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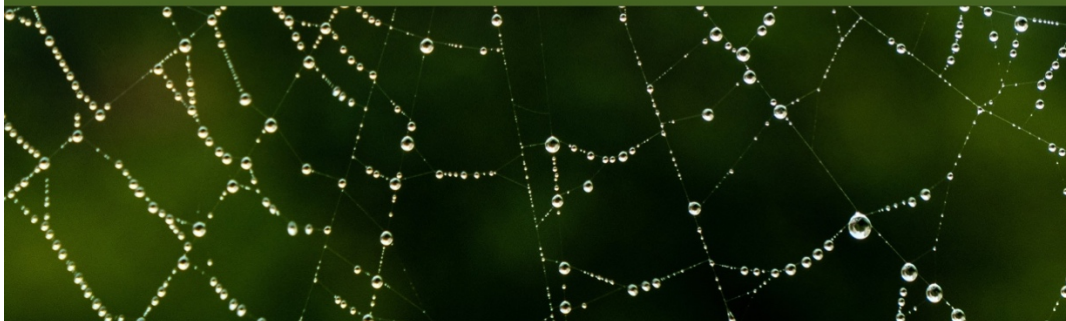
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Culture of Fear and Conservation of Nature: Critiquing the Construction of *Sarppakavu* in Kerala

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Abstract

This paper critiques the culture of fear accredited to *sarppakavu* in Kerala, through an investigation of William Logan's *Malabar Manual*. *Kavu*, the regional variant of sacred groves in Kerala, a state in Southern India, in the traditional sense is a consortium of trees devoted to various deities and *sarppakavu* is a variant that is dedicated exclusively to the worship of serpents. An ecozone guarded in the interest of a presiding deity, human intrusion into *kavu* is prohibited through a strategic amalgamation of myths and taboos. As a symbiotic space permeated by nature (forest) and culture (deity), it has undergone tremendous transformations. The paper argues that *sarppakavu* in Kerala is an epitome of human-nature-culture co-existence practised among non-indigenous communities, managed through the culture of fear-appeasement. It foregrounds that Logan analysed this culture of fear-appeasement from a religious perspective that delimited the sacred space of *kavu* and overlooked the role of ecofear in enhancing nature-human cohabitation through the construction and conservation of *sarppakavu*.

Keywords: fear, *kavu*, ecozone, culture, conservation, culture of fear

Introduction

The concept of *fear* plays a crucial role in the life of the people of Kerala. A small state located at the southern tip of the Indian peninsula, the region is separated from the mainland by the Western Ghats on the east and the Arabian Sea at the west. The area, covered by the vast expanse of dense forests, remained scarcely populated owing to its peculiar geography, mainly categorised into the climatic zones of highlands (rugged terrains of Western Ghats), midlands (hills and valley) and low lands (coastal plains) (Mannarasala 13). It's a largely agrarian civilization that flourished near the coastal plains and river banks formulated a distinctive cultural tradition rooted in fear of nature and supernature.

The fear extends from the forces and spirits of nature to the spirits of deceased ancestors which demand constant appeasement through ritualistic performances. These solemnities of fear-appeasement that centred on *kavukal*¹ or sacred groves formed the crux of Kerala's religio-ritualistic tradition. To surmise, the religiosity of the region developed from a distinctive form of fear culture interlinked to nature. The paper argues that the fear of the 'unknown,' especially the mystery of nature and death, formed the keystone of Kerala's indigenous religiosity. It also explores the function of fear dynamics in the conservation of nature through the institution of

sarppakavu, particularly in nineteenth-century Kerala, by analysing the vignette of snake worship in William Logan's *Malabar* (1887).

Logan's Hinduism: A Consolidation of Regional Religiosity in *Malabar Manual*

Popularly known as *Malabar Manual*, the text is termed as a 'guide' to Malabar, a district under the erstwhile Madras Presidency of British India. Initially published in two volumes, Logan complies the work commissioned by the Government of India during his tenure as the Collector of Malabar. An exhaustive treatise on the geography and people (caste, religion, language and culture) of Malabar, it is often regarded as a historical document of the region. His experience with the native culture and proficiency in the regional languages of Malayalam, Tamil, and Kannada had enhanced the quality and quantity of the volumes. However, as a typical gazetteer commissioned during the imperial era, the book is an explicit example of an oriental text that projects the Colonial perspectives, achievements and propaganda to glorify the imperial influence in civilizing the people of Malabar. The text also suffices as an excellent specimen of the colonial attempt to construct the unified religion of Hinduism by coalescing the people belonging to various castes and creed into the Hindu pantheon.

This study focuses on the *Malabar Manual* because of two reasons: (1) the earliest literary text to document *kavu* and (2) its dichotomous reflection of this (*kavu*) phenomenon. Logan describes *vishattum kavu* (poison shrine) with respect to the culture of fear associated with snake worship in Malabar (184). Since the *kavukal* in Kerala venerate numerous gods, goddesses and ancestral spirits broadly classified as *Ammadeivakavukal*,ⁱⁱ *Purushadevakavukal*,ⁱⁱⁱ *Mrigadeivakavukal*^{iv} and *Pretakavukal*,^{v,vi} the exclusive documentation of serpent groves exhibits a subjective act of selection and omission. Intriguingly, from the multifarious *kavukal*, Logan chose only to document those groves devoted exclusively to the worship of serpents whereas a conspicuous silence is maintained towards the groves dedicated to other deities.

Furthermore, the sketches of *vishattum kavu* on a brief segment in the sub-section of "*Hindus*" (179) under the gambit of Religion delimits the heterogeneous existence of the phenomenon of *kavu*. The opening remarks on Hinduism as "the strange medley of cults and religions" (179) is an explicit criticism of the eclectic and primitive form of religiosity practised in the region. It displays the aggression with which he indulged to expunge and systematize the diverse traditions exercised in the locality under the tenet of Hinduism. Throughout the section, Logan's evaluation of native religiosity is impaired and confounding. He often interlinks Indigenous and diverse caste-based practices and intermittently misstates the same.

Logan traces the regional religiosity of Malayali Hindus to "aboriginal cult" or "animism," wherein the people confide in afterlife and troth in "the propitiation of evil spirits" (179). Apparently, his animism corresponds to the system of ancestral worship practised by the indigenous inhabitants of Kerala [Menon (1967), Uchiyamada (2003), Vadakkiniyil (2004), Payyanad (2014), Tarabout (2015)]. He unveils a society of sophistry overwhelmed by supernature wherein the people placated the deceased spirits by offering materialistic things such as "weapons, the cooking pots, the oil receptacles, the lamps, the ornaments and implements which they used when during life" (179) to deflect the "unhappiness" the spirits would invoke on the living (179). Despite using the term "aboriginal cult" (179), the text indisputably fails to elucidate the identity

of the aboriginal inhabitants and the illustrations are limited to the death rites, and fear-appeasement practised among the Nayar, the Ezhava and the artisan castes of Malabar. According to his observations, these people set apart a portion of the southern-side homestead gardens to bury the burnt bone of the deceased ancestor (179). Strikingly, the taboos concerning the defilement of these burial sites correspond to those that surround *kavukal*.

Nevertheless, he compares and establishes a correlation between the rites of obsequies to the system of sepulchral urns and fertility cults^{vii} (179, 182). He analogises the urn to the “womb of Mother Earth” (182) and discerns that the hole at its bottom emblemize the cervical canal of the uterus (“*os uteri*” 182). Thus, the death rites are interlinked to the fertility cults. Next, he conjoins the loosely described traditions of obsequies to the credo of snake worship through the culture of fear-appeasement. Here, he identifies irrational fear of supernature as the key factor upon which both the traditions are built. Likewise, the consociation of snake worship with phallic, *sakti* (feminine power) and tree worship also lacks cohesion since the cult of venerating tree and mother goddess (*sakti*) are the immanent aspect of Indigenous religiosity observed with respect to the *kavu* tradition. Whereas, the worship of the phallus and androcentrism are non-indigenous elements that infiltrated Indigenous religiosity with the establishment of Vedic Brahminism in the region. Unfortunately, the traditional systems of worships concerning *kavu* are non-existent from Logan’s account.

Another arresting facet involves the disconcert surrounding the categorisation of Vedic Brahminism (along with Jainism, Buddhism and Vedantic religion of Sankaracharya) as a foreign influence upon the native religiosity and professing the aboriginal, non-traditional and Brahminic practices in an entangled manner. Here, Logan equates diverse texts of regional religiosity against the dogma of Christianity and attempts to codify the indigenous worship systems under Hinduism. Remarkably, the Indigenous inhabitants who practised the ancestral and fertility cults within the sacred space of *kavukal* is conspicuously absent from his account. This absenteeism is problematic and indicates the zeal with which the colonialist ceaselessly engaged to eliminate the aboriginal or untouchable existence from his oriental text. The extent of this conundrum is apprehensive from the fact that he not only borrowed the indigenous traditions but also accredited the hierarchically privileged (Nayars/Ezhavas/Artisan) castes as its practitioners in his treatise. Thus, he consciously erased the corporeality of untouchable castes to construct the religiosity of Hinduism founded on the indigenous culture of fear-appeasement pertaining to the *kavukal*.

A *kavu* is a thicket with a water body that guards a particular deity. This ancient phenomenon of animism universally practised during the prehistoric times is closely associated with the cults of the tree and, mother goddess worships [Menon (1943), Rajagopal (2004), Payyanad (2013)]. It is a heterogeneous, tempo-spatial process that continually redefines itself with respect to the human relationships forged in each milieu (Vadakkiniyil 84). According to the indigenous belief system, the spirits of nature and ancestors inhabited certain trees which were venerated (Uchiyamada 70 & 75, Tarabout 28). A. Sreedhara Menon, also comments on the harmonious co-existence of the indigenous inhabitants with nature (83). The indigenous communities revered nature as an enigma from which life emerged and considered it to be the repository that offered shelter and food. For the humans, the mysticism of nature or the first home, inspired an admiration intermixed with a fear of the unknown. This awe and fear crystallised into the cult of nature and ancestor worship among the indigenous communities. Thus, the concept of

ecofear or the fear of nature tends to play a decisive role in revising Kerala's religio-ritualistic tradition.

Dynamics of Fear

Fear is an emotion triggered in response to stimuli that is often unpleasant and casts a lasting impression on behaviour and physiology. The term derived from Middle English *fere* and Old English *faer* signified "calamity, sudden danger, peril", and traces its origin to Proto-Germanic *feraz* which denoted "danger" ("Fear"). The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* describes fear as "an unpleasant emotion caused by the threat of danger, pain or harm" and archaically defines it as "a mixed feeling of dread and reverence" or "regard (God) with reverence or awe" (518). Although fear can be surmised as an emotional state that triggers anxiety, this personal experience stretches from the immediate social state (family, community, state, nation), to the global. It is a universal experience that is personal and generic.

Fear has been studied from various perspectives including psychology, ethology, biology, neurobiology and theology (Gray 1987; Archer 1976; Adolphs 2013; Gracia 2017; Ohman & Mikena 2001). However, a philosophical inquiry on fear emerged in the late twentieth century when Desh Subba introduced the theory of fearism in his seminal book, *Philosophy of Fearism* (2014). According to Subba, fear is an integral aspect that conducts, guides and controls everyday human life. Therefore, he approaches fear as an inherent facet of human existence that can be positively channelized for personal benefits (Fisher & Subba, 2016, 10-11). In the twenty-first century, the study of fear or fearology emerged as an academic, albeit outsider, discipline in the aftermath of 9/11. This new area of critical enquiry is a holistic transdisciplinary approach towards understanding the nature and interactions of fear with all systems and entities (living or non-living, visible or invisible), which also aims to explore the ways through which fearlessness can be achieved. R. Michael Fisher, a main exponent of fearology, defines fear as a phenomenon of universal *pattern* in human experience which is culturally constructed through conditioning ("Introduction" 19). He compares and contrasts fear with love and postulates fear (i.e., 'fear') as a "disease" that invokes a series of negative emotions such as "toxicity, distress, hurt, non-self-regulation" ("Introduction" 9), which indicates "suffering in human beings" ("Introduction" 7). According to Fisher, dominant societies unleash the disease of fear to terrorise and govern their subjects. Therefore, he defines fear as "the dominant symptom of hurting, that is traumatized, human beings living in oppressive societies" ("Introduction" 19).

The process of instrumentalizing and commodifying fear as an oppressive means to control a society creates a culture of fear. Otherwise, sometimes known as "climate of fear." The culture of fear refers to an individual's or an institution's potential to induce fear in the public sphere to accomplish political or work environment objectives through emotional predispositions. Initially developed as a sociological construct in the early 1980s, by the late 1990s Frank Furedi developed the conception in a first book on the topic (Frazer 710-712), it was soon promoted by Barry Glassner (quoted from Klaehn 23-24). Fisher defines it as "the attempt to manage fear by using fear based means, which creates more fear than less" (cited in "Ecocriticism, Ecophobia" 13). Therefore, the culture of fear can be delineated as a fear-based mechanism that governs through the propagation of toxic fear(ism).

The institution of Religion is an excellent instance of this fear culture. Bertrand Russell in his 1927 lecture, “Why I Am Not a Christian” (delivered to the National Secular Society, south London), argues that religious beliefs are primarily founded on fear. He identifies a reciprocal relationship between religion and fear and demonstrates religion as a “symptom of fear” and *visa-versa* (Carlisle). According to him, “Religion is based primarily and mainly upon fear. It is partly the terror of unknown and partly the wish to feel that you have a kind of elder brother who will stand by you in all your troubles and disputes. Fear is the basis of the whole thing- fear of mysterious, fear of defeat and fear of death” (qtd. from Carlisle).

The Indigenous religiosity of Kerala is largely founded on this aspect of a culture of fear, conquered through the rituals of appeasement. The people feared the “unknown” entities which were beyond the realms of their comprehension. The mystery of nature and death were two significant aspects that troubled them the most. They mastered this fear through deification of their fear and formulated rituals (of oblation). However, this culture of fear-appeasement differs from the general presumptions of the climate of fear. The Indigenous fear culture is established such that an ethical understanding is entrenched between the humans and their natural environment to promote human-nature cohabitation.

The fear of Nature is a universal pattern that is integral to humanity. Fisher terms this “deep fear of nature” as *ecofear* (quoted from Alex and Deborah, 422) and distinguishes it from *ecophobia*. He argues that the human beings share an antipodal relationship of “deep fear” and “deep love for Nature and things wild” (“Indigenous Criticism” 4) and employs the “Indigenous worldview” to explain its conflicting correlation (“Indigenous Criticism” 6). He postulates the difference (fear/love) arises from the disparity between the Western (anthropocentric) and Indigenous (biocentric) worldviews (“Indigenous Criticism” 11-12).

Detached from nature, Western civilization is dominated by an extreme toxic fear of it. On the contrary, the Indigenous communities nurture rational healthy fears, wherein the thrust is laid on nature, and the members are encouraged towards a harmonious cohabitation. Such ‘balancing’ within the Indigenous worldview minimizes the destructive ecophobic impacts. Discriminate use of nature and its conservation is the keystone upon which the indigenous myths and cultures are developed. This worldview arises from a deep understanding of nature as the life source or the home essential for survival. The wisdom originates from the ethical awareness that nature is a shared space, a continuum constituted by diverse elements including human beings and its exploitation in any form jeopardizes the ecobalance. Therefore, fear in the form of reverence and sacralization of natural entities are sought by the indigenous communities to ensure a sustainable lifestyle where they inculcate fear and deep love towards nature.

Expanding on Fisher’s “rational fears” and “deep love” that Indigeneity fosters for nature, Rayson K. Alex and Susan S. Deborah address the issue in their seminal essay, “Ecophobia, Reverential Eco-fear and Indigenous Worldview” by introducing the theory of ‘Indigenous Reverential Eco-fear’ (IRE). Here, they distinguish ecophobia from the ecofear promulgated by the Indigenous communities. According to them, ecofear is an “integrative ideology” (422) wherein the people maintain their innate links with nature through the sacralization of natural and cultural entities. This process of sacralization “manifest as fear, awe, and/or reverence” and construct a concatenation of “nature-culture-sacred” (422). Alex and Deborah define IRE as the

fear *cum* reverence that Indigenous inhabitants nurture towards nature. They describe it as an “ethical contract” which maintains humans’ “deep connection with the material nature” (423) and argues that the indigenous communities instrumentalise ecofear in the form of fear-reverence as a cultural agency to preserve human-nature interconnectedness, and portray sacred groves as an instance of nature-culture-sacred manifestation among the non-traditional communities. Thus, the fear that Kerala’s traditional and non-traditional communities foster towards *kavu*/Nature is reverential ecofear. *Sarppakavu* or serpent groves in Kerala is the typical example of human-nature co-existence found among non-indigenous communities.

***Sarppakavu*: Manifestations of Ecofear**

Sarppakavu denotes a sacred grove that is devoted to the worship of serpent deities. Worshipped in various parts of the world, including some regions of India, the veneration of serpents with a sacred grove is unique to Kerala and is distinctively found among the *tharavad*^{viii} (ancestral home) or homestead gardens of Nayars and Brahmins (Jayakumarikunjamma 15, Jayakrishnan 29-30, Mannarasala 24). One of the ubiquitous forms of *kavu*, it is marked by strict conventions that bar human intrusion through the medium of myths and taboos. The term derived from the Sanskrit “*sarp*” denotes a snake whereas “*kavu*” in the regional language of Malayalam traces its origin to the Dravidian dialect ‘*kakk-*’ which means ‘to guard’ (Freeman 261). Therefore, the institution of *sarppakavu* is a sacred space ‘guarded’ exclusively for the use of the serpent deities by the caste hierarchy.

Compared to the other *kavukal* which are public and follows a community-based worship system, the institution of *sarppakavu* is a privately owned sacred space exclusive to the castes Nayars and Brahmins (Jayakrishnan 30). Utmost purity of mind and body is a requisite to enter this sacred space and delinquency presumes a series of misfortunes (Jayakumarikunjamma 20). The snakes are anthropomorphised as irascible divine entities who inflict diseases (Jayakrishnan 27) if its conventions are violated, especially the desecration of *kavu*. Rich in trees and climbers, this ecozone is protected by small compound walls that usually mark its sacred boundary. Its iconolatriy comprises a parapet upon which the serpent icon/stones, with(out) *chitrakootakallu*^{ix} (granite stone) are consecrated. This sacred space constituted by a *kavu* (forest), pond and *chitrakootakallu*, symbolise the three areas in which snakes reside—trees, water and earth (Jayakumarikunjamma 18-19).

However, the system of worship differs depending on the caste to which the grove belongs. The customs are comparatively rigid if owned by a Brahmin family. Here, the priestly and ritualistic performances are mediated by a Brahmin. Previously, the strict observation of caste-based purity-pollution restricted the Indigenous inhabitants’ participation (Jayakrishnan 26-27). The solemnities are comparatively relaxed if the groves belonged to the Nayar *tharavad*. Here, the ritual experts of Pulluva^x (subaltern) caste presides over the propitiation ceremonies (Jayakrishnan 26-27) and the Nayars oversee the ceremonies. Nevertheless, this cult shares a resemblance to the reverential ecofear and appeasement associated with *kavu*.

A *kavu* is an ecozone marked culturally through sacralization. Evolution of this eco-cultural space paralleled the progression of the Indigenous inhabitants over the millenniums and continues to the present. This continuity or the constant expansion makes it a unique phenomenon that has

transgressed the test of time. The primitive form of nature reverence initiated through the tree and ancestral worship among the Indigenous communities transpired to fertility cults with the rise of agri'culture'. Nature in the form of 'land' that nurtured 'life' became the 'new' sacred and the era witnessed the transition of humans from consumers of natural products to small scale producers. Gradually, the agricultural land with its fertility and elements of moderate climatic conditions was sacralized. This act of sacralizing a natural entity is termed as "nature-culture-sacred continuum," by Nirmal Selvamony (quoted from Alex and Deborah 425) as it reinstates the nature-human interconnection through an ethical understanding of the environment.

The process of sacralization reflects the Indigeneity's innate urge to conquer their fears through reverence. The unsophisticated form of worship accrued sophistry when society became agrarian. Here, the Indigenous communities projected their fear of nature's unpredictability in the form of a mishap reflected as a poor yield due to extreme weather (excessive rain/heat/wind) or lack of fertility. This fear prompted the modification of the existing worship system into a ritualistic tradition rooted in fear-appeasement. However, the expansion of agriculture threatened the existence of the sacred forests, disrupted the human-nature exchange and necessitated the demarcation of the sacred space of worship from deforestation. Thus the 'land' cleared for cultivation marked the boundary between nature and culture. The origin of *kavu* can be hypothesized to this juncture in the agrarian period, when the sacred space inside the forest was culturally shielded from destruction through myths and taboos. The active human involvement intended to preserve *kavu* ('*kakku-*' or 'to guard') elucidates its meaning as a geographically marked sacred forest guarded against destruction. Thus, *kavu* gained its current definition as a 'protected forest.' Sacralization of *kavu* bridged the gap between nature-culture materiality, and the reverential ecofear rekindled the human connectedness with nature which makes it a distinctive system of worship rooted in Indigenous Reverential Ecofear.

The next phase of *kavu* is forged from a society of refinement which was immoderately materialistic. The age classified by the establishment of the caste system by the Vedic Brahmins culminated in depriving the Indigenous inhabitants of their dignity, freedom and religion, and dissipation from their ancestral land. The caste hierarchy comprising the feudal Brahmins and Nayar (warlords) feared the Indigenous *kavu* on account of the ancestral worship practised within it (Uchiyamada 115-116, Vadakkiniyil 77). They deemed the Indigenous spirits to be invincible and noxious. Thus, *kavu*, which is the sacred space of the Indigenous inhabitants mutated to a formidable space for the casteist.^{xi} Yasushi Uchiyamada defines a *kavu* as "sacred and fearful place, which is also dangerous and a powerful place haunted by jealous, greedy and capricious ghosts, demons, ancestors, demigods and demigoddesses who intervene in the lives of the living" (119). Consequently, the casteist not only reserved the *kavukal* but also held its propitiation rituals periodically to deflate the misfortunes inflicted by pernicious spirits. This resulted in the construction of a religiosity ingrained in the fear-appeasement of "alien ghost" (Gough 463).

Kathleen Gough validates this phenomenon through her investigation on the death rites observed among the Nayars. She identifies three cults of deceased-spirit-worship practised by the Nayars. The credo of "alien ghosts" is particularly striking; this caste regarded the premature deaths of former soil-slaves (from "epidemic, accident, murder, or suicide") as a "misfortune to the living" in the forms of "sickness, madness, female barrenness, cattle deaths, house fires, or poltergeist activities" (463). Consequently, these ghosts were enshrined within the homestead

gardens and were offered oblations^{xiii} (464). Here, it may seem that the fear of supernature (alien spirits) and its immolation replaced Indigenous reverential ecofear, but the actuality reveals a counter narrative.

The fear of the spirits' wrath in the form of an adversity prevented the casteist from destroying the *kavu* or Nature. Although the society laid excess thrust on oblation, they meticulously managed the nature or the ecosystem of *kavu* as they believed that the human intrusion into this space would infuriate the spirits. Here, ecofear is used as a cultural tool to maintain human-nature nexus (Alex and Deborah 423). In this context, the reverential ecofear inherent to the Indigenous *kavu* appear as irrational fears of supernature among the caste hierarchy. Here, it is the IRE that is extended to a culture of fear rooted in covetousness. Therefore, the casteist attempted to deflate the 'misfortunes' believed to be inflicted by vindictive spirits through the rites of fear-appeasement performed within the *kavukal*. The cultural tool of sacralization sustained *kavu*'s ecosystem from destruction. Hence, the people feared to destroy the Nature of *kavu* and consciously engaged in nature conservation. Thus the culture of fear (ecofear) associated to *kavukal* enabled nature preservation.

Similar scenario persisted with the *sarppakavu* in Kerala. Corresponding to the fear of alien ghosts, the avaricious society feared the misfortunes that the mighty snakes administered in the form of death by poison, "barrenness, skin and eye diseases" (Jayakrishnan 27). In order to attain health, wealth and prosperity, and to flatten the evil cast by the temperamental snakes, these communities engrossed in fear-appeasement by setting aside a portion of their homestead garden which came to be known as *sarppakavu*. Although this cult is of relatively unknown origin, some sources trace its antiquity to the system of tree worship, while other studies associate to the institutions of Jainism and Buddhism practised in Kerala.

One of the studies expostulates the genesis of serpent worship to Jainism, and cites the Nagarajaswami Temple of erstwhile Travancore (and present-day Nagarkovil District in Tamil Nadu) as an instance of validation. Currently, a temple that observes *tantric rites*^{xiii} (esoteric tradition) under the superintendence of a Brahmin *tantri* (Vedic religious head) from Vetticode Nagaraja Temple,^{xiv} it is the site from which six idols of Jain deities were discovered (Jayakumarikunjamma 30). Furthermore, the structure of the serpent icons within a serpent grove shares resemblance to the figurines worshipped by the Jains and Buddhists. This depicts the Brahminic influence in the annexation and appropriation of Jainism. Therefore, *sarppakavukal* is an institutionalised system of worship that was absorbed and moderated by the Brahmins. Remarkably, it is the only form of *kavu* maintained by a Brahmin homestead.

The Brahmins in Kerala is an immigrant group of people who infiltrated the region through the south Carnatic pass from 4th-8th century A.D. Before this insinuation, they called the region as *ahibhoomi* or the land (*bhoomi*) inhabited by serpents (*ahi*) (Jayakumarikunjamma 13), due to the presence of diverse varieties of both venomous and non-venomous snakes. Thus the Western Ghats received its local name *Sahiyadri* (*s* + *ahi* + *adri*) or the mountain (*adri*) encompassing (signified by the prefix *sa*) serpents (*ahi*) (Jayakumarikunjamma 13, Jayakrishnan 31). The Brahmin settlers, unfamiliar to the ways of the land, feared the snakes which dominantly populated the region. The element of fear is one of the key facets interlinked to snakes. The snakes are quick to inject their venom in self-defense and its unique structure, peculiar motion, omnipresence and the capacity to

induce fatality caused dread in the settlers. They conquered their ecofear by sacralizing the serpents and engaging in appeasement rituals which are inherent to a *kavu*.

Intriguingly, the Brahmins did not worship the venomous, corporeal snakes that inhibited the region. They correlated the snakes to the divine *Nagas*^{xv} (divine serpents) of the *Vedas* and the *Puranas*, consecrated them within their homestead garden and engaged in its veneration. However, the act of sanctification through idol consecration distinguished a *sarppakavu* from the general phenomenon of *kavu*. Although, *kavukal* are sacralized for exclusive use of the presiding deity, it follows *kudiyiruthu* (inhabitation). It is a space of communion, a sacred platform within which the devotee invoked the independent deity and the deity manifested before the devotee, whereas, the practice of idolatry and fear-appeasement established *sarppakavu* as a hybrid institution formulated through the amalgamation of various traditions including Vedic Brahminism, Indigenous system, Jainism and Buddhism. Thus it epitomises a hegemonic space where the power relations were negotiated through the appropriation of Dravidian religiosity and culture by the Brahmins. Thus *sarppakavu* manifests the nature-culture materialism found among non-indigenous communities, managed through the rituals of fear-appeasement. Therefore, Logan's exclusive documentation of serpent groves or *vishattum kavu*, exhibits the selective representation of an institutionalised system of worship that was absorbed and accultured by the caste hierarchy. Analogous to the erasure of the untouchable identity as discussed earlier, Logan intermittently clubs the Nayar and Brahmin custom of worship and obscures the caste identity of its practitioner with the phrase "respectable Malayali Hindus" (184).

Logan and *kavu*

Logan distinguishes fear-appeasement of the deceased spirits as the primary religiosity of Malayali Hindus in Malabar and his analysis of the native religiosity, encompassing the indigenous system of ancestral worship and diverse caste-based customs, is delimited to the ritualistic observation of fear-appeasement. He offers a paradoxical illustration of *kavu*. The description that commenced with an aesthetic display of wilderness—"trees luxuriantly festooned with graceful creepers," commutes to a "waste spot" wherein the hood of a cobra is consecrated (184). His account critiques the superstitious fear nurtured by the Malayali Hindus who equated both natural calamities and misfortunes to the wrath of serpents. Through the selective description of "*vishattum kavu* (poison shrine) or *naga kotta* (snake shrine)" found in the "south-west corner" of "all respectable Malayali Hindu" homestead gardens, he demonstrates the culture of fear expressed towards snakes (184).

However, Logan's documentation of snake worship circumscribes to the fear of supernature but excludes ecofear. He illustrates a society in which the people believed, "The snake...to exercise an evil influence on human beings if their shrines were not respected" (184). This exposition elucidates a community wherein the people superstitiously feared the snake shrines rather than the snakes. Logan projects the irrational fear of supernature instead of examining how an ethical contract of harmonious nature-culture cohabitation was devised and maintained in a worldly society. The people acknowledged the existence of this sacred space and treated it with reverential fear. Nature in the form of shrine/*kavu* was culturally protected through the means of reverential ecofear. Thus, the underlying facet of *kavukal* including *sarppakavu* is not the fear of

supernature but Reverential Ecofear. Through the cultural mechanism of ecofear, the casteists were taught to respect and conserve nature in the form of *sarppakavukal*.

Any misfortune that affected the family was associated to a human misdemeanor that triggered the deity's wrath. Therefore, this system ethically guided the human conduct and misconduct was nullified through penance. *Sarppakavu* manifested a sacrificial space wherein the casteist propitiated the serpent deities to ward off the evil. A culture of fear is constructed around *sarppakavu* due to which neglecting a *kavu* was considered a severe offence. This taboo may have evolved with the rise of materialism when people shifted from lives lived in communion with nature to urban life. Materialism separated the humans from nature and this guilt of 'apathy' resurfaced whenever an ill befell the family. *Kavu* thus evolved as the site wherein penance was offered. They venerated the serpents by offering them a habitat and this gesture of sanctification represents a kind of sharing wherein the humans returned a portion of their homestead to nature for it to reclaim. The fear of nature in the form of serpents thus rekindled their connection with nature. Thus, through this institution they shared their home with nature and retained the human-nature-sacred continuum. Therefore, the space of *sarppakavu* with its rituals symbolise human-nature interconnectedness.

It is interesting to observe how the culture of fear led to the construction of *sarppakavu*. Logan mentions that any family, within the caste hierarchy, that was devoid of a serpent grove searched its homestead gardens to find some remnants of a *kavu* so as to construct a wild spot which is left at the disposal of nature. This tendency represents the construction of *sarppakavu* and its emergence as an indispensable symbolic space where penance was offered through oblations. They believed that the deity of the wilderness would ensure the family's wellbeing and prosperity. As a result, people left a portion of their homestead for nature in the form of *sarppakavu*. Thus the ecofear conquered through the propitiation rituals led to the development of a culture of fear-appeasement among the caste hierarchy that aided the conservation of nature through the institution of *sarppakavu* in the nineteenth century Kerala.

Conclusion

Kavu is the epitome of Kerala's regional religiosity that evolved from human-nature connectedness. Although this institution has undergone annexation, its ritualistic traditions of fear-appeasement offered resistance and conserved it from destruction. The biocentric cohabitation among the Indigeneity was such that the foreign Brahmins had to appropriate this tradition into the Vedic pantheon to ascend the social ladder and *sarppakavu* is the finest example of this cultural appropriation.

The Indigenous wisdom of understanding nature as the life source and a continuum initiated the tradition of ancestral worship. They feared nature's enigma and its unpredictability and conquered this fear through its sacralization. Although the caste hierarchy annexed the indigenous land and deities, the institution of *kavu* and its powerful ritualistic tradition of fear-appeasement instilled the fear of supernature in the caste hierarchy. This culture of fear prompted them to sacralize *kavu* and culminated in the construction of *sarppakavu* in the nineteenth century Kerala among the caste hierarchy. Consequently, any family without a serpent grove, entangled in the culture of fear-appeasement, reserved a portion of their homestead garden as wilderness to

worship and propitiate the serpents and inadvertently contributed to the conservation of nature. Thus the institution of *sarppakavu* retained human-culture-sacred continuum and its construction became a vogue among the caste hierarchy in nineteenth century Kerala.

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Notes

i *Kavukal* is the plural form of *kavu*.

ii The groves dedicated to the worship of *amma* or mother goddess such as *Bhagavthi*, *Kali*, *Neeli*, *Chamundi*, etc.

iii Those groves that worships male (*Purusha*) gods such as *Ayyappan*, *Vettakkorumakan*, etc.

iv The groves devoted to the worship of animals (*Mrigam*) such as serpent, leopard, etc.

- v The groves that worships ancestral spirits (*Pretam*) such as *Muttan, Mutti, Appoppan, Yakshi*, etc.
- vi The first three categories are formulated by E. Unnikrishnan in his seminal text, *Uttarakeralathile Vishuddha Vanagal*, whereas the latter is an observation of the researcher as there exists various groves that are solely dedicated to the deceased spirits.
- vii The urn is symbolic of the womb or “os uteri” therefore a hole is made at the bottom which represents the return of the deceased soul to the Earth or to nature.
- viii Home unique to the casteists in Kerala (Nayars, Amabalavasi and Namboodiri Brahmins) especially associated with the joint family system.
- ix Miniature mole of a Malayali house consecrated along with the serpent icons in *sarppakavu* that symbolise its home.
- x Pulluvan is a scheduled caste in Kerala renowned for their ritual expertise in exorcism and magic. Pulluvas are sub-divided into *Nagampatikal* (people who sing snake-songs) and *Pretampatikal* (people who sings ghost-songs).
- xi The term refers to the Brahmin and/or Nayar castes.
- xii Gough states that the propitiation rituals conducted annually was presided over by the Nayar tharavadu. However, the performer, often a family member of the deceased, belonged to the subaltern castes of Parayas or Pulayas.
- xiii Ritualistic right possessed by a *tantri* (priest) over the consecration of a deity within a temple.
- xiv <http://www.vetticodenagarajatemple.com/>
- xv Mythical semi-divine beings who are half-human and half cobra.
