

TITLE: “LEGEND OF KAPPIRI MUTHAPPAN IN KOCHI: A COUNTER-DISOURSE AGAINST PORTUGUESE COLONIAL DOMINATION”

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ABSTRACT

Kochi is a city dotted with remnants of trans-Atlantic slave trade practiced by European colonisers. Most people in Kerala do not know about coastal Kerala’s African connection. While Kerala’s cultural connections with Europe are well articulated through literature, museums and heritage sites, linkages with Africa and the forced migration of Africans to the Malabar Coast remain obscure and are recalled primarily through rituals and folklore. One such folklore is that of the cigar smoking African slave, locally known as Kappiri Muthappan. Although it is unclear how these slaves came to be called *kappiri*, it is believed that the word might have been a corruption of the word ‘kaffir,’ meaning non-believer, “which is what Arab travellers called the people of Africa,” said historian M.G.S Narayanan. “Kappiri” is the local slang for African slaves shipped to Kerala in the 16th century by the Portuguese.

Historian KL Bernard in his book ‘History of Fort Cochin’ discusses what came to be called Kappiri mathil (Kappiri walls) and their subsequent evolution into protective spirits called kappiri muthappan. He says, “In 1663, Portuguese, who had treasures made niches in their thick walls, tied up Kaffirs in them, placed their treasures beneath tied-up slaves and made them promise that the treasures would be kept safe till their descendants came to claim them. The niches were then plastered up with mortar,” (Bernard 12)

Over time, local beliefs took over and the wall niches where these slaves were chained up were reified and began to be worshipped. The local legend says that the slaves turned into spirits which were called Kappiri Muthappan. Possibly one of the prominent ones that is actively worshipped today, is the shrine in Mangattumukku in Mattancherry near Fort Kochi. There is just a simple black platform, without idols or symbols. The legend even found a place in the third edition of Kochi Muziris Biennale via the Dutch artist Gabriel Lester’s installation ‘Dwelling Kappiri Spirits’.

The paper tries to analyse the myth of Kappiri Muthappan from a subaltern perspective. It looks upon these narratives as a resistance mechanism of the resilient people to defy and live through the multi-pronged system of oppressive caste hierarchy, subverting these very structures. The myth would be studied as a counter discourse developed by some sections of subaltern-community who would have been culturally scarred by their stigmatised status in the caste order and in their struggle to find sustenance from the oppressive system. The customary practice in Mattancherry of offering *prasadam* (holy offering) to Kappiri Muthappan will be looked upon as a subversion and appropriation of the dominant European religious practices. Further, the scope of this paper is to study how the shrines of Kappiri Muthappan become a heterotopic space as conceived by Michel Foucault and how the concept of hybridity posited by Homi Bhabha becomes a third space for the coastal communities to withstand the marginalisation they face. Third space can be understood as a location and/or practice. As a practice it reveals a differential consciousness that according to Chela Sandoval “arises between and through [different] meaning systems” (Sandoval 180), capturing the movement that joins different networks of consciousness and revealing a potential for greater understanding. As a location, third space can be a space of shared understanding and meaning making.

Keywords:

Kappiri Muthappan, Trans-national slave trade, Subaltern deity, Kochi’ folklore, Indo-African hybridity

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Introduction: Folktale of Kappiri Muthappan

The city of Kochi known for being a hotpot of varied culture and customs holds in its abyss of memory a less heard legend of Kappiri Muthappan. According to the Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, ‘Myths are not created out of nothing; a myth is always the covering, the shell, to a kernel of truth contained inside. Folktales are

the myths of the race’. The folktale of Kappiri Muthappan too entails a racial history of African presence in the colonial town of Kochi. The history of the legend dates back to the pre-colonial Kochi when the city was a hub of spice trade. The colony of Portuguese settlement saw many slaves of African origin being transported across the ocean via trade route from East African coast to

Kochi. There are evidences of trans-Atlantic slave trade between colonial port cities during the reign of Portuguese and Dutch imperialists. The presence of Africans in Kochi could thus be attributed to the historical evidence given by historian Edward Alpers in his book 'The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean: A Comparative Perspective'.

Kappiri Muthappan is a term used to refer to the spirits of the African slaves who were slaughtered by their Portuguese masters as oblation to safeguard their riches when they retreated under Dutch coup. The historical evidence of Portuguese decampment can be traced to the Dutch expedition under Ryckloff Van Goens; the troops arrived from Ceylon to Vypin islands conquering the port city of Kochi. The legend says that the Portuguese masters chained their African slaves along with their treasures and buried them secretly in unknown recesses to get back to their riches at some later point of time. The occult practice of sacrifice was under the pact that these slaves would safeguard their treasures until the rightful master returns to claim it. It is popularly believed that the ghosts of these African slaves wander around the place they were chained in order to protect their master's riches. Over time these wandering spirits acquired the status of a deity worshipped mainly to get hold of the abandoned colonial treasure they were protecting. The devotees show their benevolence to Kappiri Muthappan by sanctifying the locale where they were chained as shrines. Usually these shrines are located under *Aanjili* tree (*Artocarpus hirtus*) in unmarked niches at boundary walls or corners of streets. It is believed that the Portuguese might have planted trees as identifiers of their treasures buried along with African slaves for the ease of retrieval. This is the probable reason for the belief that Kappiri resides in trees, and why local residents pray and make offerings to stones installed under trees to please Kappiri.

The term Kappiri is a colloquial term in Malayalam used to refer to people African origin. Malayalam author S K Pottakkad's

Kaappirikalude Naatil is a memoir of his visit to African subcontinent. The etymology of the word can be traced to the words *Kafir/Qafir/Caffer* which roughly translates as 'an unbeliever'. It is an Arabic term used by Arab traders to refer to Africans who were their slaves and who were not followers of Islam (Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya and Pankhurst 8).

The shrine stamps its difference because of the unconventional offerings given by devotees like arrack, toddy, cigar, fried fish, meat, eggs etc. as *Prasad*. Moreover, the places where these shrines are located makes it unique; unlike the places of worship of other religions which has a reified and pompous infrastructure, the demigod of Kappiri Muthappan stands on unadorned black stone inside miniature house like structures attached to compound walls on roadside.

REPRESENTATION OF KAPPIRI MUTHAPPAN IN LITERATURE AND ART

Various works of literature in Malayalam language and Malayali authors have represented the myth of Kappiri Muthappan in their novels. One of the earliest is Rafi Ponjkkara's novel *Ora Pro Nobis* which came out in 1981. The novel is a spiel of the descendants of the African slave who volunteered to kill himself to guard the treasure of his master. The vow of the Kappiri was that his spirit would guard the treasure until his master's rightful heirs come to claim it. The attempts made by Kappiri's youngest generation of successors to reclaim the assets and the resistance put forward by their ancestor to protect the secrecy of the location of the wealth becomes the plot of the story. The duel between two generations of Kappiri Muthappan's scions, one to protect the legacy and another to dismantle it gets culmination in the eldest living ancestor permanently destroying the records of the locale of the treasure. The superstitious belief that curse would befall to whoever trying to unlawfully claim the treasure is reinforced in the novel.

Adiyalaprethamby renowned novelist and scriptwriter P F Mathews is another work that

gives an eerie representation of the African deity. It is a Malayalam language novel which tells the story of Achambi from a Latin catholic family from Kochi who resorts to worshipping of the demigod of Kappiri Muthappan. The *Aanjili* tree in the compound of his home is believed by him to be the treasure house of Portuguese masters who sacrificed his slave in order to protect his valuables. The story revolves around the necromantic practices that Achambi and his slave does to sweep off Kappiri's feet. The apprehension of his relatives on his practice occult customs and his relentless attempt to please the demigod to amass the treasure that the Kappiri is believed to protect becomes the center-stone of the novel. The work of literature points towards the anti-fundamentalist approach of Achambi and how the staunch believers of Christian faith oppose his practices. Thus, Achambi and Kappiri become iconoclastic figures in the novel who inverts the power dynamics of conventional religious traditions.

Whereas, George Thundiparambil's English language novel *Maya* which came out in 2008 has as its narrator the spirit of Kappiri Muthappan. The story is set against the backdrop of contemporary Fort Kochi where tourist girls chances upon the Kappiri to listen to the 500 year old history of Portuguese, Dutch and British rule in Kochi. Kappiri narrates his voyage along with Vasco Da Gama to Kerala as a slave, his angst of being uprooted from his homeland and his attempts to redeem himself from the eternal slavery as ghost. The central figure of Kappiri and his accounts problematise the history of discovery of Kerala by Vasco Da Gama. Rather than viewing the history from above *Maya* tries to narrate a counter-history from the perspective of the colonised. The notion of White man's burden to civilise the colonised and slave trade have been critiqued and presented with an eye of suspicion. The history of triumph of colonisers is subverted through the perspective given by Thundiparambil through the eyes of the African slave.

The third edition of Kochi Muziris Biennale in 2016-17 saw an installation by the Dutch artist Gabriel Lester giving a visual treat of the myth and the history behind it through his 'Dwelling Kappiri Spirits'. The installation was a simulation of a wooden boat caught up in roaring winds of ocean. Inside the void of the dim lit wooden structure stood a teapoy with an ashtray and a perpetually burning cigar representing the lasting impact of the Kappiri on the mind of Kochiites as well as the Dutch. There happens a temporal freezing of history inside the installation.

I. Myth of Kappiri Muthappan as a Counter-narrative

The legend of Kappiri Muthappan has as its key figure a subaltern slave who was murdered for the selfish desires of its colonial master. Through this folktale the people of Kochi is creating a micro history which was refused a place in the Eurocentric history written down by imperialist intellectuals. The legend stands as what McCracken has called "ballast", it has transcended from being a cultural waste to become a public record of the atrocious practices of Portuguese imperialists. The historicisation of the myth is an unconscious act of the post-colonial community of constructing and disseminating a counter-discourse against hegemonic colonial culture. It is rather a process of artistic and literary decolonization using culturally retained marginalised memory. The shrines of Kappiri Muthappan are an example of how cultural memories of colonial history are remembered, performed, and circulated through religion. Bruce Lincoln held that myth is an "ideology in narrative form", then the myth of Kappiri Muthappan too can be considered as a remnant of an embedded ideology in the memories of the people of Kochi. The Kappiri walls where these slaves are believed to have been chained stand as embodiments of colonial memory of forced migration of African slaves to Kochi as a part of trans-Atlantic slave trade. The legend is a means to deconstruct authoritarian discourses of Portuguese, Dutch and British colonial powers.

The myth of Kappiri encompasses a third space which is geographical as well as discursive. The myth is a discursive space because it manifests the collective memory of disempowered subjects chained down by power and subordination of the colonial dominance. David Butz and Michael Ripmeester in *Finding Space for Resistant Subcultures* argue that Third Space can be understood as an “ontological category,” a model through which all spaces can be theorized, and where resistance is “comprised of hybridized, ambiguous, cautious, and often somewhat accommodative practices.” (Butz, Michael 21) On a geographical level, third space of Kappiri myth composes of the differential consciousness of the people of Kochi through which they create meaning and shared understanding of Afro-Asian culture. The stone structure worshipped as Kappiri Muthappan becomes a pretext embedding abstract meanings of struggles of the marginalised and their desire for upward mobility in social hierarchy so as to be accepted to the mainstream. Kappiri Muthappan worship then becomes an unconscious practice of resistance as the deity gets transformed from a mere property to a subculture. What is peculiar to the practice of Kappiri worship is that the deity has not been institutionalised into a recognised god nor does it have a well-built temple like structure resembling a shrine. The deity is offered food items like meat and alcohol which are considered as taboo by various institutionalised religions. The arrack offered can be seen as a subversion of holy wine and the meat as that of holy bread of Christian religious custom. Further, it is cigar that is burnt instead of incense at the shrine which again is a strategic subversion of dominant customary practice of most religions. Rather than slavishly imitating the religious practices put forth by imperialist, practices of worship of the slave deity creates a counter culture by strategically dismantling all those customs and traditions reified by imperialists. Milton Yinger in his 1982 book, *Countercultures: The Promise and Peril of a World Turned Upside Down* notes,

“Countercultures and the many types of intentional communities they commonly create are not social aberrations. For thousands of years there have been attempts to provide alternatives for the existing social order in response to the perennial grounds for dissent: hierarchy and privilege [...], disgust with hedonism and consumerism [...], and a decline in the quality of life.” (Yinger 1) Thus, Kappiri worship is an alternative and not a social aberration. The idols in the shrines of Kappiri Muthappan in Kochi become a transgressive artefact embodying the influence of colonial rule in India. The act of praying and offering unconventional *prasad* is an act of subversion of trivialities, thereby undermining the power play of cultural ideology of the time. The brahminical hegemonic cultural authority that prevailed in Kochi gets unknowingly sabotaged by the practice where taboo items like toddy and arrack become sacrosanct bene-faction to the deity of Kappiri Muthappan.

CONCLUSION

The myth of Kappiri Muthappan is a petit narrative which is a part of micro-history of African presence in Kochi. The paper tries to prove that the less popular history known only among the older generation of natives is given an uncanny tone by giving the marginalised African slaves spectral qualities. This can be seen as an undeliberate and unconscious attempt by the natives to subvert the codes of colonial domination. The collective memory of atrocious servitude and resistance against enslavement gets manifested in the form of the myth of cigar smoking African spirit that protects the destitute. Therefore, the myth can be considered as a counter history narrated from subaltern point of view, toppling down the conventional hegemonic top-down perspective. Kappiri Muthappan can be considered as what Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood calls, “a sediment that builds up the structure of culture like a coral island.”

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