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## An Ecocritical Reading of the Orature of Mavilan Tribe

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This paper attempts to look at the oral literature of mavilan tribe settled in the Kannur and Kasaragod districts of North Kerala from an eco critical perspective. The oral literature of this tribe represents their eco consciousness in the form of folksongs, folktales, proverbs, performance etc. In this paper, a few folksongs of the tribe are analyzed. They have been documented during the fieldwork conducted in Eruvessy Panchayath of Kannur district. According to the knowledge of the author, nobody else has ever recorded or studied them. Personal interviews, observations and discussions with the community members, were employed to arrive at the result. The study provides evidence for the eco consciousness of mavilans.

In her introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Cheryl Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment and further, as an earth-centered approach to literary studies (xviii). The indigenous communities being part of nature reveal their eco-centric way of life in their oral literature. Mavilan orature too manifests their eco-consciousness. The oral literature transmitted to the younger generation comprises the methods of preservation of nature. They are the lessons imparted to the little ones to safeguard the mother Earth whose abundance sustains them. The awareness of being sustained by the Earth is the root of their life and members of the tribe gratefully safeguard her. As ecocriticism focuses on the representation of nature in various literary genres, this paper attempts to ecocritically read the oral literature of mavilans.

Mavilans inhabit Kannur and Kasaragod districts of North Kerala. They are essentially of Dravidian tribe and one of the original inhabitants of Kerala (Kurup 47). Kunhambu Mavuvalappil, one of the mavilans himself, also opines that they are the successors of the Dravidian tribe that settled only in the hill areas near the forests (15). During the early twentieth century, the system of agriculture serfdom existed in Kannur and Kasaragod districts. The landlord possessed the ownership of land. They used the tribal people for their agriculture purpose. Mavilans who had relied on forest and forest produce for their sustenance had been leading a hunting, gathering and horticulture way of life until the encroachment of landlord to their habitat (Suresh). Therefore, as they remained backward, they were enlisted as scheduled caste according to the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950. They were further enumerated in the category of tribes as amended by the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Orders (Amendment) Act 2002 (Act 10 of 2003) vide Part VII-Kerala- Second Schedule notified in the Gazette of India dated 8 January, 2003.

Mavilans are subdivided into *Chingathanmar*, *Malayala Mavilar* and *Cheronmar* (Karipath). The *Malayala Mavilans* reside as colonies in Alakode, Naduvil, Seekandapuram, Payyavoor, and Eruvessy areas of Kannur District. The older generations of the tribe spoke old version of Malayalam. The new generations speak Malayalam of the present-day because of their interaction with the people outside. The current study is conducted among the Malayala Mavilans settled in Eruvessy Panchayath of Kannur District of Kerala. Personal interviews, observations and discussions with the community members, especially the elders,

were employed to arrive at the result. Raman Avidath, the elder of the community and one of the remaining tradition bearers in Eruvessy Panchayath, is the main informant of the study. He is a treasure-trove of folklore. He practices indigenous medicine as well. Being a multifaceted personality, he used to be a *theyyam*<sup>i</sup> artist as well. The author has recorded from him the select oral texts analyzed in this paper. According to the information available, nobody else has ever recorded or studied them so far.

The term 'orature' was coined in the sixties by Pio Zirimu, the late Ugandan linguist to refer to the total system of performance linked to a very specific idea of space and time (Fiona). It emphasizes the oral character and nature of literary works. Orature is a more recent and less widely used term for oral literature. Oral literature refers to any form of verbal art, which is transmitted orally or delivered by word of mouth. Today, these two terms are used interchangeably. Orature of a community remains a window to their traditions while playing the pivotal role of binding the different cultural aspects.

R.C Karipath has conducted his doctoral study on the life and culture of *Mavilans*. K.P Suresh too has studied the Mavilans of Kasaragod district of Kerala with regard to their agricultural practices and as a community in transition. However, to date, no study has been undertaken to analyze the oral literature of mavilans from an ecological outlook. Hence, the objective of the present study is to find out the themes of their oral literature from an ecocritical perspective.

Mavilans were attuned to nature. They lived eco consciousness and it is manifested in all their involvements, cultural practices, and oral traditions. The name mavilan itself is derived from the type of leaves that they used to cover themselves in the beginning. They wore the *ila* (leaf) of *Mavu* (mango tree) as cloth. (Kunhambu 14) Thus even the name of this tribe originates from their intimacy with nature. In the later stages, although they didn't have land of their own, yet they considered the land and the crop they cultivated as their own and sacred. They followed the method of shifting cultivation. Mavilans have many songs, which describe that cultivating on hilly areas after burning the accumulated debris and clearing the forest is a method entrusted particularly to their tribe (Karipath 152).

The first three principles of deep ecology proposed by Arne Naess state:

1. The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: inherent worth, intrinsic value, inherent value). These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes.
2. Richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves.
3. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.

These principles can directly be applied to the oral texts selected for the study.

### **The folksong of Karimpuli Kannan**

The folksong of Karimpuli Kannan, sung during the wedding celebrations and *Punam*<sup>ii</sup> cultivation, unequivocally stresses the urgency to protect trees. The song begins with

the context of the sexual union of Kannan's parents, conception, birth and his growth. In *Valliatu Tharavadu*<sup>iii</sup>, another noble family, a girl is of the same age as that of Kannan. While they were playing together, Kannan promised to marry her when they grew up. Later on, they are separated from each other and consequently Kannan forgets their promise. In his adulthood, Kannan begins to look for a wife. When he was disappointed not finding a suitable wife, his mother advises him to go to *Valliatu Tharavadu*. Thus, he goes there and meets her. Both of them like each other. Having promised to come back and marry her, he returns home rejoicing. His anxious mother is glad to know of his decision. Now, Kannan has to go back along with his relatives to marry the girl according to their custom. They have to cross a river to reach her place and he requires a boat to convey his people across.

Kannan is very excited. His solitary aim is to claim the hands of his beloved as early as possible. He plans to cut a huge mango tree that was in their neighborhood to build the boat. Having realized his plan his mother cautions him not to cut the tree, as it is older than his ancestors and his parents. However, he does not pay heed to her. He obstinately proceeds to cut the mango tree. An excerpt of the English translation of the song is given below:

Excitedly a mango tree he approaches  
Opens his tool box and takes out the chisel and axe  
"Where are you going Karimpuli Kannan?"  
Asks the mango tree to Kannan.  
"Need I to build a boat cutting you down,  
To cross the Karimpuli river," replies Kannan.  
"You've not grown up to cut me yet,"  
Tells the mango tree to Kannan.  
"Older than your father am I  
Older than your mother am I  
Older than your ancestors am I,"  
Tells the mango tree to Kannan.  
"Deceive me and you'll be deceived."  
Wailing and weeping falls the tree down.

Kannan disregards the warning of the tree. The tree reminds him that he is not old and wise enough to cut it. The tree tries to admonish him that it is older than his parents and ancestors. Yet the impulsive Kannan fails to pay attention to such wisdom and coldheartedly fells the tree. He builds the boat with the trunk of the tree, completing the entire project within a day. He places the boat in the river. On the previous eve of the appointed day, all his sisters and brothers-in-law arrive and they feast together. The next morning his mother and his relatives bless him as per the custom. Kannan and his relatives board the boat to set out to *Valliatu Tharavadu*. He clasps the oar and rows the boat himself. When they reach the middle of the river, the boat capsizes drowning all of them. Hearing the tragic end both, his fiancée and his mother are grief-stricken.

This folk song sung during the wedding not only highlights the birth, growth, maturing and the search of Kannan for a soul mate but also the need for taking care of nature along with one's own development. If nature is not respected the union of bride and bridegroom is also precarious. Before one commits to conjugal relationship itself, one is reminded of the necessity of protecting nature. Humans cannot exploit nature for their selfish end. This lesson is implanted in the mind of the bride and bridegroom during the wedding

celebration. As they enter the marital covenant with each other, they also realize their role as a family to safeguard nature. They are to impart these basic tenets to their heirs as well.

Kannan's mother faithfully discharges her duty of defending the tree. The wise woman realizes the role of a tree in their culture and civilization. A tree is irreplaceable. Each tree has a history. It is a silent witness of the evolution of life of its vicinity. It has witnessed the birth, growth and death of each individual of that locality. The tree has provided solace to many a sorrowing heart. Children have played under the tree and climbed on its branches. It has taken part in all the events of that region. Thus, it is a repertoire of memories of stories and incidents. A tree becomes an integral part of that locality where it is rooted. However, Kannan being impetuous and blind for his lady, does not listen to his mother. Had he stopped and thought about what she spoke he would have averted the calamity. The tree itself implored Kannan not to cut it and reiterated what his mother had already advised him not to.

This folksong epitomizes the ancestral wisdom when the tree tells Kannan that it is older than his parents and ancestors and therefore needs to be protected. A tree cannot just be cut for the selfish end of a person or community. The mango tree having entreated Kannan not to cut it, is forced to warn him that it would retaliate if he betrays it. Yet, Kannan fails to listen. Finally, the defenseless tree falls down wailing and weeping. Falling of the huge tree is symbolic of the collapse of a mighty kingdom. The mango tree that sustained many species is reduced to nothing. From now on, the birds and squirrels will have to look for another tree to perch. The people of that community and neighborhood, which enjoyed the sweet mangoes every year, will be deprived of such a generous feast. They will not be protected anymore from the scorching sun with its shade. No more a tired man can sit under the tree and relax. The tree, which used to be a provider of fresh air, shade, leaves, fruits, firewood and shelter for birds, squirrels, rodents and reptiles is destroyed within a few minutes. A thoughtless action of human beings can cause irreparable damage in the entire ecosystem. Hence, the nature teaches a harsh lesson. The tree is forced to resort to a drastic action of retaliation. The only deterrent for such reckless attitude and senseless behavior as that of Kannan is annihilation. If the existence of a tree is in risk, the one who engenders the harm has no right to live. Either both the trees and humans coexist or perish together. In other words, destruction of trees would result in destruction of human species itself. Human life depends on nature whether we realize it or not. Inter connectedness between the trees and humans needs to be nurtured. We are reminded of Barry Commoner's first law of ecology: "Everything Is Connected to Everything Else." There is one ecosphere for all living organisms and what affects one, affects all. Thus, the folksong of Karimpuli Kannan challenges us to realize this hard truth and to preserve nature. Inter dependency and inter connectedness of beings can easily be observed in the lives of the mavalans.

### **The folksong of Muthappankotta**

The folksong of Muthappankotta is sung at the beginning of *Nattutheyyam*,<sup>iv</sup> when the theyyam performer gets ready in the *Aniyara*<sup>v</sup>. It deals with the theme of shifting cultivation. It is the story of a landlord called Muthukutti Nair Thampuran, who orders his tenants to cultivate on a sacred mountain.

The meaning of the song is: Muthukutti Nair Thampuran<sup>vi</sup> wants the mountain, Muthappankotta Mudivaram Kallu, to be cultivated. He summons a tenant and orders him to bring the skilled black smith from a distant place, in order to prepare the tools. The black smith arrives. He makes the tools. Thampuran wants to know the *sakunam*.<sup>vii</sup> The black



smith cautions him of the impending misfortune that would befall on himself and his tenants. However, Muthukutti Nair Thampuran proceeds with his plan to cultivate on Muthappankotta Mudivaram Kallu. He further sends for the tenants, gives them the implements and asks them to begin the cultivation on an auspicious day. The tenants begin *Punam* cultivation on a Tuesday. After clearing the forest, the leaves and branches are kept for drying. The tenants observe the ritual of appeasing the gods and goddesses of fertility. A lamp is lit and some rituals are observed in order to be blessed by the god of fertility. With the fire taken from the lamp the dried branches and leaves are set aflame. The whole area burns for three nights and three days. Once the marked land on the mountain is ready, Muthukutti Nair Thampuran gives them the required implements and seeds. The tenants work hard on the land. They, as well as their wives, collect the remains of the leaves and burn them again. On the second day of *Medam*,<sup>viii</sup> they sow the seeds. As days go by, they weed the land for the first and second time. On the seventh day of *Karkidakam*, the flowers start appearing. They collect other produce like cucumber, bitter gourd, ash melon etc. that are cultivated along with the paddy and offer them to Thampuran. He orders them to ingather the fruit of their labor when the harvest is finally ready. The harvested paddy is gathered and kept within a boundary. The tenants go to collect *Naru*<sup>ix</sup> in order to tie the harvested tillers into bundles. The tenants who went for cords disappeared. Their wives too were wiped out. The paddy kept in the east as boundary, transformed into eagles and flew away. The entire harvested paddy became dragonflies and vanished. And Muthukutti Nair Thampuran became insane.

The tribal communities consider certain spaces in nature like the mountains, hills, rivers, etc. as holy. They safeguard and worship these places and do not interfere with them. No one is supposed to breach this unspoken rule. However, Muthukutti Nair Thampuran not being concerned about the sacredness of the hill, Muthappankotta Mudivaram Kallu, has it cultivated. The produce is abundant. However, he is not able to relish it. Both he and his workers perish before they could savor the newly harvested paddy. The repercussion of breaching the laws of nature would be disaster. Not only is the property owner punished but also the tenants who cultivated the land, conforming to his orders. Let us remember, “what affects one, affects all”. Just as Nature is bountiful to good or bad alike, her annihilating aspect also is to be faced by all whether it is deserved or not. It is the callous attitude of humans that trigger the disaster. The first principle of deep ecology reminds us that the inherent worth of human and nonhuman life on Earth is independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes. A mountain needs to be a mountain. That is why it is there. It is not to be reduced to an agricultural land or a stone mine as it is done today. A mountain has its intrinsic worth.

In the song, the egocentric attitude of Muthukutti Nair Thampuran is juxtaposed with the eco-centric attitude of mavalans. Despite being the tenants of Thampuran, they respect the laws of nature in cultivating the land. The landlord exploits their agricultural knowledge for his profit. However, at the end the innocent lives are also sacrificed while safeguarding his selfish interest. If the humans don't listen to the natural laws, Nature has to teach them harsh lessons. While the beliefs and customs of indigenous people protect the non-human world, the knowledge of the modern people leads to an exhaustive use of natural resources. Thus, the song remains a warning for all the generations to conserve nature for its intrinsic worth.

The song of Muthappan kotta also portrays the eco-consciousness of the mavalans in following the natural rhythm of seasons. They relied solely on the plenitude of nature for their sustenance. In addition, they arranged their agricultural practices according to the availability of natural resources like rainwater, fog, sunlight, wind etc. Mavalans were so

attuned to the natural flow of life that they could easily predict the weather and plan the agricultural activities accordingly. They could sow seeds on the second day of *Medam* (mid-April) as the summer rains were certain every year. They could precisely predict that the plants would flower on the seventh day of *Karkidakam* (towards the end of July). Thus, they organized their agricultural practices according to the cycle of Malayalam lunar months. As they followed the shifting cultivation they planted the other crops like melons, pulses etc. along with the paddy. It is contrary to the monoculture ways of modern ages where all the other crops are disregarded for the maximum yield of a single variety of crop. Mavilans enjoyed the bounty of nature throughout the year because of shifting cultivation.

In addition, the song of Muthappankotta vividly narrates each step of the method of shifting cultivation, which is the ideal way of agriculture. The cultivation begins with the marking of the land for cultivation. A patch of forestland is opened up and marked. Then the standing growth is cleared. The leaves and twigs are kept for drying. When it is dried, it is burnt. The ash remaining in the field becomes fertilizer for the crop. When the land is ready, seeds are sown after stirring the top soil with a small implement called *parika*. Shifting cultivation guards the nature from soil erosion and corrosion of fertility of land.

### **The folksong of Kuttithatha<sup>x</sup>**

The folksong of Kuttithatha analyzed in this paper is sung during the interlude of theyyam performance. It not only exposes the frightening reality of deforestation but also transcends the mavilans to the realm of the divine proposing the union of the creation and the creator.

A little parrot while flying from the East sees the fruit of a *Puvam* tree and perches on it. A god who comes from the East sits under the shade of the same tree to rest en route. The parrot eats the fruit of *Puvam* tree and drops it. The fruit falls accidentally on the head of the god. While looking up he sees the parrot. He wonders whose parrot it is and shoots it. The parrot falls down. The god realizing that he has shot the bird that belonged to someone else revives it. Realizing the insecurity the little parrot flies from there, settles on an arecanut tree, and makes its nest on it. Then the arecanut tree is cut into pieces. The parrot flies away from there and makes its nest on a coconut tree. The coconut tree is also chopped into fragments. The parrot approaches a mango tree and makes its nest on it. Disappointingly, the mango tree is also felled. The little parrot flies away from there to distant places having nowhere to make its nest. The last line of the song translates as: Now it is as if the god and the parrot have become one.

The folk song of *Kuttithatha* accentuates the adverse effects of deforestation. Having got revived *Kuttithatha* is alarmed to perch on the *Puvam* tree again. Therefore, she tries to build its nests on other trees, but in vain. As the trees are being cut one by one she has to wander away having no place to make her home.

Felling of trees may sound as a single act for satisfying human needs. But the song *Kuttithatha* makes one shudder at the consequences of this single deed. As a tree becomes the center of biodiversity by providing shelter and food to birds, insects, reptiles and humans, felling of trees leads to an imbalanced ecosystem. Trees and plants draw other species to them. Thus, equilibrium is already established in the environment. The nature is not a toy to meddle with. Whether god or humans, we should not do anything that is detrimental to other species for our pleasure. Each creature has its inherent individualities that we need to bear with for the survival of each other. It is the very nature of birds to eat fruits and drop the seeds. It is mere coincidence that the god comes and sits under the tree. However, we who

consider ourselves superior to any other creatures have the faculty to discern our actions. Unless we opt for a peaceful coexistence, we will be inviting trouble for the whole bionetwork. Each creature on the earth has a purpose and its intrinsic worth. Hence, the song of *Kuttithatha* manifests the eco consciousness of the mavilans. The plight of *Kuttithatha* would be awaiting humans if unmindfully felling of trees persists in the name of development for the selfish end of a rich and powerful minority. Remember the third principle of deep ecology: humans have no right to reduce the richness and diversity of life forms except to satisfy vital needs.

This folksong is a metaphor of the life of the mavilans themselves. As the mavilans did not have land of their own, they had to depend on the mercy of others specially the property owners for survival. Mavilans are compared to the little parrot that searches for a place to make its nest. This song is the outcome of the painful reality of landlessness and being oppressed by the privileged groups. The mavilans being the tenants of the landlords had to be at their disposal. As this tribe was a defenseless group, they had to succumb to the orders of landlords. Therefore, the song of *Kuttithatha* is evolved out of the painful experience of their existence, which corresponds to that of slaves.

From a vantage point, at a higher level the song of *Kuttithatha* transports us to the metaphysical existence of beings. The dualisms of creator/creature, greater/smaller, and the have's /have not's are mitigated. The entire cosmos becomes one single reality wherein everyone has an equal role of existence. The creature is united with the creator; the greater and smaller have become one; and there is no distinction as the 'have' and 'have not'. As the last line reiterates, it is as if the god and the parrot have become one.

Ideologically, the distinction between the created beings is removed and they reach the greater realization of all beings as one, irrespective of their credentials. Therefore, it is integral to the mavilans to respect the whole creation for its intrinsic worth.

From a literary perspective, the following lines of the song that describe the little parrot throw light on their sense of observation of objects of nature.

Like the flower of a banana tree is her beak.  
Like the wings of a cockroach are her wings.  
Like the stem of peacock feather are her legs.

All the three similes employed in the song are from nature itself. The beak of a parrot is bent and red. Banana flower has both these attributes. The wings of cockroach are very light. As the *Kuttithatha* is small, her wings are small and tender. The stem of peacock feather is lean and hollow. These similes are deftly used to throw light on the vulnerability of the little parrot and hence the need to tend her with extreme tenderness and compassion. Unfortunately, a very unfitting treatment is meted out to her. The comparisons to the different objects of nature evince the eco consciousness of the mavilans.

The little parrot is fragile and vulnerable. Such a state of the little parrot would evoke compassion and sympathy. On a close observation of the little parrot that falls dead at his feet, the god becomes empathetic and revives her as though atoning for his coldhearted act of killing the innocent bird. Even destroying a tiny bird would result in disruption of the ecological balance. Thus, the song *Kuttithatha* portrays eco consciousness that leads to harmonious and peaceful coexistence of all beings.



To conclude, we can surmise that the orature of the *Mavilans*, particularly those settled at Eruvessy Panchayath of Kannur district of Kerala manifests ample evidence of their eco consciousness. An ecocritical reading of their orature directs us to the world of eco centric practices of an indigenous group that relied solely on the abundance of Nature for their survival. The select oral texts studied, provide the evidence that they live a life of interconnectedness. The folksong of Muthappan kotta on *Punam* Cultivation analyzed in this paper is a reminder of the need to preserve the sacred spaces of nature. It is also an invitation to adhere to the laws of nature in order to keep oneself away from disasters.

Furthermore, the folksong of *Kuttithatha* endorses the eco-consciousness of the *mavilans* by highlighting the ill effects of deforestation. Sacredness is attributed to the whole of creation by eliminating the dualisms. The folksong Karimpuli Kannan underscores the importance of maintaining the age-old trees as part of any civilization.

Mavilans conserve the bio diversity and transmit the same attitude of reverence and gratitude to the younger generations through their orature. The folk songs analyzed in this paper remind us that Nature can exist without us while we cannot exist without her.

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Notes

<sup>i</sup> It is a popular ritual dance in North Malabar. Theyyam is a corruption for Daivam or God. This centuries' old ritual art form is a unique combination of dance, music and religious worship. After a period of intense preparation involving abstinence, fasting, prayer and solitary confinement, the performer dons the costume of the deity he is representing. During the performance, he identifies himself with the deity and receives homage from the devotees who revere him as such. In this elevated state, he is presumed to have supernatural powers.

<sup>ii</sup> Shifting cultivation

<sup>iii</sup> Ancestral home

<sup>iv</sup> It is one type of Theyyam.

<sup>v</sup> A temporary shed, a sacred place, made only for the purpose of theyyam.

<sup>vi</sup> Thamburan is roughly translated as landlord

<sup>vii</sup> Predicting the future

<sup>viii</sup> *Medam* is the ninth month of the Malayalam lunar months, which is from mid- April to mid-May. The other malayalam months are: *Chingam, Kanni, Thulam, Vrichikam, Dhanu, Makaram, Kumbham, Meenam, Edavam, Mithunam, Kakadakam*

<sup>ix</sup> A type of cord obtained from the bark of a tree

<sup>x</sup> Kutti=little; thatha= parrot