

Alamikalli-A Lost Art Form Revived

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Summary: *Exploring the cultural context, geography, costumes, people, and origins of a folk festival that exists at the crossroads between two states and two religions.*

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“Most of the time when we perform outside Kasargod, the audience would be witnessing Alamikkali for the first time in their lives and the novelty and astonishment of watching it can be clearly seen in their faces.” -Mr Santhosh, An Alamikkali Performer

Recently, the streets of the capital city Trivandrum witnessed the celebration of various cultures and art forms of Kerala as part of the Keraleeyam event, which aimed to showcase "the best of Kerala." Folk art has its own historical and ritualistic significance and is often used in propaganda to celebrate and reinvent the past with a promise of a brighter future. One of the cultural performances that captivated the spectators was Alamikkali; it was not a typical art form the crowd had witnessed till then. The people dancing with black colour painted on them and elaborate headdresses were a source of awe and intrigue.

Alamikkali is a folk art performed in some parts of Kerala and Karnataka, with its origins in the commemoration ceremonies of the Karbala War (680 AD)¹, which was fought near the Euphrates near Iraq. Even though it was a small-scale military engagement, it has influenced Islamic culture worldwide. The war resulted in the demise of Hussein, who later became one of the important martyrs of the religion. The day he died, the 10th day of Muharram, is observed as a mourning day, also known as the *Day of Ashura* according to Islam. In India, Karbala Day commemorates the memory of the sufferings of the Imam. For example, in Ladakh, Bangalore, and Hyderabad, mourners beat their chests in rhythm, injuring themselves with sharp knives recalling the events of Karbala.

In Kerala, too, the day used to allow witnessing the composite folk art form of

Alamikkali. Evidencing socio-religious unity, people belonging to certain marginalised Hindu castes perform the dance while the Turkish Muslim community (Hanafis) perform the customary rituals. The etymological origin of Alamikkali has been traced back to the time of Tipu Sultan, whose soldiers were known as Alamis. An alternative explanation is that the name is derived from the name of the mosque, Alamipalli, where it was originally performed. With communalism on the rise, Alamikkali lost its importance due to revivalist groups' homogenisation attempts, leading the art form to become almost extinct, especially in the area where it originated.

Origin and Region

“There are a lot of stories and myths behind the Alamikkali and its origin, however, what is clear is that it eventually became a celebration of the whole of Kanhangad with the participation of all communities and religions in one way or another.”-Mr.Santhosh

The emergence and traditional performance of Alamikkali is centred around Alamipalli in Kasargod, near Kanhangad, in present-day Kerala. Kanhangad came under Hyder Ali's control in the 1760s. Later, after the defeat of Tipu, the area came under the control of the East India Company. The place is known for art forms like Theyyam, Poorakali, and Maruthukali. Communal harmony and religious tolerance are part of the region's culture since it accommodates diverse varieties of people from different socio-cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds. It is said that Kanhangad was under the control of Ezhimala kings. According to Kodavalam Sasana, Kanhangad was one of the thirty-seven tulu gramas under the Cheras. Kanhangad got its name from an

¹ Sourav, V. "Vanishing Spaces of Multiculturalism: Exploring Alamikkali in Northern Kerala." M Phil diss., Calicut University, 2021. pg. 2

Edaprabhu of Kolathunadu² who controlled the region with the name Kanjan and later, Kanjan's Nadu became Kanhangadu.³

Kanhangad is also famous for its progressive revolutionary ideals; Kurmal Ezhuthachan, who composed *thottam pattu* of Pottan Theyyam, raised the region's voice against authoritarian and feudalistic power structures. Kanhangad and its pathways also got a special mention in P. Kunjiraman Nair's 'Kaviyude Kalpadukal'.⁴

Cultural Background

Alamikkali shares some similarities in practices with other artforms. *Huli Vesha* in Karnataka from regions like Mangalore resembles Alamikkali. *Hulivesha* or tiger dance in Karnataka is also performed during Karbala and Navaratri. It is said that the rituals of Alamikkali are somewhat similar to that of rituals of Sabarimala penance. The ritual of *Azhipooja* which is practised in south of Kerala also has rituals similar to this. Here also the devotees dance along the flames and are performed prior to the annual Sabarimala pilgrimage.

Compared to other folk-art forms of the region the attire of Alamikkali itself represents a simple subaltern costume where there is no extravagant attire like that of Theyyam, but both Theyyam and Alamikkali are interactive artforms which often scream at the spectators. In the case of Alamikkali, the divinity and its spiritual aspect is more related to its way of performing rather than showcasing its

vibrance through majestic outfits like Theyyam.

The Practice of Alamikkali and the Myths behind it:

"As a native of Kasargod, the practice and myths behind Alamikkali was something which I heard from my childhood and had always fascinated me"- Sourav V, A scholar who has studied Alamikkali in great detail.

Although the year when it was first performed is unknown, the art form of Alamikkali was traditionally performed till the early part of 1970s once a year within the specific time period of Muharram. The first day of Muharram according to the Hijri Calendar was the day on which Alamikkali would commence and it would conclude by the tenth day of Muharram. The Turkish migrant Muslims were the main patrons of the artform. The Fakir Sahib family who practised Hanafi school of Sunni Islam were one such Turkish migrant family who played an instrumental role in the commemoration of the Karbala, which is predominantly observed by Shiites. The Karbala war which is known for the martyrdom of Imam Hussein is observed all over the world to mark the suffering he went through but here in the Northern part of Kerala, it became a symbol of community healing. The place where Alamikkali happens is considered equivalent to Karbala battle field. The ritual structure of Alamikkali consists of *Majlis* (where the narration of the story of Hussein and Karbala war happened), the memorial service, Karbala pilgrimage, public gatherings or processions, display of plays showcasing the sufferings of Hussein, later followed by self-flagellation. The proclamation of Alamikkali is issued by a member of the Fakir Sahib family, usually, the elder member of the family, by distributing *nadas* (ties) to the upper caste Hindus and the to the local native Muslim population.

² Identified by A. Sreedhara Menon in his work 'A Survey of Kerala History' as one of the major kingdoms of North Kerala in the 15th century.

³ Manorama Online. "Athisambannam Kanhangadin Charithram." Accessed March 13, 2024. <https://www.manoramaonline.com/district-news/kasargod/2022/06/29/kasargod-kanhangad-history.html>.

⁴ The autobiographical work of Mahakavi P(Kunhiraman Nair) where he also talks about the natural beauty of the state of Kerala through his travels.

Vellikaram and the Hand of Hussein

The Alamis who typically come from the marginalised sections of the society, especially from Mukkuva, Theeya and Dalit castes, pay tributes and respects to the *Vellikaram* relic and later will pay the sahib a reward of 12 rupees. Vellikaram literally translates to the 'silver hand' which symbolises the hand of Hussein. According to legend, it was impossible to bury Hussein's hands after his death. It is seen as a symbol for a person dying after struggling and sacrificing for his community, even in his death his hands are not tied. Silver is used in Muharram celebrations all over the world, especially in South East Asia. Vellikaram also has a mythical origin story behind it. It was said that Mukkuva fishermen had seen a man drowning in the sea at dusk and it was the local Turkish Muslims who came to rescue the man, they swam across the sea towards the man only to discover that the human hand they seem to have seen from the shore was indeed a silver hand. The divinity of the relic was believed to be the hand of Hussein for the Turkman sahibs, while the Mukkuva fishermen who first noticed gave it significance as the hand of Lord Vishnu, which they again connected with the legend of Palazhi which literally means milk-sea, the heavenly cosmic sea where Lord Vishnu lives.

Alamikkali also creates a fair-like atmosphere in Kanhangad and nearby areas. The rituals begin with the Alamis observing a nine-day phase of strict fasting and wandering for alms till the day of Karbala. This includes not eating non vegetarian meals. During this time, they collect local firewood for the ceremonial pit, the procurement of products locally shows the indigenous element in the ritual. After sunset they also worship a pole along the river banks.

The tenth day witnesses the beginning of important ceremonies with the Sahib displaying the power of his family by arriving on horseback symbolising Hussein who arrived in the battlefield on a white horse. The ceremonies last till the eleventh day early morning. He gives the *Mujawar*⁵ to members of the Theeya community while chanting the names of Hussein and Ali (Ya Hussein ya Ali). Then the Alamis follow him by chanting as a group. Next is the ritual of *Thee paral* where the Alamis dance around the fire pit. Fire light is an important symbol in Shiite tradition. The Ustad then comes and collects the burning wood with his bare hands and throws out the flames, sometimes it even falls on the spectators who consider it as a blessing. Later, all the burning wood flames are collected and laid on the floor on which all the Alamis walk barefoot, which again shows the community act of sacrifice, a memorial of Hussein and his soldiers' martyrdom.

The following day the Vellikaram is washed in Arayi Puzhayi⁶ river. As a part of the rituals, discussed later in this article, around 108 medicinal formulations are also purified using Vellikaram. Later it's sent to the Sahib's home where it is kept till next year's Alamikkali. Then, the Alamis change their costumes and go home to a meal of chakkara choru or jaggery rice prepared by female relatives. (During the course of the performance of the Alamikkali and the month before it, they were not allowed to have food prepared by women to maintain 'purity')⁷. This marks the end of that year's Alamikkali.

⁵ Mujawar is a blazing light given to members of Theeya community during the ceremony.

⁶ Arayi puzha is a river in Hosdurg, Kasaragod District, Kerala. Arayi puzha is situated nearby to the hamlet Palamangalam and the village Uppilakkai.

⁷ Source: Sourav, V. "Vanishing Spaces of Multiculturalism: Exploring Alamikkali in Northern Kerala." M Phil diss., Calicut University, 2021. pg 43 and 46

The Costume:

“Once dressed in the costume for Alami, we indeed present a frightening figure.”- Mr. Santhosh

Alamis usually consists of a group of 5 to 6 men. They apply charcoal powder all over their body along with white spots (by using *arimavu* or rice paste). They dress in ragged black cloth mundus and leave their upper bodies completely exposed. They wear caps or hats made from dried arecanut leaves which are decorated with flowers of *thetti* (also known as *chethi*) or *jungle geranium*.⁸ They also shave their beard and moustache prior to the observation of penance and later wear fake beard made of thin strands made out of beaten bamboo flowers known as *odapoo*. The charcoal covered body white spots and other garments represent the sufferings and wounds that Hussein underwent in the Karbala war.⁹

Alamikkali Through its Lyrics

In Alamikali, the songs sung by the Alamis typically begin and conclude with “*lassolayma... lasso... layma... layma... laymalo*”. In between, the Alamis have the freedom to improvise and sing or say whatever they want. Thus, the lyrics of the Alamikkali songs often reflected the prevailing cultural notions and sentiments. There are very few songs with a predetermined lyric. One such song is given below:

*Yaa Ali Yaaa Hussein
Yaa Ali Yaa Hussein*

⁸ It is a common flowering shrub native to Southern India and Sri Lanka. The flowers of this plant are used widely in Goddess worship especially in Kerala.

⁹ Sourav, V. "Vanishing Spaces of Multiculturalism: Exploring Alamikkali in Northern Kerala." M Phil diss., Calicut University, 2021. pg 50-51

*Layama Layamoo dim,
Layama Layamoo dim ... (2)
Ajasseo Ajeyman Ajasseo Ajeyyman120,
jala juli, Julu Juli
Adiyantoda Panjal Bettila Pavuttadukka
Ali Pokker121... (2)*

Understanding the Artform that is Alamikkali:

“People who were affected with terrible diseases would make offerings that if cured, they or a close family member would participate in the coming year’s Alamikkali.”- Mr Santhosh

The people of Kasargod associated with the Alamikkali a belief system of healing. They believed that it had the ability to cure diseases like smallpox, cholera and epilepsy. It was considered that Alamis could also cure cattle ailments like anthrax. Could the Vellikaram medicine purification ritual be connected with this? The performers interviewed during the course of this investigation are not aware of the significance of the purification, mostly because this is not followed in the modern day performances of the Alamikkali. There are very few living performers of the traditional form of Alamikkali at the Alamipalli and although one such performer was identified, he could not be interviewed as he was facing serious health issues.

Alamikkali had its origin in the rural agrarian social set up and the social conditions of that time definitely shaped it. Women were historically only allowed to participate in some parts of the ritual; to carry fire pots on their heads and sometimes in order to be exorcised of demons. Women had little to do with the main rituals of Alamikkali since they were confined to only lifting firepots. During the penance period, the Alamis were not even allowed to eat the food prepared by the female members of the family. The lyrics of Alamikkali songs also sometimes

contained many slut shaming¹⁰ and body shaming terms.

Alamikkali, unlike many art forms of that time, was truly able to transcend religious boundaries while at the same time keeping many of the distinctions whether it be in the differentiated roles of different communities in their participation of the rituals or so on. This allowed this artform to become a celebration of a whole region. The Alamis themselves hailed from marginalised castes while the Sahibs who managed the Alamikkali belonged to Turkish-Soldier background. The nada ceremony included the participation of upper caste households and the Native Muslim communities. These all elements of multiculturalism work under one umbrella that is the common spirit of collective healing.

Looking at the other artforms in the area like Theyyam, giving divinity to the lower caste for a day gives the power to the subaltern, in the form of an opportunity to verbally abuse the landlord for one day. Compared to the anti-feudal attitude of Theyyam, Alamikkali's ceremonies, rituals and lyrics are more towards defending feudalism and also attacking whoever criticises it by trying to mock whatever is perceived as 'modern.'

But does that make Alamikkali a complete supporter of feudalism? Well, performing for feudalism or originated in its background does not possibly make it feudal. There are many subaltern elements within Alamikkali which makes it relevant for the time it played and even today. As mentioned before, the main participants of the Alamikkali were from the marginalised castes and here, much like Theyyam, they became the bearers of

the divine who could transcend divinity in a more ritualistic physical space to the spectator. Here the upper castes are just reduced to spectators.

As Santhosh has heard from Choyambu, an older generation performer of Alamikkali, the 9 days prior to the Alamikkali created a fair like atmosphere to the whole area of Kanhangad and it gave the people of the marginalised castes at least some time of leisure to alienate themselves from the oppressive feudal order. During the penance period, Alamis who wander around the village for alms have the right to take anything they want from any land (narrated to Santhosh by Choyambu), which includes both private and public lands. This gave Alamis an authority over their products which they don't usually enjoy in the feudal order. Even though Alamikkali from the outside doesn't pose any threat to feudal order, but at a closer inspection, one can see these silent aspects of resistance of the subaltern which pose a threat to the same order which it seems to defend from outside. This can be also defined as an attempt to propagate the idea of a land where there are no boundaries and the products are equally shared and distributed, more like an ideal communist society.

Alamikkali also makes an attempt to fight against colonial modernity. Observing Alamikkali in the backdrop of Partha Chatterjee's concept of the division between the "inner" sphere (which encompasses everyday life and practices of the colonised including cultural and social practices and economic activities which are not regulated by the colonial state) and "outer" sphere (the domain of the state represented by colonial state apparatus), in colonial and postcolonial contexts and the relation between them is interesting. As Chatterjee¹¹ points out, it

¹⁰ Artforms such as Theyyam engage in ridicule and satire, mostly while challenging authority. In Alamikkali, the lyrics include phrases derogatory to women. Slut-shaming is a term used in academia to imply such phrases.

¹¹ Chatterjee, Partha. "Whose Imagined Community?" In *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, 3–13. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993.

is always fascinating to note how the acts in the inner sphere tries to save and retain customs traditions, as in the case of Alamikkali. But in the case of the outer sphere, Alamikkali becomes a reflection of its inner sphere, that is in both spheres it protects traditions and also resists modernity.

Alamikkali became a discontinued artform in the late 1960s and 1970s. Oral traditions state that religious scholars of the Sunni tradition opposed Muslims being associated with Alamikkali as it was deemed to be un-Islamic and that fatwas were issued against the participation of Muslims in these customs. However the absence of records of these fatwas makes it difficult to verify the exact organisations. The major reason was the opposition of religious and/or community organisations. This opposition caused the Sahibs, the main patrons, to stop associating themselves with Alamikkali. The destruction of the feudal order due to the Land ceiling Act and the some of the Turks who managed Alamikkali eventually returning to their homeland were also reasons which contributed to its decline. The identity compartmentalisation in the region due to the emergence of revivalist¹² religious community organisations which began to look at Alamikkali, a multicultural community oriented artform with their own ideological lines, unfavourably also resulted in it becoming a lost artform. Greater cultural compartmentalisation and identity consciousness and destruction of feudalism resulted in the dysfunctionality of Alamikkali. Migration of communities who directly engage in Alamikkali like members of Theeya caste

and Muslims to GCC¹³ countries was another reason

ATTEMPTS AT REVITALIZING THE ALAMIKALI:

"It definitely is one of the greatest achievements of my life to have contributed to bringing back this lost artform from the dead and to have taken it to audiences throughout Kerala." – Mr. Santhosh

For a period of thirty years, Alamikkali was completely lost with no performances or rituals observed. However, it lived on in the stories of the people of the Kanhangad region. Many of those who used to perform or watch Alamikkali, for whom it was the one thing they used to look forward to throughout the year, could not so easily let go of something which was so deeply ingrained into the culture of their locality. Many young people had grown up hearing stories of the famed Alamikkali throughout their childhood but had never witnessed it. They also started identifying the artform as a lost cultural heritage of their land and started attempts to revitalise it. Around the 90s and 2000s, young men such as Santhosh started learning more about the practice and intricacies of Alamikkali and started performing it, mostly using the resources and networks of small Arts and Sports Clubs in the region. Under the watchful eyes of older performers like Choyambu, who I could not speak to as he was suffering from several age-related health issues, they learnt the artform and started performing it all over the district and later with the help of several enthusiasts, all over the state.

But the Alamikkali that returned to its hometown has a more progressive

¹² Sourav, V. "Erasing Cultural Marginalities: Modernity and the Decline of Subaltern Customs." *Proceedings of the South Indian History Congress 41* (2023).

¹³ GCC or Gulf Cooperation Council consists of countries Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates

character than its previous version. The new version of Alamikkali includes females as its Alamis. The Alamikkali which found its stage during Keralaleeyam also showcased female Alamis. These organisations tried to use the field and the stage put together by Alamikkali to convey the modern liberal messages which the earlier form often criticised. It is somewhat right to say that new Alamikkali acquired a more inclusive form and also at the same time retained its trans religious and transcultural character. While the multicultural character caused its demise, the same character helped Alamikkali to set its ground firm in its new avatar.

Pictures:



Mr. Santhosh, an Alamikkali artist who has played an instrumental part in reviving the artform.



The above two pictures show Alamikkali practioners in the midst of their performance. In the modern day, Alamikkali is an artform performed in stages unlike the olden days where it was only played once a year at the Alamipalli. Credit: Santhosh K



In this close up photo of an alami, the individual costume and make up can be observed clearly. Credit: Santhosh K



An Alamikali performance which took place at Padannakad, Kasargod. Credit: Santhosh K



Performers from Left in The Back Row: Santhosh K, Tarun, Karthik, Sreehari, Abhinand, Sudeesh, Raju, Pramond, and Vijeesh. Everyone natives of Ozhinjavalap in Kasargod. Credit: Santhosh K



Alamikali practitioners with full gear. Credit: Santhosh K



Practitioners of Alamikali can be seen here after their performance at an event in Trivandrum in 2022 wearing the attire and sticks used by Alamis. Credit: Santhosh K



Alamis after a performance in Thriuvananthapuram in 2022



Painting at the Nileswaram Railway Station depicting Alamikali among other artforms, photo credit: Sourav V

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