyond mere idol worship, providing a profound philosophical basis for understanding the divine as immanent and accessible within lived reality, which is further explored through embodied theological approaches that connect divinity to human experience.

Tantric Underpinnings

Tantric traditions are deeply interwoven with Mother Goddess worship in Kerala, contributing significantly to its ritualistic and philosophical landscape. Kerala's Tantric tradition is not a singular, pure form but rather a complex mixture of various traditions, including Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, Śākta, Vaidika, Paurāṇika, Gāṇapatya, and Saura elements. The influences of these diverse traditions are discernible in Tantra manuals and the rituals themselves.

Tantric worship often involves specific ritualistic practices such as mudras (hand gestures), mantras (sacred chants), and mandalas (symbolic diagrams). A notable example is the Panchopachara Puja, which involves five sacraments: meat, maithuna (sex-union), fish, liquor, and mudra (hand gesture). These practices are performed with utmost secrecy, with the stated aim of achieving transcendence and spiritual ecstasy rather than mere egoistic satisfaction. This emphasis on secrecy and the potentially transgressive nature of certain sacraments highlights the esoteric dimension of Tantric practices. However, the explanation that these acts are for "transcendence" and "spiritual ecstasy" reveals a deeper, non-literal interpretation. This demonstrates a complex relationship between public perception, ritual performance, and philosophical intent, where practices that might appear "perverse" from an "outer view" signify "creation" from an "inner point of view".

This tension between exoteric and esoteric understanding is crucial for comprehending Tantra's role in the Mother Goddess cult.

The mythological and narrative background of Bhadrakali worship in Central Kerala, particularly the Darikavadham myth, depicts her as an incarnation of raw anger and violence. Yet, this portrayal is often nuanced; her violence is "tinted with profoundly humane traits of justice, compassion, respect, filial and motherly love". Her anger is not viewed as a negative or capricious trait but as a "protective potency" and an "active ingredient" of her śakti (power), serving to restore cosmic order and protect devotees. While violent incarnations are theoretically believed to crave blood, many local informants reject the idea of Bhadrakali herself consuming blood, asserting that guruti (a blood-mimicking liquid) is offered to her accompanying evil spirits rather than to the goddess directly. This reinterpretation allows for the integration of fierce divine power with a benevolent maternal aspect.

Rituals, Festivals, and Forms of Worship

Traditional rituals and folk performances are deeply woven around the Devi cult in Kerala, reflecting its significant sociological importance and strong matriarchal leanings. A notable characteristic is the prominent non-Brahmin element of worship, which has persisted into the contemporary period. These performances often represent a synthesis of Aryan and Dravidian cultures, providing not only entertainment but also fostering community cooperation and identity.

Major Ritualistic Art Forms

Kerala is renowned for a diverse array of ritualistic art forms that embody the Mother Goddess cult:

Theyyam is a popular socio-religious ritual primarily observed in North Malabar. In this practice, performers, often from lower caste communities, assume the role of a god, and their performance is believed to bring wealth and prosperity to society. Most female Theyyams are manifestations of Bhagavathi or Kali. Theyyam serves as a powerful medium of resistance against the rigid caste system, capable of inverting social hierarchies. For instance, during a Theyyam performance, an untouchable performer is permitted to enter a Brahmin's home, an act that would otherwise be considered criminal. This demonstrates how ritual can be a tool for social subversion and empowerment, providing a sanctioned space for marginalized communities to assert agency and challenge hegemonic structures. Theyyam transforms past tales into present history, addressing the contemporary concerns of worshippers and symbolically representing the elevation of common people and their social standing.

Mudiyettu is a traditional ritual theatre and folk dance drama that enacts the mythological battle between the goddess Kali and the demon Darika. Performed in 'Bhagvati Kavus' (temples of the Mother Goddess) typically after the harvesting season, Mudiyettu is a communal undertaking where each caste plays a specific role, fostering a strong sense of common identity and mutual bonding within the community. Its cultural significance was recognized by UNESCO, which inscribed Mudiyettu as an 'Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity' in 2010.

Padayani is a spectacular ritualistic art form unique to central Kerala, which deals with the Kali myth, often commencing from the point of Darika's destruction. It is a rich blend of music, dance, theatre, satire, facial masks (kolam), and paintings, staged in Devi temples annually from mid-December to mid-May. Padayani is regarded as a remnant of ancient Dravidian forms of worship that predated the advent of Aryan culture. It is deeply connected to agricultural life, serving as a means to express gratitude to Mother Goddess Kali, the goddess of fertility, for bountiful harvests and protection from diseases. The performance is believed to have a spirituo-therapeutic effect, symbolizing the transformation of negative emotions into joy and evil into virtue.

Kaliyoot is a dramatic presentation of the genesis of Kali and Darika, their confrontation, and Darika's extermination, performed in southern Kerala during the Malayalam month of Kumbham (March). This ritualistic art form is a synthesis of older agrarian traditions, typically performed after the second harvest season. In the Kali drama, the goddess Kali appears as a Pulaya girl, representing a traditional agricultural laboring community, underscoring the cult's connection to the agrarian populace.

Bhadrakali Tiyyattu is a ritualistic dance primarily performed in Kavus and Devi shrines in south-central Kerala. This performance depicts the war between Bhadrakali and Darika, often featuring Kalamezhuthu (the drawing of a large picture of Kali using natural colored powders during the day) and accompanied by songs in praise of Bhadrakali.

Aryan and Dravidian Blend in Practices

The ritualistic arts of Kerala, including Theyyam, Mudiattu, and Padayani, exemplify a profound aesthetic blending of the Kali cult and local Bhagavathy/Devi myths with both Aryan and Dravidian cultural elements. This synthesis is not limited to folk traditions; even classical dance-dramas like Kathakali trace their origins to these early ritual folk dances and dance dramas associated with the cult of Bhagavathy. This integration highlights the dynamic and inclusive nature of religious and cultural development in Kerala.

Contemporary Relevance and Transformations

The Mother Goddess cult in Kerala, while deeply rooted in tradition, is not static; it continually adapts and transforms in response to modern socio-economic and cultural shifts.

Modern Adaptations and Challenges

Modernization has introduced significant challenges and prompted adaptations within the cult. **Urbanization and land reforms** have led to the fragmentation of the traditional joint family system (tharavad), which historically served as a locus for Theyyam roles and the transmission of collective knowledge. This disintegration of the tharavad has resulted in a "shattering" of collective Theyyam knowledge, with the prominence of ancestral goddesses fading from the daily life of nuclear family-oriented North Malabaris.

A notable transformation is the process of **templisation and Sanskritization**. Some sacred groves (Kavus) have been converted into structural temples, and their indigenous rituals have been gradually brought closer to the dominant Brahminical cult. This process, which can involve renaming sacred groves with mainstream Brahminical temple designations, often leads to a loss of the cultural uniqueness and performative richness of southern forms of Hinduism. Sanskritization, a social process where lower castes imitate higher caste ritual

practices to achieve social mobility, and Hinduization, where non-Hindu elements are assimilated by identifying them with Hindu deities, contribute to this homogenization.

Furthermore, the **commercialization** of religious practices poses a threat. The shift from traditional ritualistic performances to "art" for broader appeal, coupled with the commercial offering of specific Hindu rituals, can lead to the destruction of sacred groves. This tension between preservation and adaptation in modernity is a defining characteristic of the contemporary Mother Goddess cult. It is not merely a decline but a dynamic process where traditional forms are reinterpreted and re-contextualized for survival and broader appeal, sometimes at the cost of their original ritualistic purity or local specificity. The cult is thus not dying but transforming, navigating the challenges of modernity by finding new avenues for expression and relevance.

Conclusion: The Enduring Legacy of the Mother Goddess in Kerala

The Mother Goddess cult in Kerala stands as a compelling testament to the enduring power and remarkable adaptability of the divine feminine. Its historical trajectory, spanning from ancient Proto-Dravidian fertility rites and primitive war goddesses to its diverse and dynamic contemporary manifestations, reflects a continuous process of profound cultural assimilation, deep philosophical engagement, and active social interaction.

The cult's dynamic evolution, characterized by the intricate synthesis of indigenous Dravidian elements with later Aryan influences, has forged a unique religious landscape. The complex and often ambivalent attributes of its principal deities, such as Kali and Bhadrakali, are continually reinterpreted by local communities, transforming fear into protective reverence and allowing for a nuanced understanding of divine power. Furthermore, the socio-political roles embedded within its vibrant rituals, particularly in forms like Theyyam, underscore the cult's capacity to serve as a powerful medium for social commentary, resistance against caste hierarchies, and community building.

While facing pressures from modernization, including urbanization, land reforms, and the commercialization of rituals, the Mother Goddess cult demonstrates remarkable resilience. It adapts its forms and expressions, finding new avenues for relevance in modern society, notably through its integration into popular culture. This ongoing re-negotiation of tradition allows the cult to remain a living, breathing force, continuing to shape the spiritual, social, and artistic landscape of Kerala. Its enduring legacy is a vibrant tapestry of faith, culture, and community, embodying a tradition that is both ancient and perpetually contemporary.

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