ISSN 2319-5339 IISUniv.J.A. Vol.5(1), 29-44 (2016)

The Divine and the Diabolic Feminine: Dynamics of Caste and Gender in the Narratives about the Goddesses and the Yakshi in *Aithihyamala* Texts

Bini B.S.

Abstract

The paper analyzes the myths and legends of Kerala about the divine feminine (Devi or the goddess) and the diabolic feminine (yakshi) narrated in *Aithihyamala* (a garland/series of legends and myths) and *Vadakkan Aithiyamala* (legends and myths from the north [of Kerala]) in order to trace the divisive power of gender, caste and class in terms of rituals and functioning of temples. The former text, compiled by Kottarathil Sankunni narrates myths from the southern regions of Kerala and the latter is a compilation of Northern myths by Vanidasan Elayavoor. The goddess and yakshi are anthropomorphized in most of the narratives. The goddess in these legends is not a mere consort, or the better half of a god as one sees her in many of the dominant Hindu *Puranas* and *Ithihasas*. The notions of benevolence, ferocity and fertility are woven around her persona. The process of worshipping her reflects the hierarchical patterns in society. The diabolic feminine or yakshi symbolizes uncontrollable *kama* or sexual urge and is tamed and domesticated in some of the narratives.

The sense of the past is internalized not always through formal history. Threads of mythology, legends, popular beliefs, customs and rituals weave together the texture of the past. Thus, these legends and myths can be read as subtexts to history that capture an indeterminable period of time as lived experience. Flashes of insights into social practices, traditions in the worship of the goddess, social, familial and ritual status of women, and the complex circulation of land rights can be gained from reading the legends and myths compiled in *Aithihyamala* and *Vadakkan Aithihyamala*. Vicissitudes of caste and ritual with reference to regional variation is a significant aspect that a comparative reading of these works reveals. The narratives in these legends emerge as a concatenation of actions and incidents, through which the feminine is manifested in different ways. This paper aims to venture beyond a textual reading of the myths, rituals and legends of the goddess and yakshi by placing them in different socio-cultural contexts and tries to see the caste and gender dynamics in various strands of these polysemic narratives which pose a challenge to any interpreter.

Keywords: caste, divine and diabolic feminine, gender, goddess, Hinduization and sublimation of mythology, legends and myths as subtext to history, ritual performances, temples and shrines, yakshi.

This paper analyzes the myths and legends prevalent in Kerala, a small state in the southern tip of India about the divine feminine (devi or the goddess) and the

diabolic feminine (yakshi) narrated in *Aithihyamala*[1] (a garland/ series of legends and myths) and *Vadakkan Aithiyamala*[2] (a series of legends and myths from the northern region of Kerala). *Aithihyamala* and *Vadakkan Aithihyamala* are originally written in Malayalam in the 20th and 21st centuries respectively though the narratives compiled in these texts were in circulation for over a long indeterminable period of time in the oral tradition in the Malayalam speaking region now known as Kerala. My reading focuses primarily on how the myths and legends in *Aithihyamala* texts maintained a position of their own as a narrative genre and preserved a regional orientation by their refusal to passively meld into dominant Hindu narrative and ritual traditions. At the same time, traces and influences of *saktism* (worship of the principal feminine or *sakti*) can be found in these stories. Secondly I illustrate how these stories offer parallel accounts of caste practices, gender and status quo, customs, ethical norms and social organization which can be read as a subtext to history. These stories are not being used as *sources* of history or historical *evidence* to make sense of the culture of caste and gender in erstwhile Kerala which was divided into three princely states namely Thiruvitamkoor (Travancore), Kochi, and Malabar during the colonial times. One cannot deny the role of such narratives in informing and complementing the historical narratives and providing counter and alternative possibilities of emplotment. To illustrate the modes of emplotment, I have included certain narratives in some detail in the paper.

Devi and yakshi in the stories of *Aithihyamala* and *Vadakkan Aithihyamala* manifest as creative and destructive energies; both are capable of assuming benign and terrifying forms. The worship of the goddess is often incorporated into the broad category of *saktism* seen as a part of Hinduism which itself comprises such diverse faiths and practices brought together under an umbrella term. Heinrich von Stietencron elaborates on the notion of *sakti*:

> …the active, motive principle (conceived of as a female and represented in the form of a goddess) that lies behind all growth and decay and, in fact, all transformation. On it depends the world in its myriad apparitional forms…. Even in man's search for liberation from the cycle of being… according to this religion attainable only with the help of sakti.[3]

This view sheds light on the ambivalent materiality of *sakti*. The goddess is considered to be a primal force pervading into all aspects of a cyclic existence spanning from birth to death to reincarnation; she is also an embodied supreme feminine consciousness. Joseph Campbell argues that the Hindu goddess combines three aspects in her textual figuration or representation in art: *maya* (the illusion of phenomenality), *sakti* (moving energy) and *devi* (the divine feminine principle).[44]

However, worship of the goddess has several local variations and comprises a variety of ritual practices. I use the terms 'Hinduism' or 'Hindu' for want of better terms to denote certain beliefs, texts and practices. One should keep in mind that there is a vast diversity of stories, faiths and customs surrounding the

goddess and the yakshi in the tribal and folk traditions. These diverse narratives and practices cannot be adequately described using the generic term 'Hinduism'.

The worship of the abstract notion of *sakti* or feminine energy has many philosophical and ritualistic implications. Goddesses, considered to be embodiments of feminine primal energy, are numerous and different. *Aithihyamala* texts have mainly stories about *gramadevatas* or village goddesses whose narratives and rituals have obvious similarities and differences with dominant Sanskrit and Hindu mythology and rituals. There are goddesses connected to a particular locality, pious women raised to goddess stature and chaste women attaining divinity in *Aithihyamala* stories. These goddesses cannot be immediately associated with any goddess appearing in the dominant and prevalent vedic, epic and puranic narratives. Local legends, folklore, tribal cults and mythology have goddesses some of whom were later incorporated into dominant forms of Hinduism as materializations of *sakti*. Hinduization of local goddesses and identifying them with Parvati, Saraswati, Lakshmi, Durga or Kali is not a rare tradition. Rituals and tales were invented to facilitate this process of appropriation. Still there are several other goddesses who are known only in certain villages of Kerala as part of origin myths or legends about the local rulers. Some of the goddesses in the texts that I am discussing have remained somewhat insular to the project of Hinduization and sublimation. Muchilottamma, Neeliyamma and Makkam Bhagavati, who are pious, intelligent and chaste women turned into goddesses have cults and rituals of their own which maintain a certain degree of difference from the dominant and widely practiced ways of goddess worship. Their stories (narrated later in the paper) exemplify the curious blend of narrative insularity and occasional osmosis. Some village goddesses of the Malabar region are portrayed as *avataras* (manifestations) of popular Hindu goddesses.

The goddess is worshipped as a combined expression of *devi, sakti* and *maya*. The cult of the goddess as the divine feminine or sacred feminine has a variegated narrative component in it. While the goddess is seen as a benevolent, fierce and at times vengeful female force, yakshi in the myths and legends of Kerala is a diabolic feminine embodiment or demi-goddess with shades of evil and kindness in her. The yakshi's image swings between absolute evil and shaded virtue in mythology and ritual practices. Myths contain reflections on right behavior and values pertaining to a society where they evolve. Myths deal with mundane and complex aspects of human predicament, often representing an underlying quest of the unknown and mysterious. Mythology is associated with rituals and social practices coexisting with it.

Female chastity and purity is a recurring motif in the stories of the devi and the yakhi. In some stories, we see chaste women becoming martyrs in the act of defending their chastity and eventually getting transformed into goddesses. *Aithihyamala* by Kottarathil Sankunni has a few stories about the yakshi whereas she is not a major presence in *Vadakkan Aithihyamala*. But there are vicious goddesses (*durdevata*) and other evil spirits (*badha*) with 'conventional' feminine characteristics attributed to them in the latter text.

Aithihyamala texts selected for analysis in this paper bring together gods, demi-gods, supernatural beings, humans, animals and nature into their narrative web. In the world of these texts, we do not see an absolute ontological divide between the divine, human, and animal worlds. The study also examines the role of caste, gender and class as divisive mechanisms in the light of rituals and the functioning of temples as represented in the *Aithihyamala* texts. The notions of 'sacred' 'divine' and 'diabolic' in relation to 'femininity' with reference to the cultural context(s) of their prevalence are also examined in the paper.

The Fictitiousness and Historicity of Myth and Legends

The authors of *Aithihyamala* and *Vadakkan Aithihyamala* differ in their perceptions about the veracity of the narratives. Kottarathil Sankunni does not differentiate between story and history. Admittedly an ardent devotee of the goddess, he gives the stories an air of mysticism, accuracy and credibility. Vanidasan suggests that these stories are narratives once preserved in oral tradition in which history, mythology, imagination and local customs are indistinguishably entangled. While Sankunni insists that *Aithihyamala* has a nuanced veracity, Vanidasan points out that looking for veracity in myths and legends is not a sensible and viable approach to their interpretation.

Myths have traces that open inroads into a certain understanding of temporality, people, life, civilization, customs, etc. pertaining to regions. Origin myths deal with themes such as origin(s) of the world, humanity, a particular tradition, a place, a temple or shrine, a custom or social practice. Myths in general have a dream-like quality that emanates from the collective consciousness of a people. They address some fears, thoughts, insights and beliefs which have individual and social dimensions and dynamics. Collectively shared myths are closely linked to cultural identities and oral traditions of the group in myriad and polyphonic ways. Campbell in his *Myths of Light* observes:

> Mythology is composed by poets out of their insights and realizations. Mythologies are not invented; they are found…. Myths come from the mystical region of essential experience. (xix)

Mythology in that sense is not merely lies, make-believe, and tall tales which the contemporary interpretations attributed to it seem to suggest. A legend gives the feeling that it is actually a way of retelling a historical event. It may or may not be a version of a historical event reshaped and reconstructed through imagination. Projecting the narratives from mythology, legends and oral traditions as irrefutable true accounts or evidences of actual events is problematic. In the texts I have selected for the study, one can see a blend of the elements of mythology and legends.

As stories with an air of culturally attributed sacredness closely linked to religion or ritual, myths are often endorsed by those who wield temporal or priestly power. For this reason, dominant mythical narratives have survived through iteration and circulation and been passed down many generations. Several stories

might have also got obliterated from a culture due to the complex equations between power, knowledge and circulation of narratives. Within a society about which and wherein they were narrated, myths thus gain the status of true accounts of a remote and indeterminable past. Different types of narratives like myths, legends and folktales have complex associations with history since they give glimpses of the ways a society perceives and wants to perceive its past. Myths have a psychological impact as they often give access to the sacred and make one participate in its mysteriousness. Legends and myths do reveal the flipside of history. The caste and gender dynamics and regional specificities in the rituals associated with the goddess (devi) and yakshi throw light on several aspects of erstwhile Kerala society and culture.

These two different manifestations of the feminine, the anthropomorphized goddess and yakshi reflect the social as well as the ritual status of women. Temples and *kavukal* (sacred groves) of the goddess and the sylvan abodes for the yakshi doubtlessly played a major role in the economy of the region. Temples and groves acquired wealth in terms of land, gold and elephants. The strategic attainment of wealth and its uses by temples narrated in these myths indicates the dominant role of faith in deciding temporal matters. The goddess and the yakshi communicated through oracles and certain happenings were interpreted as miracles. Diseases and famine were seen as punishments from the angry discontent goddess. For redemption and exoneration, the mysterious emissaries of the goddess (*velichappadu*) claimed valuable gifts of gold, elephants and land. One reads in these legends that without these offerings, the goddess and the yakshi refused to be pacified. Sometimes, demand was made for human and animal sacrifices. The power structures in a highly hierarchized society and the tensions between priestly and monarchical powers can be read between the lines in these stories, especially with reference to land rights.

The Politics of Manifestation of the Divine and the Diabolic Femininities

The goddesses are part of a polytheistic system and commonly associated with soil, nature, fertility, motherhood, emotions and the household. Sometimes they are attributed functions such as war against and destruction of evil. They sow the seeds of illness of body and mind as a form of revenge on irreverent and erring people. In goddess stories, her wrath carries the pedagogy of righteousness and ethics. Goddesses are portrayed as agents of spiritual, psychological and physical healing. The Supreme Being is depicted as containing both masculine and feminine traits. In the *sakta* scripture known as the *Devi Mahatmya*, all the goddesses are represented as aspects of an immense feminine force, singular in principle though plural and diverse in manifestation, providing energy to the cosmos. Using philosophical tracts and metaphors, the potentiality of masculine being is given actuation by the feminine divine.

South India, besides generating many narratives enriched with flavours of local history and ritual practices, recreated its own versions of the classical Hindu myths. These versions derive immensely from literature in Sanskrit and Tamil while weaving stories attached to local shrines. Most of the shrines have

utpattikatha or origin myths, *mahatmya* or a story about its greatness and *sthalapurana*, which depict traditions which have been nurtured, preserved and circulated around the shrine and its locale. Reconstruction of goddess stories from Sanskrit texts to suit the local life-worlds is not rare. But not all goddess stories are formed in that way. Stories from other languages have also been adapted into Sanskrit literary renderings.

Many goddesses in *Aithihyamala* texts are human beings transformed to divinity, like Makkam Bhagavati, Muchilottamma, and Neeliyamma. In some stories, goddesses such as Kumaranellur Bhagavati and Annapoorna arrive from other places as refugees looking for an abode after fleeing from the socio-political turmoil in the kingdoms where they once reigned as main deities. Goddesses also manifest in a stone, umbrella, well or pond as a power demanding to be installed as an idol. Some of these stories in their narrative content differ from the puranas and mythology of the dominant forms of Hinduism by maintaining an unmistakable local flavour. The inspiration for such marked deviation from the dominant narratives could be ritual, folk and tribal traditions that have been thriving in and confined to a particular region. At the same time one will not fail to notice that these stories have absorbed certain elements from the mythology associated with dominant traditions of Hinduism.

The diabolic feminine or yakshi in *Aithihyamala* symbolizes uncontrollable *kama* or sexual desire and is quite different from the figure of the tree nymph we identify as yakshi in temple iconography and certain Sanskrit texts. She appears as a beautiful woman who allures unsuspecting men to her dwelling, the dark palm tree, which would be transformed to a palace in the eyes of the spellbound victim. She satisfies the man's desire, but in return takes his life. The yakshi literally devours a man's flesh and blood after the amorous union, littering his nails and hair around the palm tree. The narrator of *Aithihyamala* assures that yakshi's perilous charms can be nullified by the powers of the goddess. In one of the stories, the yakshi fails to harm a brahmin who is protected by the powers of *Devi Mahatmya*, a mainstream Sanskrit text that narrates the triumphs of the goddess Durga against the evil Mahishasura who is half man and half buffalo. The incorporation of the Sanskrit text which is part of *Markandeya Purana* that tells the story of Durga's triumph over Mahishasura into a local myth is suggestive. This local myth is about the conquest of unbridled evil and sexual energy embodied in the yakshi by a chaste brahmin. The brahmin uses the Sanskrit *Devi Mahatmya* text, about the conquest of the bestial and destructive *asura*, as a weapon or means of self defense to tame the yakshi. The Sanskrit text becomes a *kavacha* or armour for the Malayalam-speaking Kerala brahmin devotee defending him from the destructively lustful advances of the yakshi. The stories in which the devi and yakshi play the role of the protagonist and antagonist respectively, traces of uniqueness and derivative traits in the narrative can be observed. The devi and yakshi, both beautiful and powerful, represent two manifestations of femininity: the former is predominantly good and chaste and the latter is predominantly evil and lustful. The moral anxieties of the cultures wherein the devi and yakshi stories were prevalent assign a superior

status to the goddess. The yakshi is either killed or disciplined to fit into conventionally accepted modes of womanliness.

A repeating motif in the yakshi stories is the tactics of escaping from her with the help of the goddess by reducing the yakshi into docile domesticity. When the yakshi is thus defeated, she becomes a servile companion to her conqueror, an 'upper-caste' man who is a staunch devotee of the goddess. To tame and conquer the yakshi, one may try offering her some lime smeared on the tip of a knife. The symbolic connotations of this knife, a phallic symbol with white lime at the tip are indicative of a sexual liaison. In some stories, yakshi falls in love with a potential victim; but she could never be part of his family rituals as a wife though she lives with him and mothers his children. The tamed yakshi is never allowed to perform the ritual roles assigned to the legitimate wife of the brahmin though she visits him in the nocturnal hours and serves him like a handmaid.

According to these narratives, the goddess and yakshi have several similarities in terms of appearance. Both are women of incomparable charm. The former's beauty is a source of serene bliss and the latter's beauty allures to doom. Both are fond of adornments, blood sacrifices and have immense protective and destructive potentials. The yakshi is given a place in small shrines in sylvan settings outside the temples of the goddess. The concepts on the goddess and the yakshi in *Aithihyamala* and *Vadakkan Aithihyamala* show local variations.

The goddesses and the yakshis often reflect the gender roles in the given culture. Human virtues and vices are attributed to them. The goddess is susceptible to desire, jealousy and craves for sacrifices. Some goddesses like strong alcohol and meat. In certain narratives under study, the goddess menstruates and can be weakened by the presumably 'contaminating' effects of another woman's menstrual blood. The goddess in these legends is not a mere consort, or the better half of a Hindu god as one sees her in some of the dominant Hindu *Puranas* and Ithihasas. The notions of chastity, benevolence, ferocity and fertility are woven around her person. *Yakshi* falls in love, is aggrieved by rejection and betrayal and can bless and curse. She can be an erotic force that consummates and consumes. The portrayal of the yakshi captures prevalent cultural apprehensions about women's sexuality and independence. Vicissitudes of caste and ritual with reference to region is a significant aspect that a comparative reading of *Aithihyamala* and *Vadakkan Aithihyamala* reveals. The narratives in these legends emerge as a concatenation of actions and incidents, through which the feminine is manifested in different ways. The plurality of these narratives poses a challenge to an interpreter.

The Caste, Gender and Class Dynamics and Tensions

Flashes of insights into caste practices, caste and gender divisions in the worship of the goddess, social and ritual status of women, and the complex circulation of land- rights can be gained from reading the legends and myths compiled in *Aithihyamala* and *Vadakkan Aithihyamala*. The *Aithihyamala* contains eight books, compiled in two volumes. Except the first, all other books begin with the

story of a devi or goddess. In many other stories not directly about the goddess, she manifests as a benevolent mother and a powerful avenging feminine force. The habitats of these goddesses are forests, temples in sylvan settings, villages or small old towns under monarchical rule. People of different castes had their own specific roles in the worship of the goddess and the yakshi. The administration of temples was the privilege of a few 'upper castes'. The temple was a site where caste and gender hierarchies were well defined. Sometimes there had been instances of conflict when these hierarchies were challenged. Cooperation and confrontation marked the complex caste politics in the worship of the goddess and the yakshi. The priests, kings and warriors played their respective roles in the rituals and administration of the temples and shrines.

The narratives on the goddess in Sankunni's *Aithihyamala* are more in number and follow certain patterns. The divine feminine comes into being as powerful and worthy of reverence. There are many recurring motifs and incidents in these stories. The goddess might manifest in a stone that starts bleeding when a 'lower-caste' Mannan or Pulaya woman sharpens her sickle on it. But then the goddess will demand to be purified (for she is contaminated by the touch of a 'lower-caste' woman) and worshipped by a brahmin. Through the oracular medium or the *velichappadu*, she expresses the desire to be housed in a newly constructed temple. The temple becomes her abode where the 'lower-caste' woman who discovers her idol cannot enter. Sometimes goddess idols will be found in ponds and wells. Panachikkadu temple has a goddess in sylvan settings and she is supposed to be the goddess of knowledge, Saraswati. She could be a tribal deity appropriated into a goddess who figures in dominant mythological accounts of Hinduism. The idol of Chengannoor bhagavati is believed to be found by a *pulaya* (an untouchable caste) woman though the temple was later appropriated to dominant Hinduism by the 'upper castes'. The untouchables did not have the right to enter the temples before the temple entry proclamation of 1936 in Thiruvitamkoor. Chengannoor bhagavati is believed to menstruate and all the purity-pollution norms associated with menstruation are observed whenever the idol made of stone secretes a blood-like substance. Chengannoor bhagavati is considered to be the consort of Shiva though the names 'Parvati' or 'Uma' are seldom used to refer to her.

Another recurring plot is that the goddess accompanies her brahmin priest from the neighbouring state of Tamilnadu, enters Kerala as a refugee and usurps a temple constructed by a native king for his favourite male gods such as Aiyyappa or Subrahmanya. In mythological accounts, these male deities are associated with the lore of Shiva. Aiyyappa is the son of Shiva and Vishnu who disguises himself as a beautiful woman, Mohini. According to the local narrative, Aiyappa, the son of Hari and Hara (Vishnu and Shiva), was adopted by the Raja of Pandalam, a staunch devotee of Shiva. Subrahmanya is born from an outside-the womb-union of the energies of Shiva and Parvati. It is intriguing that the goddess (who sometimes is a manifestation of Parvati, the mythical consort of Shiva) decides to make her abode the temples constructed by a king for either Aiyappa or Subrahmanya.

The goddess communicates with the king, landlords and local community through the medium of *velichappadu*, her ritual emissary, a male belonging to a particular caste. Often she talks in the mysterious language of miracles; sometimes she is articulated through epidemics such as small pox and fever. She can be the cause of death ascending on people as a form of chastisement. Offerings, sacrificial rituals and gift of vast acres of land are needed to pacify her. The process and politics of worshipping her reflects the power and caste equations in society. In most of the temples in Sankunni's *Aithihyamala*, the brahmins are priests and priesthood had long been a male privilege. Other tasks of temple such as cleaning the premises of the temple and ritual utensils, preparing the offerings, collecting flowers for worship, making floral garlands, lighting the lamps, beating the drums and overseeing the day to day activities of the temple are performed by the *ambalavasis* (literally meaning temple-dwellers) or a group of castes considered ritually pure. Administrative and property matters are taken care of by the Nairs (warriors). In such temples, the goddess will also be a *savarna (*'upper caste'). But there are sylvan shrines or *kavukal* mentioned in both *Aithihyamala* and *Vadakkan Aithihyamala,* where the 'lower castes' worship the goddess through blood sacrifices, offering of alcohol, ritual performances and song traditions.

Limits of Power and Vulnerability: Women, Goddesses and Transformations

I use the story of the encounter between Naranathu Branthan and Kali of the cremation grounds or Chudalabhadrakali to illustrate the simultaneous deviation from and similarity to dominant Hindu narratives. This story displays a degree of conformity to the elements of *sakta* cult. The former segment of the story does not have the goddess or the yakshi as characters. Still I narrate the story here fully to exemplify how Hindu epics, segments from puranas and mythological texts are woven into some local stories. The story of Naranathu Bhranthan is part of the famous *aithihya*, *Parayi Pettu Panthirukulam*, or the story of a *parayi* (a 'lower-caste' *paraya* woman) who is the mother of twelve kulas or clans representing caste identities. Some background information about *Parayipettu Panthirukulam* myth that branches out into several narratives will give some useful clues about caste practices and status of women. This narrative web exemplifies how mythology and legends in Kerala often take off and extend the plots of puranas and other dominant Sanskrit narratives. I narrate the story of *Parayipettu Panthirukulam* to illustrate how women turn into goddesses and how a limit of power is indicated in the case of goddess, in this story Kali. In the *Aithihyamala* text, this story is central to many other narratives that sprout from it. *Parayipettu Panthirukulam* is hence a major mythological account that would provide an entry point into the mythic-narrative-ritual tradition in Kerala. In the story, the brahmin Vararuchi, a favourite courtier of the emperor Vikramaditya of Ujjain (who also figures in Sanskrit accounts about Kalidasa, believed to be another courtier of the emperor) wanders in search of the answer to his master's question, "which is the greatest *sloka* (verse) in *Ramayana*?" He overhears the conversation of forest nymphs and finds a clue for the answer.

This fragment of the story is part of some Sanskrit narratives. But the latter part is juxtaposition and amalgamation of a local story into this narrative. We see several familiar motifs from different narrative traditions in this story. The plot extends as Vararuchi comes to the banks of the river Nila (now known as Bharatapuzha) in Kerala in search of the answer and finds it there; but is terrified by the prophecy by forest nymphs that a sudra ('lower-caste') child who is born on that day to a couple living in a nearby village will be his spouse. Using the power of the emperor who is his patron, Vararuchi plans the destruction of the child. The infant is sent floating on the river with a burning torch stuck to her head by her parents who are told by the young brahmin that she will spell doom for them and the empire. This story suggests how a brahmin horrified by the thought of marrying a 'lower-caste' woman would not even hesitate to get his 'abominable' future wife killed in infancy. But his plans did not work as a childless brahmin couple finds the floating infant and adopts her. Vararuchi on visiting this brahmin family in the course of his wanderings after sixteen years is impressed by the wisdom of the young adopted daughter and marries her. He realizes that this is the same *paraya* child by touching the scar left by the torch on her head while caressing her. The brahmin couple admits that their daughter is a foundling. Vararuchi does not leave his wife, the *paraya* infant grown into a brahmin woman. He even has children by her as she accompanies him in his endless wanderings. But as soon as each child is born, Vararuchi asks his wife whether it has a mouth. As soon as the answer in the affirmative comes, he instructs her to abandon the child for the divinity that has given the baby a mouth will fill it with food also. The *parayi*, being a *pativrata* (devout wife) does what she is told. The first eleven abandoned children were adopted by couples belonging to different castes. On the birth of the twelfth child, the wife tells a lie that he does not have a mouth, hoping to keep her son with her. She realizes with utter horror that, being a *pativrata*, the falsehood uttered by her has become true. The mouthless child becomes so heavy that the mother is not able to lift it. The twelfth child is installed on a hillock and named Vayillakunnilappan (a mouthless god dwelling on a hillock). Eventually people start worshipping him and he turns into a local deity. This segment further extends to narrate the fates of each of the children after they had been adopted by people of different castes and clans. This story gives a fairly good picture of the caste system, untouchability, norms of marriage between castes, temple management and the roles of each caste in it. The *parayi* is revered as a goddess because of her chasity. This story generates several other narratives in *Aithihyamala*: each child has a story of her/ his own, besides many clan legends revolving around their persona.

Kottarathil Sankunni in a story that depicts the limits of power and vulnerability of the Goddess Bhadrakali follows the life of Naranathu Bhranthan, or the madman of Naranathu who is one of the children of Vararuchi and the *parayi*. We see how a myth branches out into a plethora of narratives based on the personae in the original myth. In the story developed around Naranathu Bhranthan, he is a mendicant, a person similar to Sisyphus who repeatedly rolls a massive stone uphill during the day and laughs aloud as he lets it go. At night,

he frequents the cremation ground to gain insights about the absurdity of life and death. Bhadrakali who is part of many dominant Hindu narratives has the same cremation ground as her dwelling and dancing place. She arrives there with her companions to celebrate and rejoice. Naranathu Bhranthan confronts Bhadrakali who offers to grant his wish. Though she could predict the day of his death, Bhadrakali was unable to change it even slightly. Naranathu Bhranthan asks her to cure the elephantiasis on his left leg and make his right leg affected by the same disease. This story traces the curious link of *sakta* cult with magic and magic rituals associated with the cremation grounds. The story also suggests that the power of the goddess is not absolute. She is not the one who can control life and death though minor miracles are possible.

The goddesses in some of *Aithihyamala* stories lavish their blessings on their devotees and endow them with miraculous prowess. Goddesses in certain stories keep evil forces under control. But they are vulnerable, sometimes homeless women seeking the asylum of a temple, and cannot alter destinies. Many of them, like the *parayi*, are women who have suffered in life and remained chaste despite temptations, eventually turning into divinities. They have feelings of fear, anger, sorrow and ecstasy. As exemplified in this part of the paper, their stories are connected to or grow out of stories from well-known Sanskrit narrative traditions while a medley of novel and unique narrative segments are incorporated to enrich these stories.

The Caste Politics in the Right to Worship

The supremacy and monopoly of brahmins in the worship of the goddess is emphasized in many stories, though not all stories in *Aithihyamala* support this view. The story of Kakkassery Bhattathiri who believed that if one worships the goddess devoutly, even the Brahma or the Supreme Being would be subservient to the devotee, the story of Muttassu Nambutiri who stealthily ate the *Thrimadhuram* (sacred sweet offering) of the goddess Mookambika and achieved peerless scholarship, and the story of Puliyampilly Nambutiri who performed rituals according to the *sakta* tradition, using alcohol and meat which are forbidden to brahmins illustrate how the goddess protects her brahmin devotees from all evils and ire of the monarch and grants their wishes. The Brahmin protagonists of these three stories are represented as having privileged access to the benevolence of the goddess. Thevalassery Nambi's story is about the devotion of an 'upper-caste' male to the goddess according to the *sakta* tradition and his power to evict a *badha* or possession by an evil spirit or malevolent demigod on human body. According to *Aithihyamala* worshippers of the goddess become immune to *badha* or possession by demons or evil deities. Kalloor Nambutirippad also gets unique powers through the worship of the goddess and she interacts with him at a personal level. He can see her and talk to her. The story of Pallippurathu Kavu is based on the miraculous cures and eviction of *badhas* possible to brahmin worshippers.

The story of Kumaranellur Bhagavati illustrates the benevolence of the goddess to a brahmin devotee. According to the story, Kumaranellur Bhagavati was

Madurai Minakshi (a famous south Indian goddess and the presiding deity of the Meenakshi temple in Madurai, Tamilnadu) who follows her fleeing brahmin priest. The priest was falsely accused of thieving the diamond nose-stud of the goddess idol. From the Pandya Kingdom, the goddess reaches the realm under the reign of Cheraman Perumal and usurps a temple constructed for the god Subrahmanya (Kumara). An idol is found in a well and she is installed in it. In the story, the goddess performs miracles to convince the king and in turn receives land and other kinds of wealth. The gifting of lands to temples was a common practice of kshatriya kings. There are many stories of miracles and punishments woven around such generous donations by kshatriya rulers to the goddesses' brahmin priests.

Most of the devi stories are associated with temples. The story of Cherthala Bhagavati, the reigning goddess of the Cherthala temple which is located in a place known as Cherthala is often narrated as an origin myth of the place. The word in Malayalam for mud is *cher* and head is *thala;* hence the name of the place and the deity means 'the muddy head'. Her story goes like this: Vilvamangalathu Swami, a brahmin catches hold of seven divine virgins and installs them as goddesses in temples at different locations. The mention of Saptakumaris (Saptakanyas or seven virgins) and Saptamatrikas are found in Sanskrit *sakta* texts such as *Devi Mahatmyam* and *Lalitasahasranamam* (which is believed to be part of *Markandeya Purana*). Then the story adds a narrative component that gives it a local flavor. The seventh one among the virgins tries to escape into a pond filled with mud. The sage, peeved by her resistance against becoming embodied in an idol, uses an obscene word (meaning a slut) to address her, pulls her out of mud and installs her as the divine feminine without even cleaning the mud that is smeared on her head. The story of the goddess becomes the origin myth of the place as well. She becomes a *gramadevata* or a village goddess of the region.

In certain legends about the temple, one can see a curious allusion to certain historical events. For example, the Kollam Vishaarikkavu's *aithihya* is linked with the attack of Tipu Sultan and the miraculous apparition of the goddess in the Sultan's presence. It is said that after the miracle, the Muslim sultan repented, performed penance, and made generous donations for the temple.

Martyrs and Maidens Turned Into Goddesses: The Roles of Religion and Ritual

There are goddesses of disease and cure like Kodungalloor Vasoorimala (a goddess of small pox installed in the devi temple of Kodungalloor). They communicate through *velichappadu* or a ritual emissary. Kodungalloor Bhagavati, the main deity of the temple is believed to be Kannaki, the protagonist of *Cilappathikaram*, a samgha text by the sage Thiruvalluvar. Kannaki was is chaste woman, a *pativrata*, who proves the innocence of her husband falsely accused of theft and killed by the king. Kannaki metamorphoses into a powerful goddess after taking revenge on the king who had turned her into a widow. The rituals in the temple use several sacrificial rites. Songs in obscene language are sung in order to please the goddess. These songs used in the worship of this chaste goddess are, paradoxically, overtly sexual. Women do not have any

significant role in the worship of the goddess or in her rituals. The priests who have access to the sanctum sanctorum will be male, the *velichappadu* is usually male and women have only minor roles in temple management.

The recurring manifestations of the sacred feminine in *Vadakkan Aithihyamala* are Muchilottamma and Annapoorna. One story about Muchilottamma traces the origin of the goddess to a scholarly brahmin virgin who was misunderstood to be unchaste when in a scholarly debate she answered the question on the most enjoyable pleasure as the one derived from *rati* or intercourse. After committing herself to the sacrificial fire, the girl gets transformed into a powerful goddess. This narrative indicates the prevalent insecurity and fear surrounding women's intelligence and free expression of her sexuality. There are several temples dedicated to this goddess and many are the rituals associated with her worship in which different castes are represented through ritual roles. Kanjangadu Muchilottu Bhagavati temple is associated with the story of a Muslim, Kalyal Ali, who offers water to a Nair during the latter's penance. The devi manifests under a banyan tree in the Muslim's house and the Nair initiates the construction of a temple. According to Vanidasan, the descendents of Ali still play a major role in the *theyyam* (a ritual theatre depicting the stories and feats of the goddess; performers are usually men) performance of the temple. In most of the stories on Muchilottu Bhagavati, a man of vaniya (oil-manufacturer) caste appears as a major figure.

Another prominent village deity who has many temples in north Kerala is Makkam Bhagavati. Makkam Bhagavati was a devout woman who was cheated by her sisters-in-law. The jealous wives of Makkam's brothers plotted against her and produced false evidence against her. By making Makkam's brothers believe that their sister was unchaste, the sisters-in-law could engineer her murder. On being killed by her siblings, Makkam turns into a powerful goddess, for whom there are unique local rituals. As I had mentioned in the beginning of the paper, these stories exemplify how the stories of *gramadevata* or village goddesses are somewhat immune to the project of Hinduization and sublimation though there are occasional porous spots in the narratives.

There are several such textual and performative examples for this narrative phenomenon. In another story, Kunju Neeli a *pulaya* woman, on rejecting the 'upper-caste' men who wanted to have secret illicit relationship with her, was accused of being immoral. After her sacrifice by her father to the *maladaivam* or hill deity she gets transformed into Neeliyamma, a village goddess. The stories of the sacred feminine and the rituals like *theyyam*, *kalamezhuthu* and *mudiyettu* are complexly interlinked in Kerala, especially in the northern region. *Kalamezhuthu* or drawing of the *kalam*, a sacred image or pattern depicting the goddess has a narrative song tradition linked to it. This *kalam* will often be erased by the *velichappadu* or the ritual emissary of the goddess, who performs certain dance or martial-art like movements and makes supposedly prophetic statements standing on the *kalam*. Similarly, *mudiyettu,* or a ritual that combines drawing the image of the goddess with natural colour powders on the floor and singing and performing the story of the killing of a demon, brings together the

narrative and performance traditions and art forms such as dance, drama, vocal and instrumental music and painting.

Another ritual performance that is interwoven with the narratives of *gramadevatas* is *theyyam*. The *theyyams* of Alichamundi and Bhagavati are believed to be the manifestations of Ali, a muslim youth killed by Nangakkutty, a beautiful Nair woman raped by him. After murdering Ali, she commits suicide and in order to pacify the ghosts, the performance of these *theyyams* is believed to have started. Behind each *theyyam*, there are stories mostly of martyrdom and revenge. In the story, "Theekkuzhichalil Ninnoru Bhagavati" (A goddess from the furrow of fire), Mohini (Vishnu disguised as a woman to fool the *asuras*), a character from *Bhagavata Purana,* after being cursed by goddess Parvati for being her husband Shiva's mistress seeks abode on a palm tree. The story takes off from *Bhagavata Purana* and continues. Mistaking Mohini to be a yakshi, a Nair cuts the *karimpana* or palm tree and the goddesss, now named Muchilamkodu Bhagavati demands for a temple and *theyyam* ritual.

The story of Arayangadichi devi depicts her as an evil and revengeful spirit who was locked inside a nail stuck on a tree by a Nambutiri or Kerala brahmin. She is different from the goddesses in other myths as her traits are menacing and murderous. This story in many ways resembles the yakshi stories in which the yakshi is prevented from harming people by a nail that locks her on a tree. Ariyangadichi devi was punished by the brahmin for eating up his servant. On being released by a cowherd, she had to be given a temple and *theyyam* to pacify her. In another story, Durga enters the body of a princess in the land of Aryans and demands the king to send her to south India in a ship. She is installed as Chuzhali Bhagavati (cyclone goddess) because as a cyclone, she pushed the ship to the right shore. Annapoorna also come to the shores of Malabar sailing in a ship from Kashi responding to the pleas of Kolathiri, the monarch of the region. According to the myth, three brahmin women accompanied Annapoorna with lamps, Buddhists and Jews were sailors and the captain of the ship was a Muslim. The goddess was received by Nairs when she reaches Aayiramthengu (shore of a thousand coconut trees) in the Malabar Coast. The myth has several versions. In one of the versions, Krishna, a manifestation of the Hindu deity, Vishnu, also accompanies Annapoorna. Annapoorna's traits are similar to the characteristics of Lakshmi, the spouse of Vishnu. There are many stories about the miracles performed by Annapoorna and she is believed to be the goddess of prosperity and abundance. 'Annam' in Malayalam means food and 'poornam' indicates fullness. Like Kumaranellur Bhagavati in Sankunni's *Aithihyamala*, Annapoorna also comes from a distant land and makes the region her home by making demands for land and a temple for her abode.

The stories of the goddess and the yakshi in both the *Aithihyamala* texts give glimpses of the society, customs, and modalities of temple administration. We also get certain clues about the social distribution of land and wealth and caste and gender roles in erstwhile Kerala. The sense of the past is internalized not always through formal history, but by means of mythology, legends, popular beliefs, customs and rituals. Thus, these legends and myths can be read along

with history as attempts to capture an indeterminable period of time, actual or imagined, as lived experience and fantasy. At the same time one has to resist the tendency of reading myths and legends as 'authentic' versions of history. Myths and legends do not replace or substitute for history, but often supplement history with alternative likelihoods. Mythology at times is primeval attempts for capturing memory, history and life-worlds of a people. Mythical accounts from a region derive segments of narratives and characters from other mythical and ritual traditions. An aura of fantasy and imagination envelops ordinary events and people in mythology. One cannot dismiss the possibility that myths are created through combined processes of recollection, performance, collective or individual imagination and observation of everyday lives. Moreover, the domains of myths are dialogic. Dialogues happen across time and space in these stories made porous through repeated narration and boundless circulation. The authorship and voices in the myth cannot be treated as monologic, singular or bound to a particular spatio-temporality. This reading was also an attempt map the levels of difference between myth and history. It looked into many-sided and multi-dimensional divisions in terms of region, religion, caste and gender as depicted in *Aithihyamala* and *Vadakkan Aithihyamala*.

Endnotes

[1] Kottarathil Sankunni started writing a series about the legends and myths in Kerala in Malayala Manorama and Bhashaposhini, following the suggestion of Kandathil Varghese Mappila, the Founder and managing editor of these popular and prestigious publications. Due to the untimely death of Varghese Mappila, Manorama did not bring out the narratives as a textual compilation. Mangalodayam Private Press published the text during 1909-1934 in 8 volumes. Later, these 8 volumes were put together in two volumes by Kottarathil Sankunni Smaraka Samiti (Kottarathil Sankunni Memorial Committee)

[2] Vadakkan Aithihyamala is a compilation of short mythical accounts and legends about people, temples, practices, religion and communal matters in Malabar or the northern region in Kerala. It focuses on the socio-ritual aspects of myths along with the narrative component. The text discusses in detail about theyyam (a ritual art) and other similar art forms that involve music, performance, martial arts and painting.

[3] Heinrich von Stietencron, Hindu Myth, Hindu History: Religion, Art and Politics (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005), p. 115.Stietencron, Heinrich von. Hindu Myth, Hindu History: Religion, Art and Politics. Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005. Print.

References

Campbell, Joseph. *The Mythic Dimension: Selected Essays [1959-1987]*. Novato: New World Library, 1997. Print.

—. *Myths of Light: Eastern Metaphors of the Eternal*. Novato: New World Library, 2003. Print.

Elayavoor, Vanidasan. *Vadakkan Aithihyamala.* Kottayam: DC Books, 2008. Print.

Sankunni. Kottarathil. *Aithihyamala,* Volumes I & II. Kottayam: Kottarathil Sankunni Memorial Committee, 1974. Print.

Stietencron, Heinrich von. *Hindu Myth, Hindu History: Religion, Art and Politics.* Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005. Print.