

*MUDIYETTU*, MASKING, AND QUEERNESS:

Layers of gendered expression in Kerala's Bhadrakali worship

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## I. Introduction

Throughout South and Southeast Asia, masked performances (as part of ritual, accompanied by trance, dancing, and possession) subvert traditional western understandings of masking and identity. The relationship between the mask and its wearer is a paradigm for relationships between self and Other (equally, self and other selves). In Kerala, a South Indian state, *mudiyetti* is a ritual drama translating to “carrying the crown”, in which actors dress as, channel, and eventually are possessed by the goddess Bhadrakali (also known as Bhagavati, Kali, and Durga, among many other names). This essay will focus on an analysis of writings by Sarah Caldwell, John Emigh, and a lecture by Sarah Ngu, and what they reveal about current interpretations of *mudiyettu* and the interpretive frameworks used to describe and analyze masked trance dances of South and Southeast Asia as a whole.

## II. *Mudiyettu*

*Mudiyettu* is an hours-long ceremony in which two actors channel the energy of Kali and Kuli--a grotesque clownish version of Kali--in a ritual performance with a choir of singers and percussionists. Elements of *mudiyettu* include rice flour painting, singing and drumming, costumed “possession-performance”<sup>1</sup>, and ritual practice. The plot of the performance centers around Kali fighting and eventually slaying the twin demons Darika and Danavendra.

The ritual hinges on the *muti*--the mask worn by the performer. It is the most important factor in the ceremony--at all times, it is a conscious, living embodiment of the goddess’s power.

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<sup>1</sup> Caldwell, Sarah. *Masked Ritual and Performance in South India: Dance, Healing, and Possession*. Edited by Deborah Thiagarajan and David Shulman. Ann Arbor: Centers for South and Southeast Asian Studies/ Univ. of Michigan, 2006, p 186



*Figure 1: A performer donning a muti and vesam<sup>2</sup>*

Like an offering which activates a temple's architecture, the *muti* is the central object from which the power of the ceremony is derived.

It is a mask that is worn on top of the performer's head. It is made of solid jackwood and can weigh about 25 kg. Kali's visage is centrally located on the mask, her tongue extended and eyes bulging. Her two small breasts sit at the bottom of the mask, on the actor's temples. She is surrounded by rows of erect cobras that are painted gold.

The jackwood tree is revered in Kerala's Kali cult, and the *muti* that Caldwell studied was carved directly on the tree (the carver stood for hours upon days on a platform built around the tree). The jackwood gets its powers in part from the properties of the tree--it is linked to the

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<sup>2</sup> SILK ROADS Dialogue, Diversity & Development." UNESCO. Accessed March 28, 2019. <https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/silk-road-themes/intangible-cultural-heritage/mudiyettu-ritual-theatre-and-dance-drama-kerala>.

underworld, a realm associated with snakes, power, and water. It is fertile with sap and oozes a white liquid when cut into, associated with semen and milk, both life-giving liquids.

The actor is always a male from the *Marar* or *Kuruppu* (matrilineal and temple-serving) castes. The *muti* is kept in a closed shrine in the actor's home. The actor must not only bear the weight of the mask during the performance, but also the "spiritual load" of Kali's furious and wild power. For hours he channels her energy until the ceremony culminates in a violent spirit possession.

### *Outline of ritual*

Before the ritual can begin, the *vesam* is applied ceremonially--the *vesam* is the makeup and costuming of the actors' bodies. The actor must then activate the *muti*. The actor draws the goddess's energy out of the *murti*, an image of her hidden within the inner sanctum of the temple, into an oil lamp. He conveys the image into a *kalam*, a large colored powder drawing of the goddess, on the floor of the temple. A priest of the temple wipes out the image and dissolves it in more powdered colors, which are gathered up and distributed among the faithful as blessed offerings - *prasadam*.

The actor as Bhadrakali, or equally, Bhadrakali as the actor, enters the performance space. The singers and percussionists tell the story to the audience. The focal point alternates from Kali to Kuli, and scenes of both. The possession occurs at the end of the dance, when Kali fights and destroys Darika and Danavendra. In other trance dances, when possession occurs the actor usually has no memory of the event; in *mudiyettu*, possession is unique because the actor usually does not lose consciousness during it and can describe how they feel Kalis strong emotions channeling through them.

### III. Analysis of Masked Performances in South and Southeast Asia

In a European ontology, analyses of masks occur within a dichotomous framework in which only one visage--the human or the mask--can be authentic. The Western notion of a mask carries connotations of cosmetic disguise<sup>3</sup> and implies a split<sup>4</sup>. However, what this framework fails to capture is that in most non-Western contexts, masks are more accurately read as tools to manifest a multiplicity of self/selves, as opposed to an obscuring of truth.

The multiplying of images of Kali in *mudiyettu* is a method of seducing the entity out of materials and images of her into a physical body in a pattern of emergence. Her image appears in the *vesam* donned by the actor, the *muti*, and the *kasam*. There is a doubling of each of both Kali and Kuli as their images are on both the masks worn on the actors' heads as well as on their painted faces underneath. The masks act as conduits, channelling the energy of the goddess, which the face underneath theatrically contextualizes. Everyone involved, from the carver of the *muti* to the audience, takes on the role of midwife and assists in the wishes of the Kali's spirit--to be manifested.<sup>5</sup>

Caldwell's analysis of the ritual, which she personally experienced, focuses more on the gendered dynamics of the ritual in the social context of the community that performs it. She identifies male feminization in tandem with female exclusion. In her book on Kali worship entitled *Oh Terrifying Mother: Sexuality, Violence, and Worship of the Goddess Kali* (1999), she

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<sup>3</sup> Emigh, John. *Masked Performance: The Play of Self and Other in Ritual and Theatre*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996.

<sup>4</sup> Schulman, David. *Masked Ritual and Performance in South India: Dance, Healing, and Possession*. Edited by Deborah Thiagarajan and David Schulman. Ann Arbor: Centers for South and Southeast Asian Studies/ Univ. of Michigan, 2006, p 1

<sup>5</sup> Emigh, John. *Masked Performance: The Play of Self and Other in Ritual and Theatre*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996.

states “the cult of the goddess as enacted in *mudiyettu*, far from empowering or glorifying either female qualities or actual women, is a transsexual drama of male oral fixations and regressions”<sup>6</sup>. She reads representations of the female as a form of masking, pointing to the fact that “actual women”<sup>7</sup> are barred from acting as Kali due to their female bodies being perceived as impure. In her essay “Kali and Kuli: Female Masquerade in Kerala Ritual Dance”, she states: “the *vesams* of both the goddess Kali and the grotesque female clown Kuli are masquerades, male meditations on the feminine body, character, and force that abstract, manipulate, coax, and refashion mysterious feminine power into manageable forms.”<sup>8</sup>

#### **IV. Gender Pluralism as a Precolonial/Decolonized Perspective**

In her lecture entitled “Is queerness a white invention?”, Sarah Ngu discussed common themes in the way gender and sexuality were socially constituted precolonially<sup>9</sup>. In indigenous groups across North America, gender was more occupationally-defined than based on the internal/intrinsic qualities of a person, including cross-dressing; for example, it was acceptable if two women were to be in a same-sex relationship, cohabit, and be partners if one of them took on social roles traditionally given to men. It was also common for a woman in this situation to have a child with a man, while she and her female partner retained parental rights over the child.

In precolonial Southeast Asia, Ngu described ritual and religious contexts as a kind of social loophole for transgender acceptance. While parents of a transgender child might have been

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<sup>6</sup>Caldwell, Sarah. *Oh Terrifying Mother: Sexuality, Violence and Worship of the Goddess Kālī*. Delhi: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004, p. 183

<sup>7</sup>Caldwell, Sarah. *Masked Ritual and Performance in South India: Dance, Healing, and Possession*, p 185

<sup>8</sup> Caldwell, Sarah. *Masked Ritual and Performance in South India: Dance, Healing, and Possession*

<sup>9</sup>Ngu, Sarah. "Is Queerness a White Invention?" Lecture, Cornell University, Ithaca NY, March 25, 2019.

hesitant to accept the child's self-identification as another gender, if the child claimed that a god had spoken to them in a dream or they were being spiritually called, they would be incorporated into society in a religious/spiritual role.

Ngu attributes the decreased value of one's role in a collective in contemporary gender formation as a byproduct of the spread of Christianity that occurred with colonization. Christian principles enforce a sense of constant surveillance and measured weight given to individual actions, so even private sexual acts were under the threat of God's punishment. Many precolonial indigenous societies focused more on whether or not the needs of the collective were fulfilled than on the actions of the individual, so there was more leeway given to the sexualities and gender expressions of individuals if they contributed to the collective. Ngu also recognized that the acceptance of genderqueer existence as a spiritual or religious role was still a form of "othering".

## **V. Analysis**

Caldwell situates *mudiyettu* in its social context, calling to attention issues of sexism (female bodies being deemed impure) and classism (Kuli is depicted as a dark skinned, lower class, vulgar caricature of an indigenous woman). However, her emphasis on "real women" (a phrase she uses several times in her essay "Kali and Kuli"<sup>10</sup>) and her conflation of male feminization and female exclusion as a part of a singular patriarchal process is misleading. Caldwell reads *mudiyettu* within a mostly cisgendered, dichotomous framework that, while recognizing the authenticity of the actors' and participants' emotional experiences of the ritual, naturally concludes in reading the performance as a gendered falsehood or impersonation.

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<sup>10</sup> *Masked Ritual and Performance in South India: Dance, Healing, and Possession*

I propose an added layer of interpretation of the *mudiyettu* based on Ngu's notions of precolonial gender and Emigh's notion of multiplicity of selves through performance. While issues of class exclusion and violence (in many different forms) against female bodies are certainly prevalent in the society of Kerala's Brahmins, the performance of *mudiyettu* still has potential to be read as a social loophole or a socially acceptable expression of queerness. In "Kali and Kuli" Caldwell asks of the actor: "Is there a corresponding female consciousness within him that resonates especially with the goddess's own? Perhaps"<sup>11</sup> and introduces Don Handelman's analysis that the ritual impersonation is an expression of "transcendent gender fluidity"<sup>12</sup>. The lived experiences of cisgender women are dictated by patriarchal norms and for Caldwell, this indicates that gender fluidity is probably less present in *mutiyettu* than other trance performances that Handelman may be describing. However, Sarah Ngu's lecture sheds light on the complex ways in which non-western precolonial notions of a liberated gendered existence were different than they are now. Perhaps "male feminization" in *mutiyettu* is less linked to female exclusion as Caldwell postulates, and more a vestige of a precolonial gender history.

## VI. Conclusion

Even in what might be easily read as a patriarchal context, masked ritual performances may serve as a vehicle for genderqueer experiences; this is perhaps especially true in overtly patriarchal contexts in which there are rarely other socially accepted outlets for queer expression. While the *mutiyettu* may function as a tool to enforce patriarchal norms in Keralan Brahmin culture, a genderqueer perspective would bring to light aspects of the ritual which, while seeming

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<sup>11</sup> Caldwell, Sarah. *Oh Terrifying Mother: Sexuality, Violence and Worship of the Goddess Kālī*. Delhi: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004, p. 192

<sup>12</sup> Caldwell, Sarah. *Oh Terrifying Mother: Sexuality, Violence and Worship of the Goddess Kālī*. Delhi: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004, p. 205



paradoxical to Western notions of linear liberal progress, are continuous with non-western genderqueer experiences.