

Narrative Styles of Visuality in Kalamezhuthu

Kanni M.

Summary font: *Kalam is a material entity presented and performed through the corporeal intervention of the performers and devotees. Looking at the history of the sacred performed space of Kalamezhuthu.*

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Kalamezhuthu, a ritual prevalent among several communities of Kerala, involves depicting a figure or a series of motifs on a treated floor with colour powder. It is performed at temples and sacred groves for purgation, prosperity, and devotion as part of a fertility rite.

Early literature mainly contributes to the study of the folkloric and aesthetic dimensions of Kalamezhuthu's genres.¹ This analysis makes use of the data collected through fieldwork, ethnographic accounts, and other vernacular documents regarding Kalamezhuthu. Two types of performance viz. Vettakkorumakan Kalam by Kallattakuruppu and Bhagavathi Kalam by Mannan are studied here. This essay analyses two different styles of visual narration among the existing variants of the Kalamezhuthu tradition.

Kalamezhuthu is a vernacular term used to represent ritual drawing and its associated performance. This term is etymologically composed of two words: *kalam* and *ezhuthu*. Kalam denotes the sacred space where the ritual drawing is done, and ezhuthu means writing, which implies drawing. In vernacular language, this is also called *kalampattu* or *Kalamezhuthupattu*.

In this ritual, the drawing of the kalam is followed by songs called *thottam*. This series of motifs denotes the figures of deities and other symbols related to the narratives of gods. Thottam denotes ritual songs to praise and revive the god. Musical instruments support these songs, and a few other ritualistic chores are followed thereafter. After the completion of the drawing, the floor painting is erased either through the dance movements of the performers in trance or as a part of the decorum of ritual.

Communities like Vannan, Mannan, Malayar, Pulaya, Panar, Paraya, Velar, Theeyattunnikal, Kuruppu, Marar, Brahmins, Pulluva, and Kaniyan perform this for various purposes. Kalamezhuthu is used to propitiate deities like Bhagavathi, Naga, Ayyappa, Vettakkorumakan,

Vishnumaya, and Muthappan. A few communities perform Kalamezhuthu to exorcise evil spirits from the human body, especially pregnant women. Apart from this therapeutic utility, it also functions as a fertility rite to enhance the mode of production. Kalamezhuthu is used in magical practices that are not prevalent now. It is usually performed for well-being and good health. Unlike these uses, Brahmins use tantric kalam while offering pooja, but they are devoid of song or possessed performance.

Kalam, the term, is an ethnic usage that refers to both the spatial and the pictorial representation of the deity worshipped in the given space and time. The particular deity symbolised in the drawing is the god worshipped at the given temple or the ancestral deity of the family offering the Kalamezhuthu. Those who sponsor this performance intend to seek blessings from god through this ritual. The performers (communities mentioned earlier) professed to perform this ritual on behalf of the devotees.

Figurative Kalam

Figurative Kalam can be analysed using the icon of *Vettakkorumakan Kalam* (also known as *Vettekkaran Kalam*), a type of Kalamezhuthu tradition that the *Kallattakuruppu* community has been performing traditionally. In this performance, Vettakkorumakan's standing posture is drawn and then evoked by the *Kurup*.

Vettakkorumakan is a hunter deity worshipped in Kerala. He is believed to be the son of the Siva-Parvathy couple during their life as hunters in the jungle. Vettakkorumakan Kalam depicts a male figure with a beard and moustache. The body area is filled with green colour. As told in the myth, a bow and arrow are seen in his left hand, and a weapon named *churika* (a small double-edged sword) is seen held in an upright position in his right hand. This explicitly expresses Vettakkorumakan's position as a hunter. The guns in each hand are also drawn, and vice versa. The body and the posture typically resemble that of a human, and

¹ For example, see works by M.V. Vishnunamboothiri and Vijayakumar Menon.

weapons like a bow and arrow bring memories of primitive folk who were hunters. The oracle who gets possessed by the end of the ritual uses his *churika* to cut the tender coconut leaves hanging down from the shed and canopy above the *kalam*, and erases the ritual drawing by dancing on it. This part of the ritual is believed to be the involuntary commemoration of hunting by Vettakkorumakan.

The thatched shed where the performers assemble and make arrangements to draw the *kalam* is called *Pattupura*. There may be a permanent stage-like architecture used as *pattupura* in some places. The stage or rectangular space used to draw the *kalam* is called *pattumandapam* or *pattarangu*, oriented east-west. The size of the *kalam* is 16 *kol* and 8 *viralu* in perimeter.² The space of the *kalam* is demarcated initially by creating a shed (*panther*) with four pillars made of areca nut trunk. The thatch is covered with ritualistically arranged seven or nine coir ropes, and the shed is decorated with tender coconut leaves.

Kalamezhuthu is initiated by the *kalam kurikkal* ritual or *Ganapathikku kurikkal*. Initially, the space is treated with cow dung for purification, and an oil lamp (*nilavilakku*) is placed in four corners. Then, in the southeast corner, a motif named *shadkonachakram* is drawn. Using rice powder, a rectangle is drawn along the border of the treated floor. Inside the border, the outline of the figure of the deity is drawn. Later, the colour powder is applied according to the design. Traditionally, every community uses five colours made out of natural ingredients for Kalamezhuthu. The performing artist uses rice powder for the white colour, burnt paddy husk powder for the black colour, powdered air-dried leaves of *Albizia* (*vaka*), henna, or cassia for the green colour, turmeric powder for the yellow colour, and a mixture of turmeric powder and lime water for the red colour. There is a belief that these colours represent the five natural elements (*pancha bhootha*). The eyes and nose of the gods, and the bosom of female gods, are projected three-dimensionally by

leaving a small heap of paddy and rice. The crowns of the deities are drawn in the final phase, which marks the deity's evocation.



Figure 1. Vettakkorumakan Kalam, Pandallur Devi Temple, Malappuram. Image: Kanni M., 2022.

Kurup (the performer) receives a new piece of silk (*koora*) from the devotee (or patron), conducting the ritual, and with their consent, the cloth is spread over the ceiling of the canopy. This ceremony is named *Kooradiyal*, and the new cloth implies the dress for the deity. The process involves moving the sanctified sword from the sanctum to the stage; meanwhile, the priest makes offerings, and the *Kurup* sings the *thottam*. *Kurup* uses a stringed instrument called a *nanduni* and a small cymbal called *kuzhithalam*. In the meantime, musicians from the Marar community play the traditional drum and *chenda*. After this, songs praising the different gods are

² Kol and Viral are Malayalam words denoting units of measurement for distance.

continuously sung during the wiping of the kalam, referred to as *kalam azhikkal*, which marks the erasing of the kalam. The oracle or the possessed devotee will enter the stage and wipe the kalam. Under the trance, the oracle blesses the devotees and offers them *prasadam*. During the chanting, oracles advise devotees and may predict the future. Finally, they are allowed to rest and helped to emerge from the possessed state by retrieving the conscious mental state, which is called *parkkuka* in Malayalam.



Figure 2. Vishnumaya Kalam, Guruvayur, Malappuram. Image: Kanni M., 2023.

Non-figurative Kalam

The style of Kalam, which has non-figurative designs, is ethnically referred to as *pathmakalam*, consisting of different combinations of motifs and shapes. The Velar community in the Ernakulam district and the Mannan/Choppan community in the Thrissur district predominantly perform Bhagavathi Kalam. It is performed at village temples, temples near households, and sacred groves. Thottam, the song of the ritual, is based on the story of the birth and life of the mother goddess and her triumph over evil power. Darikavadham Thottam, Kannaki Thottam, or Bhagavathi Thottam are mainly sung during the ritual. The reference used in this study is a performance by the Mannan community in Thrissur district, where the thottam is about Kodungallur Bhagavathi. This refers to the deity of Bhadrakali or Kannaki at Kodungallur Sree Kurumba temple, which is famous for the Kodungallur Bharani festival.

Before the ritual drawing, the floor is treated to eradicate impurities by layering it with cow dung. The dimensions of this square-shaped Kalam are 2 kol and 10 viralu long. A scaffolding or canopy is made using areca nut tree trunks as pillars (*sthanakkal*) at the four corners of the square-sized space of the prescribed size. Afterwards, the shed is decorated by hanging tender coconut leaves and mango leaves. The leaves are braided to make the shapes of peacocks, cock, and other animals—representations of nature. A scale-like elongated piece of the outer bark of the coconut leaf sheath, called *panthakkol*, is used to measure and create straight lines. Colours are filled after finishing the basic white drawing. The drawing of the kalam begins after spreading black powder (*kari*) on the neatly arranged floor of the normal-sized, proposed kalam. After the performance of the oracle, the kalam is erased, as in all traditions.

The basic story of the song is about the origin and life of Kali, or the mother goddess, and her conflict with Darikan. To soothe and pacify the ferocious Kali after the fight, the kalam is supposed to be drawn by the bhoothagana (the group of sacred companions or disciples in charge of Bhagavathi's security and well-being). They sing about the ferocious state, and afterwards, it is believed that the mother goddess will be calmed. Kalam is drawn as prescribed, and it is discussed in the portion of the song called *kalam poli*. Here again, the nanduni is the musical instrument used.

The weapons of Bhagavathi and the bhoothagana are drawn in the kalam. On the northern side of the kalam, the sword (*val*) and anklet (*chilambu*) are drawn, and on the southern side, the lotus (*pathname*), spear (*shool*), conch (*shanghu*), and auspicious disc (*chakram*) are drawn. The swastika symbol is placed in the northeast corner and a tangled banyan leaf (*kettalila*) is seen (if present in Kalam) in the southwest part (*kannikkodi*).

Apart from the ritualistic offerings, food is served for the Devi and her bhoothagana. Besides the kalam rice, cucumber, betel leaf, areca nut, coconut, flattened rice (*aval*), puffed rice, and jaggery are served on *nakkila* (tip part of the banana leaf).

There is a ritual in which a new dress is offered to the goddess. A piece of red cloth is placed over the rice offered on the banana leaf. A *valkkannadi* (tailed mirror) is also provided.



Figure 3. Bhagavathi Kalam, Guruvayur. Image: Kanni M., 2018



Figure 4. Muthappan Kalam, Guruvayur. Image: Kanni M., 2022

Visuality and Mode of Narration

Kalamezhuthu tradition tries to convert the abstract concept of God into a tangible construct in the physical world through the kalam, the floor painting. The erasing of the kalam, which marks the accomplishment of the ritual, is a point of satisfaction for performers and devotees. During this heightened point of psychological satisfaction, the movements of the oracle perform a subsequent reconfiguration of the ritual, drawing from a prescribed format to an unpredictable and disorganised form. Performers try to follow the same tradition and style their ancestors have used. They try to improvise and stylise each kalam only by confiding to the basic decorum of the Kalamezhuthu tradition. Part of the thottam contains

several verses describing basic instructions for drawing kalam and provides information about the directions to which weapons and accessories should align.

The motifs used in kalam are traditional and are mandatory to evoke the presence of divinity. Various types of Kalamezhuthu traditions use different motifs, which can be perceived as a visual text according to the context and deity being worshipped. Kalam uses folk geometry, which deals with the old system of measurements. The usual size of each style of kalam is maintained according to tradition, and the design extension is allowed for aesthetic purposes. Performers have a certain amount of freedom and choice to make their kalam attractive despite the prefixed forms. They can draw and combine designs from the fixed motifs spontaneously and according to their aesthetic notions. Recently, many have started using colours other than traditional colours, through which they try to enhance the visual scope.



Figure 5. Vishnumaya Kalam, Vatanapilly, Thrissur. Image: Kanni M., 2022.

The bigger the kalam, the bigger its spatial canvas is. The form, prior to the destruction of the kalam, is the sacred space of worship, which is attained after strict penance and anticipation. The erased kalam denotes the culmination of the major step in the ritual. The wiped-off, chaotic design brings satisfaction to the spiritual state of the performers. It alters the idea of aesthetics from a well-presented design to a destroyed chaotic pattern. This implies that aesthetics is not always about the visually pleasing form; rather, it depends on the context and temporality of the same. The ritual and

spiritual communication are manifested through powdered materials and colours in kalam. Kalam, thus, is proposed as the tangible and visible manifestation of piety.

Except for non-human gods, the figure of the deity in kalam is represented as an anthropomorphic form with human characteristics. The weapons used by these deities are depicted along with their figures. Most deities are human incarnations, and they tend to have a myth about their origin, a series of events containing human affairs intertwined with magical events that confer them the status of God. In the myths, the deity is said to behave as a human being, and the figure depicted in the kalam also shows the general human body-like figure of the respective gender. These figures are usually drawn half-naked, exposing the upper body. The goddess' body is emphasised by placing a lump of powdered colours at the bosom region, which in turn creates a three-dimensional visual perspective. These mythical events certainly affect the perception of sexuality and fertility, which is predominant in olden societies. According to tradition, female gods are worshipped as a part of fertility rites and have an apparent connection with the sexuality and livelihood of women in society. Nagakkalam, performed for the pacification of serpent gods, also uses such three-dimensional visual enhancement techniques. The Pulluva community, in particular, performs this.

On the contrary, a symbolic kalam, also known as *Pathma Kalam*, still uses geometric forms like dots, lines, triangles, circles, and other simple shapes. These abstract forms do not explicitly communicate about the deity, but they are still considered motifs. Mythological narratives entangled with phantasmatic metaphors are being attempted to be placed into symbolic form, which is difficult to decipher.



Figure 6. Muthappan Kalam, Guruvayur, Thrissur. Image: Kanni M., 2023.

Kalam is a material entity presented and performed through the corporeal intervention of the performers and devotees. The most intriguing factor of embodiment is the creation and rupture of a ritual drawing, which acquires a sacred status during the initiation and is eventually removed through various stages of ritual acts by devotees themselves.

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