

## **Sin of the King: Early-Modern Kingship and the Deification of Victimhood in Malabar, South-Western India**

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This essay is an attempt to look at the early-modern Hindu kingship as they appear in an oral literary genre from North Malabar, south-western India. The genre is known as ‘*thōttam* songs’ or the propitiatory narratives for the local village-Hindu pantheon. It is widely popular in the Malayalam-speaking region and also in the neighbouring Tulu-speaking South Canara where this genre is called as the *pāḍḍana*.<sup>1</sup> The following discussion is based on the text of a single *thōttam* which is available in printed form since 1998.<sup>2</sup> It is titled ‘Āippaḷḷi Thōttam’ and it narrates the story of a local male-divinity called Āippaḷḷi Daivam or the God [named] Āippaḷḷi. The *thōttam* captures our attention because of a peculiar description of denial that it provides against the conceptual makeup of regional Hindu kingship. The narrative describes a couple of untimely deaths by homicide and an accompanied incidence of post-mortem deification. The role of king is being explained in the setting of an imposed victimhood, but of his putative subjects, and their subsequent apotheosis. The aspect of peculiarity that this literary composition tries to attribute to the institution of Hindu kingship had a symbolic bearing upon the ways in which the political authority, especially the so-called embedded or the native variety, was

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<sup>1</sup> Heidrun Brückner, “Bhūta-Worship in Coastal Karnataka: An Oral Tulu Myth and Festival Ritual of Jumādi.” In *On an Auspicious Day, at Dawn: Studies in Tulu Culture and Oral Literature* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2009):13-19.

<sup>2</sup> M. V. Vishnunamboothiri, “Āippaḷḷi Thōttam.” In *Theyyam* (Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala Bhasha Institute, 1998): 231-249.

consumed in this part of south-western India, on the Arabian Sea board. These ‘songs’ were believed to have attained their present format sometime during the long 16<sup>th</sup> century, and their language, the non-metrical style of ritual utterance, still keep a close resemblance to the rhythmic structure of early Malayalam prose. Some of them are traditionally assigned to quasi-mythical cult-authors such as Maṅkkāḍaṅ Gurukkal and Āṇiḍil Eḷuthachaṅ but with little or no clues leading to their historic identity.<sup>3</sup>

Despite being a regional literary genre of wide currency, thōttam narratives had almost bypassed the standard historiographic interest. This is perhaps with the exception of a couple of investigations on the ‘popular’ perceptions that these genres had allegedly communicated, first; from the late-Colonial situations of labourer servitude and the second; from the topographic marginality of Malabar’s swidden agriculture.<sup>4</sup> In both these cases, thōttam narratives represented a sort of sub-culture marginality in their immediate milieu and are described as if they had been operating on a plain of instrumentality of which, however, the history of modern experience and ethnography provide the prominent terms of reference. They were rarely approximated as aesthetic appreciations of institutions and practices which once positioned intimate to their space-time of literary composition and circulation. As literary texts, thōttam narratives were crafted around the institutions of Hindu kingship and caste-based commensality. They describe a Malabar-world which is

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<sup>3</sup> Kaliyanthil Leena Thaniya. “Goddesses of North Malabar: An Anthropological Study on Kinship and Ritual in North Malabar.” Unpublished Master Thesis (Bergan: Department of Social Anthropology, University of Bergan, 2016): 46.

<sup>4</sup> Dilip Menon, “The Moral Community of the Teyyattam: Popular Culture in Late Colonial Malabar.” *Studies in History* 9/ 2 (1993): 187-217; R[ichardson] J[ohn] Freeman, *Forests and the Folk: Perceptions of Nature in the Swidden Regimes of Highland Malabar* (Pondicherry: Institut Français de Pondichéry, 1994).

conceptually removed from the present; though their specific performance settings, the rituals they enact and the communitarian patronage they receive, have strong sociological imperatives in mobility, transgression and cultural-conflict.<sup>5</sup> The thōttam thus speaks about the past of a deity; a local-god which had often been casted with a particular territorial affiliation in Malabar's political landscape. In its pre-deified human-form, the local-god lives with the institutions of caste, the Hindu king and his scaled-down miniatures. But once it becomes deified into the village-Hindu pantheon, the local-god transcends the caste and its specific locality, and approximates a kingly proportion in cosmic providence. It is this aspect of remembered transcendence and approximation makes thōttam narratives an important literary registry of early-modern political culture which, as would argue below, was organised around the institution of kingship and its systematic denial.

### **1. Kingliness and the Historiography of Politics: The Case of Southern India**

Early-modern kingliness in Southern India has invited a significant historiographic attention and debate. This was in fact a continuation from the early work on the ceremonial form of the historical Hindu kingship. However, the recent attempts were able to establish their novelty in two major counts. Firstly, the new scholarship was successful in bringing certain peripheral geo-political zones into the discussion of royal authority. It shifted the empirical focus of research, and took the historiography of post-16<sup>th</sup> century politics out of the cereal producing riverine wetlands. Earlier, the dhārmic Hindu kings were seen as instituting eleemosynary endowments and other theistic institutions in all major river valleys. The kings

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<sup>5</sup>Dinesan Vadakkiniyil, "Images of Transgression: Teyyam in Malabar." *Social Analysis* 54/2 (2010): 130-150; M. Zahira, "Folk Performances: Reading the Cultural History of the Thiyya Community in Kerala." *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 19/ 2 (2014): 159-164.

shared their realm with an untrustworthy network of councillors and political subordinates. The latter, especially in the Tamil countryside of the late-Chōlas, represented non-Brahmin landed-magnates who had been proprietors by their endemic agrarian-localities called *nāḍu* and they held up an autonomous political merit vis-à-vis the king.<sup>6</sup> The kingly authority was mediated through an ill-defined (i.e. non-graded) hierarchy of courtly and the peripheral functionaries. The mediaeval Southern Indian state reproduced its image through what the south-Asianists often call ‘the legitimacy’ but it enjoyed only a contained portion of available agrarian surplus and a much lesser, in fact a segmented, amount of control over the peripheral regions that lay far away from the kingly centre. The new emphasis in Southern Indian political history is however given to those geographic locations which were once approached as too under-evolved in the standard teleology of pre-modern state-formation to support an elaborate royalist, if not the statist, establishment. Semi-arid rain-shadows of the Western-Ghats, basaltic fringes of Deccan Plateau and the sandy-plains of Southern Coromandel were thus increasingly investigated.<sup>7</sup> Regions which are topographically unsuitable for the

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<sup>6</sup> Y. Subbarayalu and Noboru Karashima. “Kaniyalar Old and New: Landholding Policy of the Chola State in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries.” *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 44/1 (2007): 16; Y. Subbarayalu, “Changes in Agrarian Relations in the Kaveri Delta, c. 900–1300.” *Social Scientist* 38/ 7&8 (2010): 45.

<sup>7</sup> Brenda E.F. Beck, *Peasant Society in Konku: A Study of Right and Left Subcastes in South India* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1972); David Ludden, *Peasant History in South India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); Nobuhiro Ota, “Beda Nayaka and their Historical Narratives in Karnataka during the Post-Vijayanagara Period.” In *Kingship in Indian History*, ed. Noboru Karashima (Delhi: Manohar, 1999): 163-194; Barry Lewis and C.S. Patil, “Chitradurga: Spatial Patterns of a Nayaka Period Successor State in South India.” *Asian Perspectives* 42/2 (2003): 267-286; S K Aruni, *Surapura Samsthana: Historical and Archaeological Study of Poligar State in South India* (New Delhi: Bharatiya Kala Prakashan, 2004); Elizabeth Jane Bridges White, “Beyond Empire: Vijayanagara Imperialism and the Emergence of the Keladi-Ikkeri Nayaka State, 1499-1763 C.E.” Unpublished Doctoral Thesis (Anthropology), (Michigan: University of Michigan, 2015).

riziculture peasantry and its institutions of horizontal expansion are now being considered as critically important in developing autogenous formations in economy, in politics and, in the realm of imagination. Malabar ideally fits into this new academic interest though there are only a few historiographic attempts in this direction.<sup>8</sup> The region had a long-term implicatedness in the economy of dry-land gardening<sup>9</sup> and its medieval centuries witnessed a unique political formation which is known as the *swarūpam*.<sup>10</sup> Despite being a desired seat of the political power, *swarūpam* did not maintain an exclusive/necessary association with the institution of Hindu kingship. In other words, ‘the demarcation between of what constituted the status of a kingly *swarūpam* and a non-kingly proprietor-household was very narrow’.<sup>11</sup> The apparent narrowness in this political demarcation made the regional kingship to appear more like an aspirational category of high generality, which being

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<sup>8</sup> For instance, see; Manu V Devadevan, “Changes in Land Relations during the Decline of the Cēra State.” In *Irreverent History: Essays for M.G.S. Narayanan*, ed. Kesavan Veluthat and Donald R. Davis, Jr. (Delhi: Primus Books, 2014): 53-80.

<sup>9</sup> Jan Kieniewicz, “Pepper Gardens and Market in Pre Colonial Malabar.” *Moyen Orient et Océan Indien* 3 (1986): 1-36; Federico De Romanis, “Comparative Perspective on Pepper Trade.” In *Across the Ocean: Nine Essays on Indo-Mediterranean Trade*, ed. Federico De Romanis and Marco Maiuro (Leiden: Brill, 2015): 127-150.

<sup>10</sup> K. N. Ganesh, “Polity and Society in Medieval Kerala: Preliminary Considerations.” In *New Dimensions in South Indian History: Felicitation Volume in Honour of Dr. M.R. Raghava Varier*, ed. K.K.N. Kurup (Calicut: Association for Peasant Studies, University of Calicut, 1996): 96-124; M.R. Raghava Varier, “State as Svarupam: An Introductory Essay.” In *State and Society in Pre-modern South India*, ed. R. Champakalakshmi, Kesavan Veluthat and T.R Venugopalan (Trissur: Cosmo Books, 2010): 120-30.

<sup>11</sup> Binu John Mailaparambil, *Lords of the Sea: The Ali Rajas of Cannanore and the Political Economy of Malabar, 1663-1723* (Leiden, Brill, 2012): 29.

embroiled in the south-Indianist innovations of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, was prone to constant emulation and conceptual reworking.<sup>12</sup>

The recent historiography of Southern Indian state-formation did pay attention to this nexus of innovation, especially in the ‘redistributive relations’ (of the king as well as the *jājmān*), and often treats them as important turning-points in ‘the early-modern period’.<sup>13</sup> In the realm of politics and royal courts, historians also proposed a set of new, but endemic, conceptual frames for the portrayal of kingship, and this proposal of novelty, and the historic change that it had subsequently entailed in its specific regional settings, constitute the second count on which these investigations score their points off. Interestingly, the unusual kings and their abstract royalism are in particular noted from those peripheral zones which remain attired in the institutional garb of pre-19<sup>th</sup> century Hinduism. Here again Malabar forms itself as a ‘type-locality’ in the standard historiographic sense that it was never, till the second half of 18<sup>th</sup> century, politically destabilized by an invading ‘Muslim’ rule.<sup>14</sup> Even in the settings of such a peripheral royalism and of an alleged insularity, historians speak about concerted efforts in material accumulation, in staging ceremonial orgy, in orchestrating retribution, and an unprecedented thrust in public piety and consumption.<sup>15</sup> All these gestures were highly important to the kingly

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<sup>12</sup> David Shulman, "The Marriage of Bhāvanā and King Best: A Sixteenth-Century South Indian Theory of Imagination." *Diacritics* 38/ 3 (2008): 22-43; David Shulman, *More than Real: A History of Imagination in South India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012): 3.

<sup>13</sup>David Washbrook, "India in the Early Modern World Economy: Modes of Production, Reproduction and Exchange." *Journal of World History* 2/1 (2007): 87-111.

<sup>14</sup> Theodore Gabriel, *Hindu-Muslim Relations in North Malabar, 1498-1947* (Lewiston, New York: Edward Mellen, 1996)

<sup>15</sup> Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society, 1700-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989): 63-69; K. N. Ganesh, "The Process of State Formation in Travancore." *Studies in History* 6/1 (1990): 15-33; Mary Beth Heston, "The Nexus of Divine and Earthly Rule:

being of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. This was despite the fact that his temporal authority was often conceived as austere-Brahmanic in political disposition, and as an enthroned sainthood by the standing dhārmic parenthesis. The kings were continued to be hailed as the benevolent protectors of the Brahmanhood and its associated sacred geography. But he was a protector by the sole benefit of his force; his temporal power, and not by his fate or the innate constitution. The king was also the transgressor and an insatiable present of extreme materiality. He often embodied inappropriateness and thus converted himself to be an apostate who violated the boundaries of sectarian soteriology and the sacred.<sup>16</sup> As it was argued from the late-Maratha households of royalist aspiration, the kings had been styled as the arms-bearing ‘lordly man of prowess’ who, if we go by the courtly panegyrics composed after them, believed in personal charisma, and in the fetishism of invented objects, and in public spectacles.<sup>17</sup>

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Padmanābhapuram Palace and Traditions of Architecture and Kingship in South Asia.” *Ars Orientalis* 26 (1996): 83 and 89; V. V. Haridas, *Zamorins and the Political Culture of Medieval Kerala* (Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2016): 260-281.

<sup>16</sup> For Tamil and Telugu cases; see, David Shulman, “Of South Indian Bandits and Kings.” *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 18/3(1980): 283-306; Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Hearing Voices: Vignettes of Early Modernity in South Asia, 1400-1750.” *Daedalus* 127/3 (1998): 82-83; Kamil V. Zvelebil, “Some Tamil Folklore Texts: Muttuppattāṅ Katai, Kāttavarāyaṅ Kataippāṭal, Paḷaiyaṅur Nīli.” *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 2 (1989): 290-303. For Malabar; see, P. C. Alexander, “Palli Bana Perumal.” *Proceedings of Indian History Congress* 10 (1947): 159-163; Scott Kugle and Roxani Eleni Margariti, “Narrating Community: the Qiṣṣat Shakarwatī Farmāḍ and Accounts of Origin in Kerala and around the Indian Ocean.” *JESHO* 60 (2017): 345-349.

<sup>17</sup> Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University of Press, 1999): 56 and 64. Also see, Kate Brittlebank, “Sakti and Barakat: The Power of Tipu's Tiger: An Examination of the Tiger Emblem of Tipu Sultan of Mysore.” *Modern Asian Studies* 29/2 (1995): 257-269; Kate Brittlebank, “Curiosities, Conspicuous Piety and the Maker of Time: Some Aspects of Kingship in Eighteenth-Century South India.” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 16/2 (1993): 41-56.

Those kings who integrated their authority with an early-modern mercenary culture, and the military-labour market that it suggested,<sup>18</sup> frequently devoted energies in instituting certain public, but most often an in-absentee, exhibition of valour and benevolence. In this regard, the importance given to the incendiary royal-entourage appears as a new creative innovation. The entourage worked as the mercenary companions to their kingly overlords. They fought wars, conducted *mulkgiri* raids, and not so infrequently ended life on behalf of their political masters. Unlike the early-medieval *āsanna* ‘companions of honour’,<sup>19</sup> this new retinue was highly mobile, and had been drawn from the ranks of emergent military sub-elite. As it has recently argued for the north-western Karnataka, most of these mercenaries belonged to the class of an arms-bearing peasantry,<sup>20</sup> and had been infamous for its unpredictable loyalty stance and rampant sectarianism. The early-modern Hindu kings were made out of their overtly prodigal, and an almost uncontrollable, retinue. Despite being tied up in a naive string of filial solidarity with the king’s household and even with his corporeal person, this retinue was not as self-denying and ‘altruistic’ as their *vēlevālika* predecessors.<sup>21</sup> In their 18<sup>th</sup> century posture, they frequently killed opponents and got themselves killed for their private benefits, for alienable compensations in landed property and, indeed very rarely, to settle the ‘blood-feud’ of their political patrons. Whether in Mysore, in Madurai or in the

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<sup>18</sup> Dirk H. A. Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput, and Sepoy: The Ethnohistory of the Military Labour Market in Hindustan, 1450-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). For southern Indian experiments; see, John F. Richards, "Warriors and the State in Early Modern India." *JESHO* 47 (2004):399-400; Mesrob Vartavarian "An Open Military Economy: The British Conquest of South India Reconsidered." *JESHO* 57 (2014): 501-4.

<sup>19</sup> M.G.S. Narayanan, "The Institution of 'Companion of Honour' with Special Reference to South India." *Proceedings of Indian History Congress*, 33 (1971):74-83.

<sup>20</sup> Manu V Devadevan, *A Pre-History of Hinduism*, (Warsaw: De Gruyter Open Ltd, 2016): 98

<sup>21</sup> Kesavan Veluthat, "The Nature and Significance of the Institution of Velevali in Karnataka in Historical Perspective (AD 800-1300)." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 51 (1991): 151-159.

forested-country of Ikkery, the kings were thus compelled to live up with an authority that had been put under an internal threat. The hanging sword of danger was that of a home-grown challenge. An unforeseen shadow of treachery or a bloody palace-coup always loomed so large over the royal person, estate, and its collateral households.

Though there are attempts to explain these small-scale and the peripheral political authority as ritually ordained, redistributive and as ethnically collegial,<sup>22</sup> the hybridity in their local agrarian incarnations, especially in those forms which stayed away from the centralizing states of Mysore (both the Wodeyar and the ‘Khudādādi’), still remain seriously unacknowledged. For instance, in 18<sup>th</sup> century Malabar, in the swarūpam context of political activity, the reciprocal ethic of a given collegiality is hard to find, if one could take a momentary leave from the 20<sup>th</sup> century regal nostalgia, even in the level of an elementary proprietor-household. Instead, the conflicts—which were often armed, regicidal and internecine—frequently erupted among the household membership, and at times, they converted this institution into a site of chronic disorder and asymmetry. As in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century Maratha family-feuds,<sup>23</sup> household conflicts in Malabar had been initially crafted around property and wealth or, what this paper would like to call, ‘the *kūru* obsession’. In its political orchestration, *kūru* (literary, ‘a share’) represented a privatizing intent to capture, in the realm of landed-property and the revenue of a swarūpam, what was considered as the appropriate share, a specific material owing which had been contextually due

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<sup>22</sup>Burton Stein, “State Formation and Economy Reconsidered, Part 2.” *Modern Asian Studies* 19/3 (1985): 408; Burton Stein, “Notes on ‘Peasant Insurgency’ in Colonial Mysore: Event and Process.” *South Asia Research* 5/ 1 (1985): 16.

<sup>23</sup> Sumit Guha, “The Family Feud as a Political Resource in Eighteenth-Century India.” In *Unfamiliar Relations: Family and History in South Asia*, ed. Indranee Chatterjee (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004): 77

to a share-holder participant. In a challenge to understand the early-modern statecraft, Sanjay Subrahmanyam has showed that the alleged ‘ritual reciprocity’ (of Stein and his early school of ‘ritual sovereignty’) was historically integrated with a resilient world of fiscal possibility. In Southern India, this had been a possibility of accumulation from trade, from land-based wealth, and also from the political asymmetry between different governmental concerns. Fashioning oneself as king in this context was indeed a tough responsibility.<sup>24</sup>

Yet some unusual men of excessive prodigality and political speculation aspired to own for themselves the kingdoms of their times. They tried to become king and the king-like or, what Subrahmanyam and Shulman once termed, the ‘would be kings’.<sup>25</sup> This kingly aspiration and the readiness to resort into a venture of conquest and alliance-making formed the ideals in political practice all thorough this episode. Kings and their histories were simultaneously crafted in almost all small polities that emerged in the Southern Indian scene after the 16<sup>th</sup> century. These histories were not always instituted an auspicious effect on the Hindu King. Rather as Kesavan Veluthat has recently showed in his introduction to Vāñchēsweradīkshithar’s *Mahiṣaśathakam*, some of them unfurled a scathing criticism against the king’s person, and even against the very idea of kingship.<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, the usual narrative models of the courtly kingship were still minted and were put into circulation. Models were often handpicked from the so called

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<sup>24</sup> Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “State-Formation and Transformation in Early Modern India and Southeast Asia.” *Itinerario* 12/ 1 (1988): 91-110.

<sup>25</sup> Sanjay Subrahmanyam and David Shulman, “The Men Who Would Be King? The Politics of Expansion in Early Seventeenth-Century Northern Tamilnadu.” *Modern Asian Studies* 24/2 (1990): 225-248.

<sup>26</sup> Kesavan Veluthat, *Śrī Vāñchēsweradīkshithar Rachicha Mahiṣaśathakam* (Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala Council for Historical Research, 2011).

‘Persianate’ or the Vijayanagara classicism. But, they were increasingly found being customized to the core. In the meantime, the non-courtly versions authority—the variety that is often explained of as if they had been existing over tiny revenue-localities, ‘villages’, and even over households—found their way towards a level of political sophistication and stability through the invocation of certain parochial idioms of heroism and institutional dependency. In both these versions, kingly histories of political authority appeared more like impromptu artefacts of realistic patronage and they commended, even at their best merit, a limited and circumstantial validity. In this sense, in specific pre-reified contexts, the ideology of early-modern kingliness operated like an internally vulnerable built-up of exigency. Its capacity to reproduce (i.e. legitimize) itself had been severely truncated in the face of emergent ‘fringe elements’ who, in several Southern Indian cases, were entrenched landed and propertied interests, and who owed a history which was as old as the king’s ancestry itself. This is particularly true as one moves out to the periphery of an existing kingly topography, and indeed out of the literalist orthodoxy of the written word to the literacy-aware realm of folk remembrance and the collective orality. As it was once argued by Shulman and Narayanarao, it is in the latter realm that parody and subversion thrived *vis-à-vis* the institutionalized expressions of Hindu kingship and the caste.<sup>27</sup> In the North Malabar setting of an apparent native kingfulness, thōttam narratives belonged to the folk remembrance, to the public ritual and to some extent,

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<sup>27</sup> Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman, “Parody and Subversion in Remembered Verses of South India.” *The Eastern Anthropologist* 49/3&4 (1996): 239-258.

a collective way of ‘speaking the fresh’ about a provincial world;<sup>28</sup> in fact, in all its abundance.

## 2. Thōttam: A Short History of the North Malabar Genre.

As a literary genre, *thōttam* has some similarities with two of the better known Southern Indian traditions of regional orality. On the one hand, they could be classed along with the bow-songs or *vil-pāṭṭu* of the Tamil-speaking Travancore which recount the history of a localized pantheon in, what Stuart Blackburn identifies, a ‘strongly oral tradition’.<sup>29</sup> Just like the Tamilsed bow-song, the North Malabar *thōttam* often maintains a basic manuscript backup for its training, exegesis and for the inter-generational transmission, though this manuscript practice was once limited among the ritual-experts. On the other hand, perhaps with a bit more certainty in generical analogy, *thōttam* moves closely with the ‘oral/folk epics’ of the Kongu and the Tulu regions.<sup>30</sup> In several cases *thōttam* narratives are tiresomely long. Some of the modern print-formats often run into thousands of ‘lines’, and their recitation takes many hours (even a couple of days) to complete a normal course in rendition. In North Malabar, *thōttam* is always found in association with the cultic complex of Theyyam which is one of the numerous ritual-dances of the region, and is believed to have integral to the village Hinduism at least since the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Rajeev Kinra, “Fresh Words for a Fresh World: Tāza-Gū’ ī and the Poetics of Newness in Early Modern Indo-Persian Poetry.” *Sikh Formations* 3/2 (2007): 125-149.

<sup>29</sup> Stuart H. Blackburn, “Oral Performance: Narrative and Ritual in a Tamil Tradition.” *The Journal of American Folklore* 94/372 (1981):211.

<sup>30</sup> Brenda E. F. Beck, *The Three Twins: The Telling of a South Indian Folk Epic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982); B.A. Viveka Rai, “Epics in the Oral Genre System of Tulu Nadu.” *Oral Tradition* 11/1 (1996): 163-172.

<sup>31</sup> R[ichardson] J[ohn] Freeman, “The Teyyam Tradition of Kerala.” In *Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, ed. Gavin Flood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003): 309.

The dance and its associated network of shrine-centres are intended for the divine propitiation of the animist as well as the ancestral spirits of the ancien régime agrarian society. They were instituted for mysterious local-gods—most of them are of antique and unknown in origin—, and also for a recent, perhaps more historical family of fallen heroes and heroines. In other words, the thōttam recitations are closely integrated with the ritual propitiation of an extra-human agency which sometimes commands a large sectarian following and therefore, they are consensually accepted by the local crowd as their benevolent patron-deity. These deities often represent or ‘guard’ a traditional political unit, an agrarian-locality and in most cases, a giant commensal household. Thōttams are believed to be of ‘magical’ in their innate capacities, and in the specific settings of their recitation and dressed enactment. They invite respective deities from the local cosmos, and allow them to ‘possess’ the physical body of a Theyyam performer (*kōlakkāran*).

Just like the Tulu genre of pāḍḍana, these narratives describe a deity’s creation. They progress through the events in its terrestrial career among several real-life personages from the locality, characterizing the king, the merchant, the priest, the landlord and several others and thus, they provide us with a chance of treating their generic body as a life-history of the Theyyam context.<sup>32</sup> Thōttam recitations are quaintly ‘thick’ with descriptions of a deity’s birth, activity, apotheosis, travels, its establishment at various shrines, and also of its awesome physical appearance.<sup>33</sup> But

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<sup>32</sup> B. Surendra Rao, “Images of Trade and Traders in Tulu Folklore.” *Studies in People’s History* 2/1 (2015): 41-53; Marine Carrin and Harald Tambs-Lyche, ““You don’t Joke with these Fellows: Power and Ritual in South Canara, India.” *Social Anthropology* 11/1 (2003): 23-42; Barkur Udaya, “Landlords and Peasantry in Medieval Karnataka Coast.” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 67 (2006): 224-231.

<sup>33</sup> R[ichardson] J[ohn] Freeman, “Performing Possession: Ritual and Consciousness in the Teyyam Complex of Northern Kerala.” In *Flags of Fame: Studies in South Asian Folk Culture*, ed. Heidrun Brückner, Lothar Lutze and Aditya Malik (New Delhi: Manohar, 1993):115.

in the meantime, the standard history-textbooks on Malabar conclude the thōttam as highly formulaic, chronologically incoherent and logically flawed and bypass the possibility of them constituting a historical genre of some merit.<sup>34</sup> We would revisit this conclusion by indicating that within their immediate setting of circulation—or in ‘the Theyyam complex’ as Rich Freeman once designated it—, the thōttam is approached as a genre in history by an important diagnostic element i.e. an exclusive biographic obsession with the past and its overtly causal constitution. Even in those thōttams that apparently tries to connect the textualist Hindu theism with the terrain of North Malabar,<sup>35</sup> the major narrative thrust is therefore given to a parochial biographic element with a specific set of casual justifications. Foundational-legends in the thōttam are almost exclusively deal with the regional past. They are crafted around a single historic question; how did a deity or a family of deities attain existence in the spectrum of an omnipotent, but still a local, pantheon? As an answer to this question, the thōttam narrative provides a cause-effect account of the apotheosis. This account *inter alia* constitutes the familiar, a deeply localised, biography of a deity. It inserts a new local-god, sometime a godling, into an existing divine-hierarchy. More importantly, the thōttam’s causal logic substantially reworks the moral order of propriety by which institutions such as the Hindu kingship and the caste operates in the locality. It is this ability to effect an innovation in the moral order of propriety that makes the thōttam an interesting archive providing clues to

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<sup>34</sup> For instance see, M R Raghava Varier, “Vāmoḷivaḷakkam: Sāhithyavum Charithravum.” In *Ammavaḷikkēralam* (Thrissur: Kerala Sahithya Academy, 2006): 44-54; M. R Raghava Varier and Rajan Gurukkal, *Kerala Charithram* (Sukapuram: Vallathol Vidyapeetam, 1991); 39.

<sup>35</sup> See, R[ichardson] J[ohn] Freeman, “There upon Hangs a Tail: The Deification of Vāli in the Teyyam Worship of Malabar.” In *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition*, ed. Paula Richman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001): 187-220.

the forms of political authority for a period in which divinity and regality appeared as if they were indistinguishable pairs.

In its etymological roots, word thōttam maintains a connection with an old usage in early-modern Malayalam; *thōttuka*. It meant a mental activity intended ‘to produce or to restore to life’ something which includes objects, inanimate beings and, even the mere imagination.<sup>36</sup> In this sense, a thōttam narrative, when uttered in a ritual complex, produces a cultural field for ‘the coming of a deity’ by giving life to a common pool of symbols, primarily associated with the local political patronage and its agrarian base. Political agencies such as the kings (*rāja*), kingly deputies (*nāṭuvāḷi*) and household-patriarchs (*kāraṇavan*) together form this milieu of terrestrial patronage. Most of the times, they manage shrine-centres (*stānam*) as their overseers or the *mēlkōyma*. The term *mēlkōyma* can roughly be translated as ‘overlordship’. It need not necessarily be of political in a strict, perhaps the modern, sense of the term. Several kings and chieftains of pre-British Malabar had extended and, indeed, criss-crossing overlordship claims which often transcended their respective political borders and their ability to offer armed protection. Zamorin, the king of Calicut, reportedly had certain overlordship rights over Rājarājēsvara Temple at Thaliparamba which among other things was situated behind his enemy’s political lines, i.e. in the domain of the Colastrian Kings of Cannanore. Similarly, the Raja of Cochin had *mēlkōyma* privileges in what his courtly chronicles call the ‘Trichur Pagoda’ which since 17<sup>th</sup> century had been one of the contested sites between Cochin and the kings of Calicut. The *mēlkōyma*-wielding overlords were

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<sup>36</sup> Herman Gundart, *A Malayalam and English Dictionary* (Mangalore: C. Stolz, 1872): 474; B. Bailey, *A Dictionary of High and Colloquial Malayalam and English Dedicated by Permission to Highness the Rajah of Travancore* (Cottayam: Church Mission Press, 1846):362.

often figured themselves as ‘trustees’ (*ūrālar*) of the Theyyam shrines. Kings fashion themselves as if they preside over an entire stretch of territory where a particular deity (or a group of deities) circulates as the tutelary entity or a totem. The territorial extent of a deity’s circulation is known as *swarūpam* which, in common parlance, meant the realm over which a deity enjoys regal rights.<sup>37</sup> It is interesting here to note that the domains of pre-19<sup>th</sup> century kingliness were also signified by the same term.

Within the Theyyam theatre of performance, all activities including the key act of possession and the ritualized *thōttam* utterance are characterized by a highly formalized set of behaviours and beliefs.<sup>38</sup> This is like a standard courtly etiquette. Many deities in the pantheon were conceived as patron-deities attached to different royal families of the region. For instance, *Thāyi Paradēvatha* or *Kōlasvarūpathinkal Thāyi* of *Thiruvarkkāttukāvu* shrine at *Madayi* was the patron-deity of the *Rajas* of *Chirakkal*.<sup>39</sup> Whereas *Vēṭṭakkorumakan*—an untenable hunting deity in the regional Theyyam pantheon—was of great importance to the royal household of *Zamorins*. Apart from these, *Aḷḷaḍa Rajas* of *Nīlēswarem*, *Prāṭṭara Swarūpam* of *Kōṭṭayam*, *Porḷāthiri Rajas* of *Kaḍathanāḍu* and the *Ārangōṭṭu Swarūpam* of *Vaḷḷuvanāḍu* had their own patron-deities, and all of them are given theatre-forms in the ritual spectrum of Theyyam incarnation. At another level of patronage, but on a limited scale, Theyyam shrines were also sponsored by several artisanal and cultivating groups. They were mostly controlled by a land-owning household which almost

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<sup>37</sup> Freeman, *Performing Possession*: 125.

<sup>38</sup> Freeman, *Performing Possession*: 111.

<sup>39</sup> Balan Nambiar, “*Tāi Paradēvata: A Goddess and her Ritual Impersonation in the Theyyam Tradition of Kerala.*” In *Flags of Fame: Studies in South Asian Folk Culture*, ed. Heidrun Brückner, Lothar Lutze and Aditya Malik (New Delhi: Manohar 1993): 143.

functioned, if one could afford to draw a parallelism from Western Deccan, like a local jājmān. According to Dilip Menon, this level of extra-kingly patronage was embedded in an active ‘moral-community of work’ where proscriptions of hierarchy were often mediated by lordly affinity and intimation.<sup>40</sup> Quite interestingly, many of these sites had also worked as the centres of arbitration, especially in those inter and multi-party disputes which involve members of different castes who live without any formal commensal-ties. The kingly postures in ‘Theyyam complex’ were structured primarily by the contextual exigencies in organizing localist production regimes. Topographic particularities of the region (which was dotted with extensive beds of lateritic dry-land, forested groves and scattered patches of wet-rice agriculture) had inserted an imprint of heterogeneity upon the popular subsistence. This heterogeneity was peddled into the systems of everyday magical religion and its esoteric narratives. It has to be remembered that many Theyyam shrines in Malabar were accessible to the members of so called ‘polluting’ Hindu castes that formed the bulk of regional agrarian population.

The key characters in thōttam are the deities of prosperity or of potential trouble. In a number of narratives, they are represented as being once emerged from the ‘victims’ of an unprecedented injustice or an unexpected treachery. These victims are posthumously deified. Another type of thōttam characters includes certain more-than real-life personages. They had also been given positions in the Theyyam pantheon, but strictly after their death. This is mainly as the ‘effect’ of their prodigious activities and commitments which transcend the corporeal absence. They were believed to be of extra-ordinary in physical and mental abilities. These super-

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<sup>40</sup> Dilip Menon, “Intimations of Equality: Shrines and Politics in Malabar 1900-1923.” In *Dalit Movements and Meanings of Labor in India*, ed. Peter Robb (Delhi: Oxford University Press.1993): 245-276.

human credentials were often stated as uncontrollable within the limits of the contemporary temporal order. A small group of deities fall into the category of ancestral-cults but with a limited congregational following. The followers of an ancestral cult belong to a household-based an extended kin-group, generally composed of local agriculturalists and peddling traders. Deities of the first and the second type (i.e. the ‘victims’ and the ‘super-humans’) have comparatively wider lay-following even though it becomes congregationally active during the festival-season in their specific shrine-centres. The lay-followers are studiously familiar with the foundational legend, and even with the liturgy of their deities as it had been expressed in the thōttam narratives of their immediate folk-territory.

The story of Āippaḷli Thōttam deals with the post-mortem deification of two apparently different personhoods. In the format of pre-19<sup>th</sup> century Malabar society, these personhoods shared no commensal affinity between each other, in particular on the basis of the given hierarchy of castes in which they were born and later led their specific temporal profiles. Both of them belong to the pantheon category; the ‘victims’ but with a peculiarity. They bore permanent wound-marks of an act of injustice of which their king was the sole perpetrator. They were murdered by the king. The first victim was a native Brahmin; a Nambūthiri of substantial wealth and landed opulence. The second was a prodigious agrarian-servant who was an ‘untouchable’ by his caste status. He was the headmen to a band of predial Pulaya workmen who served the Brahmin chief in his wetland paddy-enclosure. Even though they seem like occupying the extremes of Hindu caste hierarchy, these two personhoods—Brahmin and the ‘Untouchable’—express a certain syntagmatic similarity in the literary domain of the thōttam. The murdered Brahmin and his servant are described as if they were occupying the realm of extra-ordinary, even

before their posthumous deification. This aspect appears like a trait-like regional convention in sanctioned apotheosis. Fallen victims—despite the specificity of their cultural classification as the ‘lineage-based’, and as the ‘alien’ ghosts<sup>41</sup>—are the potential gods. But in Āippaḷḷi Thōttam, they are phenomenally unusual to the known society. The pre-deified victim creates an unparalleled exemplar through deification. Its cultural emulation soon after figures as an important, if not the central, trope in several narrative realms. The very act of ordained deification is resulting from an unusual incurring of the kingly wrath; an injustice which, in the essence of its historical occurrence, embodies an aberration from what is considered as the ‘past’ and as the ‘proper’ by the thōttam story-line. The felt/committed injustice and the impropriety that it ultimately produced thus have no history, no customary existence in the locality and, it has no precedence. The pre-deified victim, its death rather stands out as a unique enactment and, it is distanced from the familiar ways of getting things settled. Given the longstanding obsession in the *mahāpāthaka* felony of brahmanicide,<sup>42</sup> the Brahmin victim is the curse-inflicting experience. Similarly, the prodigious ‘Untouchable’ is equally non-historical *vis-a-vis* the regional kingship. Being an extra-ordinary entity in its uncontrollable temporal capability, the ‘Untouchable’ could possibly rise above the conventional existence of normalcy. If we consider aesthetics of deification in the thōttam genre as an easily fabricable cognitive-device and assume that it was designed to make sense out of an unprecedented situation or the disjuncture, these narratives would readily appear as

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<sup>41</sup> Kathleen E Gough, "Cults of the Dead among the Nāyars." *The Journal of American Folklore* 71/281 (1958): 446-78.

<sup>42</sup> M. G. S. Narayanan, "Socio Economic Implications of the Concept of Mahapathaka in the Feudal Society of South India." *Proceedings of Indian History Congress* 37 (1976): 111-118.

an important, but yet un-investigated, registry of early-modern political re-articulation.

The thōttam of Āippaḷḷi accompanies the performance (*kōlam*) of a deity called Āippaḷḷi Daivam. It is performed by the ritual specialists of a regional ‘untouchable’ caste named the Pulayas who reside in the present-day district of Cannanore in the Indian state of Kerala. The foundational legend in the thōttam is set in the regnal years of kings of Kōlathunāḍu Swarūpam who—despite their kingship being divided into several collateral households and embroiled in mutual conflict—were fortunate to extent their native rule, especially its 18<sup>th</sup> century revenue-collecting prerogative, up to 1799. They were pensioned off as mere *mālikhānah* recipients in 1800. But this kingship had retained the landed fundamentals of their material power all through the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Kōlathunāḍu kingly households remained as the major ground-rent takers from most of their private demesne property or the *chērikkal* which was once central to their medieval kingly origin and political articulation.<sup>43</sup> The thōttam of Āippaḷḷi speaks about a Brahmin chief; the Eḷa-nampūthiri of Aḷḷikkōḍu who, though a junior, and a prescriptively celibate, member in his household’s line, lived in a traditional castle of opulence or the *aramana*. The landed Brahmin had a faithful servant from the ‘untouchable’ Pulaya caste, named Pithāri. Both of them became unfortunate victims to an act of kingly injustice and unfounded anger. The unjust king was the Kōlathunāḍu senior; the Lord Kōlaththiri. Both the Brahmin and the ‘untouchable’ predial servant, thus says the thōttam, ‘lived in an unbelievable proximity and affine indulgence’. They were slain together by the king who had been blinded himself in a maddening spree of anger. The anger came from

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<sup>43</sup> Mailaparambil, *Lord of the Seas*: 34-35.

his mind for which, alas, there were no external justification other than those cases that we would very shortly make an attempt to look into.

The story of Āippaḷli Thōttam, like many others of its kind and temperament, is much popular in North Malabar. They are often fêted as setting an exemplar or at least, a proto-type, of the inter-caste social harmony in the long pre-modernity.<sup>44</sup> The standard folkloristics emphasises the emotive aspects, allegedly embedded in the Brahmin-Untouchable relationship. The deified-victimhood is frequently argued as the memorable vanguard of a rural social-protest against the ‘feudal’ as well as the caste-bound social hierarchy. Instances of victimhood-deification are further categorized as pre-political even from the so-called ‘ethno-historic’ point of view in the sense that they had little implication and effect in the real, the contemporary design of political power. According to an existing orthodoxy in Malabar’s ethno-history and folkloristics, the pre-modern political power revolved (only) around the textual-practice of Hindu kingship and caste, and their alleged sacrificial centrality in defining a local variant of the Hindu patrimonialism. In the specific context of North Malabar, the kingship was often depicted as an authentic, culturalist institution with trans-historical validity. The pre-19<sup>th</sup> century society was concluded as capable of maintaining its temporal order and repetitive stability even with the pale memory of a departed king.<sup>45</sup> A ‘virtual king’ was deemed as necessary (as if a fixation since the days of certain ancient Hindu law-givers) for all the futuristic

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<sup>44</sup> R. C. Karipath, *Kōlathu Nāṭṭile Theyyam Kathakal* (Trissur: Current Books 2004): 32-37.

<sup>45</sup> See, Margret Frenz, “Virtual Relations: Little Kings in Malabar.” In *Sharing Sovereignty: The Little Kingdom in South Asia*, ed. Margret Frenz and Georg Berkemer (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2003):81-92.

‘clashes of sovereignties’ in the region.<sup>46</sup> But, the very virtuality of Malabar king’s existence and the political relations that it allegedly produced had been marred with, what we would prefer to call, collective un-recognition and systematic denial. The thōttam of Āippaḷḷi captures our attention owing to its connection with a specific posture of denial that it articulates against the Kōlathunāḍu kingship, and, perhaps more importantly, against the ‘Malabar Kūṭṭam’ which, as Margret Franz once argued—but without any verifiable foundation in her primary sources—, was the ‘assembly of native Rajas’.<sup>47</sup>

### 3. God Āippaḷḷi and the Denial of the Early Modern Hindu King.

The story of the God Āippaḷḷi carries a subtle riddle in its overt gesture of political denial. The unjust king of Kōlathunāḍu, the Kōlathiri, who caused the victimhood of Pithāri and his Brahmin master, is stated as instituting divinity; the pantheonhood, to the victims of his-own anger and injustice. In other words, the deification of an apparently anti-king position is portrayed as an ordained apotheosis in which the king, very fountain of the committed injustice and transgression, is narrated as the central agency in the ritual of ordination. However, this kingly act of deification, as it was explained in Āippaḷḷi Thōttam, involves the aspect of a fear (about an ever-inflicting curse) and thus, an unenclosed rite of public atonement. Unlike in the secretive (i.e. domestic) paradigm of *āsoucha* purification, the atonement by apotheosis constitutes itself as a public event. Given the carnivalesque

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<sup>46</sup> Margret Frenz, *From Contact to Conquest: Transition to British Rule in Malabar, 1790-1805* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003); Margret Frenz, “Pazhassi Raja between Independence and Submission: The Concept of Rule in Late Eighteenth Century Malabar.” *Tapasam* 1/1 (2005): 201-210.

<sup>47</sup> Frenz, *From Contact to Conquest*: 15-16. Also see, K. N. Ganesh, “Review [Margret Frenz, *From Contact to Conquest: Transition to British Rule in Malabar, 1790-1805*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2003, Rs 595].” *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 42/4 (2005): 564-566.

ambience in the Theyyam theatre-ritual, this public dimension had a sacrilegious implication on the patron and his hereditary kingliness. The canonization of other's victimhood is indeed a known narrative trope in the Southern Indian scenario. The ordination of the Kaṇṇki-Paṭṭini by the celebrated Chēra king Chenkuṭṭuvan perhaps provides us with an early example. However, the composer of *Chilappathikāram*, the poet Iḷankōvaṭikaḷ makes it clear in that his patron's act of enshrining Kaṇṇki was not a gesture of repentance over the sin that he or his generation had previously committed. Rather, it was more like an obedient *bhakta*-type involvement, merely intending to receive the grace of an all-powerful, and oftentimes, a ferocious mother-goddess.<sup>48</sup> In the thōṭṭam of Āippaḷḷi, however, post-mortem deification of victimhood was described as resulting from a serious ritual humiliation in the orchestrated kingship. The crowned king of Kōlathunāḍu had tuned to be a sinful being. If the sin remains un-atoned, it could prevail over the kingly household and indeed, over his entire royal domain as a malevolent, an inauspicious omen and as an offing danger. In this sense, the apotheosis represents an eventual predicament. How does this predicament unfold in the thōṭṭam of Āippaḷḷi and what occurrences could have possibly run parallel to its narrative realm of collective remembrance? In order to engage with these important concerns, we would quickly look at the tale of Āippaḷḷi and show that there were certain extra-ordinary procedures active in the landed milieu which created a wedge of incompatibility with the known past and hence, its formalities in the Hindu royal dictum. These procedures—and also the

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<sup>48</sup> Chummar Choondal, "The Kannaki Legend in Kerala Folklore." *Folklore* 19/7 (1978):188-201; Kamil Zvelebil, "The Lay of the Anklet." *Mahfil* 4/3&4 (1968):9; Brenda E.F. Beck, "The Study of a Tamil Epic: Several Versions of Silappadikaram Compared." *Journal of Tamil Studies* 1(1972): 23-38.

situations of predicament that they eventually created—were deeply endemic to the Malabar world.

In the very beginning of thōttam, Brahmin chief of Aḷikkōḍu was stated as residing in an *aramana* or the castle. To the best of our current understanding of the lingual etiquette on regional Hindu castes and also the Malabar custom, *aramana* is an unusual usage if deployed for the natal residence of a Malayali Brahmin or the Nampūthiri. The Malayalam-speaking Brahmin instead resided in architectural abode which is specifically constructed and was called as *illam* or more simply as *mana*.<sup>49</sup> But the term *aramana* prima facie invoke a royal or a king-like posture on the part of its sanctioned occupant. According to Herman Gundart *aramana* is the royal house, a palace or a court<sup>50</sup> where the king and his entourage spend their lifetime and consumed the best qualities of his otherwise inherited kshātrahood. In the tale of Āippaḷḷi, Brahmin *aramana* does convey a state of king-likeness. It is not a sui-generis royalty by the routinized myth or by the genealogical inheritance. Rather, it appears more like an achieved, a parvenue status in the given grid of political authority. Similar incidences of parvenue kingliness were also reported from other places. For instance, in the locality of Kavaḷappāra in Southern Malabar a refractory chieftain named as Mūppil Nāyar of Kavaḷappāra—who made a political life on the porous fringes of Calicut and Cochin kingdoms—was occupying a private *koṭṭāram* or the palace.<sup>51</sup> The expression of Brahmin *aramana*, therefore, points towards a secondary, yet an autonomous, formation in the vocabulary of regional kingliness. This could be a recent achievement, and it possibly had emerged out of

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<sup>49</sup> William Logan, *Malabar* (Madras: Government Press, 1887): 85

<sup>50</sup> Gundart: *A Malayalam-English Dictionary*: 71

<sup>51</sup> K.K.N. Kurup, ed. *Kavalappara Papers* (Calicut: Calicut University, 1984): xiii

the Brahmin lineage's traditional-roles. Some of these Brahmin-roles were overtly religious and ritualistic such as that of the so-called 'visiting-husband' to the ruling kshatriya and the śūdra households. But some others, as we could see below, constitute an extra-ritualist portfolio in the contemporary order of alienable assets, especially in the management of landed-property and its regular improvisation.

In this regards, in the realm of alienable landed assets, the concurrent economic tendency in Malabar's agrarian frontier was akin to the 'neo-Brahmanical landlordism' as it was recently argued by Devadevan for the 16<sup>th</sup> century Kannada territory.<sup>52</sup> Its 'newness' had been based on a Brahmin householder's ability to replicate the stability aspect from the Malabar kingly demesne or the chērikkal on one hand, and a trust of economic expansion from the contemporary sūdra proprietorship on the other.<sup>53</sup> Brahmin master of Aḷikkōḍu held an extensive chērikkal land-holding. He enjoyed an overlordship right over a group of seven *ūrālar* intermediaries and, over an effective *kōyma* overseer who belonged to the managerial caste of Maṇiyāṇi. All these aspects unfold towards a nascent, but an unusual, political formation being crafted around the aramana of Aḷikkōḍu. The Brahmin household further possessed "numberless bonded and hired labours" in its enclosed estate. This workforce was engaged in the cultivation of chērikkal property. Interestingly, the Brahmin chief is not described as performing his typical priestly prerogative of *tantram*, and its *ṣōdaśa* codes of exclusivity. He is not the medieval temple-fed being of ascribed temperance. Rather, the Brahman of Aḷikkōḍu is casted around a bristling, the worldly farmer-ethic of which the regional sūdra

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<sup>52</sup> Devadevan, *Pre-History of Hinduism*: 139-140.

<sup>53</sup> K. N. Ganesh, "Ownership and Control of Land in Medieval Kerala: Janmam—Kanam Relations during the 16<sup>th</sup> -18<sup>th</sup> Centuries." *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 28/3 (1991); 299-321.

proprietorship had been a premier model. The Brahmin had been commissioning an otherwise difficult agrarian enterprise in his landed property. This is the cultivation (*kothhi naḍathhuka*) of a fertile watershed or the *kaippāḍu*.

The thōttam maintains a silence on the natal origin of young Pithari; the Pulaya servant. He is declared as ‘an orphan’ who had once been ‘deputed to rear the cattle in the field’. Later on, he was owned by the Aḷikkōḍu household. He always completed the assignments on time, and committed no mistakes. The work was performed with utmost dexterity and servatile commitment. His Brahmin master soon noticed Pithari’s obedience and extra-ordinary capabilities. The master then decided to entrust this untouchable servant with an authority in farm overseership. Pithari was delegated to one of the chērikkal holdings. This was the revenue-circle of Chālāṭṭu Thara and Pithari was entitled with full power in its temporal management. He had to perform this assignment with his personal attendance, with ‘the authority of his eyes’ (*nōkki naḍathhuka*). The rite of entitling a Pulaya servant with supervisory authority is narrated in the thōttam as follows.

By the next dawn, in the morning

The serfs were called in to the threshing floor,

The Brahmin Master stood at its stone-steps

He decreed to the floor, aloud.

“Listen, thee my serfs, and Oh’ thee my the servants

Pithari of Chalattu Thara,

Be you the overseer of my plots,

The paddy enclosures, and of my water-filled reservoirs

Oh thee my serfs,

Do obey his words as mine,

And do [judge] him as me.”

The Pulaya servant was finally given a ‘rod of authority’ and a ceremonial umbrella. The Brahmin master informed him that there is no limit for his endowed overseership. No Maṇiyāṇi superintendent is to keep a watch on him in his new responsibility. His portfolio was instituted above the Brahmin master or the mēlkōyma himself. The servant’s only obligation was “to guard his master’s fields in the chērikkal from theft and any unsolicited encroachments”. Those who assembled at the trashing-floor, the serfs, the day-labourers and the haired workmen, accepted this decree of delegation. Then the Brahmin master walked down to the crowd through the masonry stone-steps. He came near to the Pulaya servants, and stood on the pavement, and presented Pithāri with a heavy spade or *kaikkōṭṭu*. ‘The rod of authority’ or the *kōlu* given to Pithāri conveyed an unprecedented supervisory prerogative. The ‘untouchable’ servant is now elevated into the position of an intermediary overseer. This elevation and his sanctioned wielding of the critical *kōlu*-rode undoubtedly enact a political possibility. This was a possibility of contained material accumulation and an associated enhancement in the servatile selfhood; both the real as well as the anticipated. ‘The rod of authority’ appears central to several other settings of contemporary political articulation and imposture. It is seen in the *Koodali Grandhavari* which is an in-house documentation from one

of the dominant households in the North Malabar politicalscape. This is the uncanny lordship of the Kalliāḍan Chieftains. They controlled an extensive domain of improvised landed-property on an old trade-route which ran from Cannanore in the west to the city of Seringapatam in the east. Just as the Kavaḷappāra chieftains of Southern Malabar, the sūdra proprietorship of Koodali was known for its perennial stances of revenue disobedience. It had been positioned against their political overlord; the Colastrian King of Cannanore and even against its immediate commensal ally; the King of Cotiote. ‘The rod of authority’ in Koodali is known as the *chūra-kkōl*. The chief patriarch or the *kāraṇava* of Koodali Kunnath reportedly held this symbol when he supervised a powerful cock-sacrifice in his household *kaḷari*.<sup>54</sup> All through the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Kalliāḍan lordship was successful in developing a parallel regime of privatization in landed property, and it was never conquered by the Kōlathunāḍu Kings.

The paddy marshes of Aḷikkōḍu were about to witness the burst of northwest monsoon or the torrential rains of *Eḍavappāthi*. Northwest monsoon enters Malabar from the Arabian Sea, from the coast of Oman and the Persian Gulf. The first course in its seasonal precipitation is received in the months of April and May, once this region completes its grand post-harvest fest of the vernal equinox, the Viṣu. All sea-ports and the inter-regional sea-born trade remain closed till early September when the rains end, and when the black-pepper yield and the *kanni* crop of wetland paddy are about to get reaped into another cycle of festivity and market transaction. However, Eḍavappāthi is not a hibernating interval, at least for those who prepare the paddy fields, look after the pepper-vines and the gardens. Labour demand shoots

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<sup>54</sup> “Document No. A-2, Dated 786 ME (c. 1593), Vrichigam.” In *Koodali Grandhavari*, ed. K. K. N. Kurup (Calicut: Calicut University, 1995): 1-2.

up into its extreme heights during Eḍavappāthi and intensive preparations should be managed in all paddy enclosures. The young Pithāri was busy in supervising his Chālāṭṭ chērikkal where waterlogged marshes or the kaippāḍu decided the format and the prospects of local agrarian operation. An extreme high risk is involved in preparing the water-logged wetlands for paddy cultivation. In Aḷikkōḍu, water-logged marshes are the estuarine formations. They were formed out of the deltic deviations in the famous river Dharmapatam which originates from the distant Coorgi upland. These marshes are shallow and seasonally saline (especially in long summers) and in some cases, they are prone to the devastating alterations of the river-tides. They are highly fertile by the lateritic and clayey sedimentation and always generated a bountiful yield for the paddy-cultivator. But the farming operations in them are always labour-intensive and very precarious. A small change in the tide, in the salinity and even in the local hydrologic discharge could turn all investments completely empty and void. Cultivating the paddy-marshes was historically more dependent on corporate efforts and ethic than the ordinary cultivation under seasonal rains.<sup>55</sup> Pithāri was always in the field. He ate the bare-minimum and he slept much less. He was leading his day-labourer comrades to work hard and meticulous. He kept all the mud-ramparts intact and protected his master's crop from a merciless season. The untouchable guarded the tides, but this Eḍavappāthi was fateful for him.

The crowned King of Kōlathunāḍu: the Kōlam-Muḍimannan was on his way to attend the festival of Māmānkam. The festival happens only once in 12 years and is being hosted in an orgiastic scale by the grand king of Calicut; the Zamorin, who

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<sup>55</sup> C.A. Innes, *Malabar and Anjengo; Madras District Gazetteers* (Madras: Superintendent of Government Press, 1908): 211.

ofttimes styles himself as ‘the Lord of Oceans and the Mountains’. King of Kōlathunāḍu wanted to be present personally in the venue of Māmānkam. In order to travel Calicut by land and from thence to the river-side of Ponnani—where this festival was being held—the king had to move southwards from his palace, and then he was to traverse the lordly realm of Aḷikkōḍu. The Kōlathunāḍu King had to cross the Brahmin chērikkal of Chālāṭṭ Thara with his armed Nāyars. His retinue was large and mostly made up of sword-bearing mercenaries, attendants and palanquin bearers. It was also armed with a small contingent of hand-gunners. The party had to mediate its way through an entire stretch of waterlogged marshes, steep elevations, dykes and a cluster of country-lanes. As they marched through the chērikkal of Chālāṭṭ, the young Pulaya servant was seen to him. Pithāri did not know about the festival of Māmānkam and the royal procession of Kōlam-Muḍimannan to attend it. He was sitting on a damaged mud-rampart or the *varambu*. The mud-rampart was also a narrow elevated-passage that ran across a vast waterlogged marsh where the workmen recently transplanted the paddy-seedlings. It was made of enormous human labour and designed as reinforced embankment of excavated mud and wooden-logs which protects the fields from unexpected inundation and river-tides. Continuous rains of Eḍavappāthi make this mud-embankment wet, and keep its wooden-frame soaked in the river salinity. The dampness invites a cast of paddy-field-crabs to the situation, and they can jeopardise the whole arrangement. Paddy-field crabs are so dangerous that they dig holes in every dampened slope, and leak them into destruction. The mud-embankments may fail, and devastate the collective effort of several laborious weeks. Pithāri was trying to catch a nasty family of paddy-field-crabs from its hole which was newly dug, still moist with the fleshy smell of a

pregnant female-crab. He could not apparently see the kingly procession which was approaching him from his behind.

Pithāri was after all an inauspicious *chandāḷa* for the Kōlathunāḍu Kingship. He was blocking the king's way and dishonouring the royalty by showing an extremely inauspicious omen: his impure untouchableness. Even a sūdra Nāyar, noted Francis Buchanan in 1800, was expected to cut down an untouchable who did not move out of the road as a Nāyar passes by.<sup>56</sup> The Kōlathunāḍu King was a kshatriya by his proclaimed caste status. He was enraged in the frenzy of an imagined dishonour, and he turned uncontrollable. The king ordered the Nāyar retinue to kill the *chandāḷa* on the spot, and thus clear off his route from the momentary impurity. But the Nāyars did not listen to his order. It was inappropriate for them to act in such a mindless frenzy and intoxication. The arms-bearing Nāyars tried to council their king about the appropriateness in the kingly moderacy and the virtue of his slow action. The king was not in a mood to listen to the therapy of his bailiff, his attendants and his arm-bearing Nāyars. The king took out his gun; the loaded with lead and gunpowder rand shot the Pulaya servant on his forehead. The untouchable was gunned down and bleed out a contemporary history of injustice. And his body lay on the mud-rampart which he had tried at his best to repair once. In the end, the damaged rampart and the Eḍavappāthi rain survived this untimely death. The Brahmin master Aḷikkōḍu was miles away in his castle. He heard the gun-shots being fired from his paddy-field. The Brahmin came running to the spot and sow the bleeding corpus of Pithāri: his beloved farm supervisor who was 'shot

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<sup>56</sup> Francis Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras through the Countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar*, Vol.2 (London: T. Cadell and W. Davis, 1807): 410.

at his forehead and lying in the rain, helplessly on the crab-holes'. Panic struck him.

He was broken with grief and he thus lamented at the king:

“Had he been given a chance [to live],

Oh' you the King

Gold worth his weight could be given to you as the ransom.

If, my Pithāri, my servant had, at all

Committed a crime of impropriety”

But these lamentations had no effect on the Kōlathunāḍu King. On contrary, it infuriated him further. The king took these agonized utterances as the camouflaged insults upon his impartable royal being. He loaded his matchlock for a second time, shot at the lamenting Brahmin for several times and murdered him on the same spot where the untouchable servant was earlier slain.

What could be the kingly logic for murdering an otherwise insignificant untouchable farm-overseer? If one approaches this event from the historiographic vantage of *maryāda* or the caste-based norm of propriety, the murder of an untouchable—who allegedly transgresses the regional decorum of pollution—would appear like a mere conformist ritual. Some of the historians consider the *maryāda* as an omnipresent ‘law’; a ‘vernacularised’ *dhama-sāstra* of temporal stability. It encompassed all instances of crime, violation and causalities in the native societal milieu. Despite several contextual deviations from the standard *dharmasastra* jurisprudence, this nativist *maryāda* (or the historiographic take on it) hinges on the arbitrational centrality of king or of a communitarian coterie of ‘legal experts’ who

almost work in the format of a kingly exclusivity.<sup>57</sup> Since its alleged reference was a sponge-like ‘community’ and a text that it enviously guarded from ‘outsiders’, the traditional kingly-self is rarely found sacrilaged—not even for a single time—in its responsibility of arbitration. The community allegedly absorbs everything into its time-immemorial body and maintains the dhārmic stability. This is true in the king’s rewarding of death, corporeal punishment to a ‘violator’ of existing commensal codes, even if the punishment had taken its most bloody and violent format. But, even in this vicious maryāda logic, the death that had been given to Pithāri had a ‘surprise’ aspect. It was perhaps because of its unprecedented and surprising constitution that the Nāyar retinue turned down their king’s order to kill the Pulaya untouchable. Pithāri was ‘an elevated servant’ and lived in a state of liminality *vis-à-vis* the landowning Brahmin master. His portfolio was that of the physical service and obedience, and it brought him respect and trans-commensal intimacy. In the last intend, he was owned by the Brahmin. Pithāri was a Brahmin property. Murderous posture of the Kōlathunāḍu King appears like a personalized disposition by the traditionalist pathology. But, it was unshared in his maryāda based realm, even among his closest entourage.

In the meantime, the Kōlathunāḍu entourage had their own reasons for not following the king and his whimsical orders. It was a political time that witnessed contagious insurrections of numerous little political-interests which—although often invoked a protean ideology of *sēva* or the obedient service—frequently resorted to an array of subversive enterprise. From camouflaged disloyalty to violent anti-king rebellion, the erstwhile kingly entourage of functional elites had fielded themselves in a

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<sup>57</sup> Doland R Davis, “Recovering the Indigenous Legal Traditions of India: Classical Hindu Law in Practice in Late Medieval Kerala.” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 27/3 (1999): 159-213.

wide spectrum of activities.<sup>58</sup> All of them had been highly speculative in amassing wealth and material benefits, and some of them were substantially successful in producing privatized regimes of resilient, trans-dispensational, political agency. For the traditional Hindu kingship and its vernacularized verities, this was a situation of political uncertainty. In Malabar, the kingly authority was no longer able bank upon the edifice of the given maryāda which, by this time, was increasingly re-crafted as a patch-worked assemblage of extreme plasticity. As Donald R. Davis has recently showed, the insignia of rajaship; sanctioned symbols of the Malabar rajadom was not reserved for a specific, strictly native heredity. The English East India Company, when it emerged victorious in this region in 1792, was approximated as Maharaja or the ‘great king’, and its provincial bureaucracy; ‘as royal officials of the new “kings” of Malabar’.<sup>59</sup> Those native kings who were more ambitious than others tried their best to move the royal *gaddis* against this tide, and ornamented their already-hollowed crowns with certain public-authority impostures. The enactments of corporal as well as the revenue violence owned a key significance in this new, perhaps the early modern, royalist incarnation. However, as the thōttam of Āippaḷḷi indicates, this new incarnation remained structurally unacceptable even for the king’s otherwise intimate retinue, if not, the co-sharers of power in his royalist realm. When the untouchable Pithāri bleed and succumbed to an imposed corporeal annihilation, the native king was exiled from his present into an unreal past. The king turned out to be a sinner, personifying the eternal

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<sup>58</sup> See, Raman N. Seylon, “Study of Poligar Violence in Late 18<sup>th</sup> Century Tamil Country in South India.” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 3/3&4 (2004): 245-172; Mesrob Vartavarian, “Warriors and the Company State in South India, 1799–1801.” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 37/2 (2014): 212-224; Mesrob Vartavarian, “Pacification and Patronage in the Maratha Deccan 1803-1818.” *Modern Asian Studies*, 50/6 (2016): 1749-1791.

<sup>59</sup> Doland R. Davis, “Dharma, Maryada and Law in Early British Malabar: Remarks on Words for ‘Law’ in Tellicherry Records”. *Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik* 23 (2002): 55.

injustice, the evil and, as we could see below, the *kali*; the wicked time and its proscribed essence.<sup>60</sup>

The second instance of homicide in the thōttam is that of the Brahmin chief of Aḷikkōḍu. He was also murdered by the Kōlathunāḍu King. The Brahmin was killed because he expressed a poignant discontent in the king's action which caused his untouchable servant's death. If one looks at this homicide from the dhārmic paradigm of retribution, it would appear as a lawful resolution being sentenced upon a Brahmin householder who was found scandalising his inherited casteness. He broke the ṣōḍaśa codes of his household and of his portfolio of temple-priesthood. But, at another level, perhaps deeper in the thōttam text, the portrayal of Brahmanicide refers to a serious problematic which we think as being endemically build-up in Malabar kings' relations with the landed institutions of early-modern Brahmin-hood. We have already seen a tendency in neo-Brahmanical landlordism in this region and, as mentioned earlier, its property-practice had approximated certain prerogatives of the kingly routine on one hand and of the sūdra landed-proprietor on the other. While presiding over the realms of excessive revenue-consumption and the display oriented carnality, kings always felt the assistance of Brahmins as necessary. This was in order to render their inflated claims on contemporary power as 'customary' and hence, an authentic continuation from the past. The literate Brahmin-hood undertook this responsibility very successfully in particular by invoking a recently-invented vocabulary of kingly power, piety and the statist benevolence. The role of Brahmins in the early-modern statecraft was not confined to the priestly-councillor portfolio which, according to some neo-Hocartian

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<sup>60</sup> James Ponniah, "Alternative Discourses of Kali Yuga in Ayyā Vaḷi." *Nidan: An International Journal for Indian Studies* 26/1 (2014): 65-85.

elaborations,<sup>61</sup> was once *imagined* essential to the Hindu kingly being and its perpetual (i.e. trans-historical) reestablishment through ‘Sanskritized’ ritualism or an integrative gesture of redistribution. However, if one could pay attention to the recent research on the post 16<sup>th</sup> century politics and the institutionalized ‘*nīthi*-pragmatics’ that it eventually gave life to,<sup>62</sup> the most familiar (sometime, the ‘affine’) Brahmin-hood belonged to the landed and the literate-order. As an institution of expertise, it was increasingly put into public practice by the contemporary states.<sup>63</sup> The ‘royalist ‘domestic-ritual’ owned only a secondary importance. It was posterior to the immediate kingly politics and indeed, to the early-modern state. Brahmin thus occupied a number of prebendal responsibilities for which his inter-imperial specialization was a major requirement. They were often deployed as revenue-collectors, accountants, scribes, physicians, mercenary headmen, cooks, spies and as the itinerant messengers. In 18<sup>th</sup> century Travancore, especially after the centripetal rise of the re-born kshatriya king, Anizham Thirunal Marthandavarma (r.1729-58), the Brahmin-hood appeared almost like a statist project if not, a ‘semi-official surrogate’.<sup>64</sup> As a historical institution of salaried service, the early-modern Brahmin-hood had neither maintained a definite localist association nor a specific ethnic provenance. Instead, the Brahmins were drawn

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<sup>61</sup> Roland Inden, *Imagining India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000): 237-256

<sup>62</sup> Velcheru Narayana Rao and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Notes on Political Thoughts in Medieval and Early Modern South India.” *Modern Asian Studies* 43/1 (2009): 179-180; Rosalind O’ Halnon, “The Social Worth of Scribes: Brahmins, Kāyasthas and the Social Order in Early Modern India.” *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 47/4 (2010): 563-595.

<sup>63</sup> Rosalind O’ Halnon and Christopher Minkowski, “What Makes People Who They are? Pandit Networks and the Problem of Livelihoods in Early Modern Western India.” *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 45/3 (2008): 381-416; Rajeev Kinra, Master and Munshī: A Brahman Secretary's Guide to Mughal Governance.” *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 47/4 (2010):527-561.

<sup>64</sup> Gagan D.S Sood “The Informational Fabric of Eighteenth-Century India and the Middle East: Couriers, Intermediaries and Postal Communication.” *Modern Asian Studies* 43/5 (2009): 1113.

to the nexus of kingly business from all sectarian and linguistic stocks. At the same time, this temporal association with king's patronage and its *dañda* mechanism had proved fatal to the Brahmin's alleged ability in transcendence. He was still the preeminent agency, and lived within an exalted regime of prestation for his qualified services. But as Raheja has once showed, the 'unreturnable gifts' that a service-Brahmin receives from his patron contained the 'poison' of materiality, and thus it involved the sacrilege and inauspiciousness.<sup>65</sup> Perhaps much more dangerous to the brahma in its proximity to the affairs of the 18<sup>th</sup> century kshātra, was the physical demand of the *realpolitik* in which the ceremonial pre-eminence of hereditary Brahmin-hood were ridiculed and often circumvented. Service-Brahmin was frequently put at the stake. In other words, the statist niche of Brahmin-hood was so temporal that it always faced the challenge of being substituted by another, equally sophisticated, rung of prebendal aspirants of which, if one look at the Malabar experience, the literate sūdra was the greatest contender.

The sin of murdering a Brahmin (*brahma-hathya*) is one of the 'five grand-sins' or the *mahāpāthaka*. It was a pervasive restraint in the practice of medieval kingly authority in Malabar, particularly over those protected domains which were traditionally alienated to the syndicates of Brahmins and their structural temples.<sup>66</sup> But in the tōttam of Aippalli these protected sanctuaries are conspicuously absent, not even in the distant memory. Rather, the unprecedented *realpolitik* designation and the prodigious landed-wealth of the Brahmin master of Aḷikkōḍu are the reasons which made him a susceptible target of the kingly transgression. When the brahmanicide had taken place, its

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<sup>65</sup> Gloria Goodwin Raheja, *The Poison in the Gift: Ritual, Prestation, and the Dominant Caste in a North Indian Village* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

<sup>66</sup> Narayanan, *Socio Economic Implications of the Concept of Mahapathaka*

contamination is conceived as a 'play' in *kali*: the ultimate state of Indic kinglessness. Kali is an abominable situation of bewildering occurrences where either the persona of a powerful king was conceptually absent or there were several kings being put in simultaneous practice. As per the textualist orthodoxy, the *kali* makes different *varnās* and *guṇas* inter-dine in a dangerous proximity. But for the unknown compilers of Aippalli Thōttam, the state of *kali* is qualitatively different. It is the unjust, the evil-doing king. The *kali* is personified in the slayer king of Kōlathunāḍu and it is because of the gravity of his sin; his unprecedented wickedness and violence, fallen corpses amassed a ghostly weight. The dead-bodies of the slain Brahmin and his untouchable-servant lay in the Eḍavappāthi rain. As the rainy day progressed into a cloudy afternoon, the bodies gained weight. They lay unattended on the mud-rampart and on the vacant crab-holes. Nāyars and the Pulaya workmen tried their level best to lift the dead-bodies from the ground. But, the death did not move from the spot. They were afraid to approach the dead-bodies any further because diseased embody the sin of their crowned king.

Meanwhile someone was sent to the Brahmin mother of Aḷḷkkōḍu and informed her about the unfortunate end of Ela-nampūthiri who was her son. She was soon brought into the paddy field; the scene of death. The Brahmin mother did not break into tears, not even showed a glimpse of vengeance-seeking ferocity against the perpetrator. The fate of death was indeed violent and it was arbitrarily imposed on her the body son and his untouchable farm-servant. But, she was clairvoyantly composed as if she knew that these events were foretold and as if they are destined to cast a hellish spell. She looked at the fallen bodies on the ground and the stains of blood that spilled over the damaged rampart. As the Eḍavappāthi rain started drizzling into the dusk, she ordered the Nāyars and the Pulaya workmen;

“Let the death and its bodies live together.

The slain Brahmin and untouchable servant

They should lay and remain together

By their last rites,

On the pyre,

At an auspicious *rāsi* in the aramana gates.”

The workmen somehow moved dead-bodies for the final rite. Brahmin master and his Pulaya servant were buried together. Their funeral rituals were then continued for long forty-one days. But the departed spirits apparently remained unsatisfied. Their ghosts made a terrifying presence before the kingship. They were seen in Chirakkal where the king maintained his palace. The fallen Pithāri was everywhere.

The king’s palanquin did not move from its lot.

His pageants were cancelled on spot, in the last minute.

The princes were young.

But they had gone wild and mad.

The dead Pithāri came as a horary nightmare,

As frequent fallouts in king’s battles.

He came as a melancholy knot,

Infesting king’s valour and his command.

The ghost was seen in bed, over the fortress and at water-tanks

And at times, it stopped king's daily rites

Both at bath and at the hearth.

The kingly household was not able to find a resolution for its new predicament. Someone had to be called from outside. An astrologer was thus invited to find out the remedy, a timely resolution which could possibly tame the infesting ghost and save the regional kingliness from a bleeding fear. The royal household of Kōlathunāḍu was on the verge of an unavoidable break-up. There was internal schism and chronic infighting among its members and, perhaps more profoundly, amongst its old political subordinates. It was haunted by the death, the victimhood that it once sectioned on other's fate. The king wanted to expiate himself from the felony. 'Committed sin', thus told the king's soothsayers, 'was conjuring against his regality'. The only option of atonement was through public deification which however made the resurrected victimhood to act almost like the king, if not a standard anti-king.

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