



SHADOW WALKERS OF THE NIGHT: REINTERPRETING THE ODIYAN MYTH OF PALAKKAD THROUGH CASTE, FOLKLORE, AND CULTURAL MEMORY

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Abstract: This paper explores the Odiyan myth, a distinctive folkloric narrative from Palakkad in Kerala, India, characterized by supernatural shape-shifting figures deeply intertwined with caste dynamics, ritual traditions, and regional identity. Traditionally feared as nocturnal sorcerers wielding “odi vidya” or black magic, Odiyans occupied liminal roles that reflected broader societal tensions. Drawing from oral histories, folk performances, and caste-based perspectives, this study examines how the myth of the Odiyan evolved within agrarian and feudal contexts and functioned as a dual mechanism of both social control and subaltern resistance. Further, the research explores how contemporary reinterpretations—in cinema and cultural discourse—are transforming the Odiyan into a symbol of cultural reclamation and marginalized identity.

Keywords: Odiyan, Kerala folklore, caste hierarchy, oral tradition, subaltern identity, odi vidya, ritual magic, cultural memory

1. Introduction

Kerala’s folkloric tradition encompasses a variety of supernatural and mythical beings, but the Odiyan of Palakkad stands out as a figure both feared and revered. Known as elusive, shape-shifting entities capable of vanishing into the darkness, Odiyans are more than mythological phantoms—they are embedded in the socio-political and caste fabric of Kerala, particularly in the Palakkad region. This paper examines the socio-cultural functions of the Odiyan myth, tracing its evolution and analyzing its implications within caste structures, oral traditions, and contemporary reinterpretations.

2. Historical Origins and Mythic Construction

The Odiyan myth is believed to have originated during the feudal period in Malabar, particularly in Palakkad—an area where Tamil and Malayalam cultural influences intersect. The myth flourished in a caste-based agrarian society where upper-caste landlords exercised economic and ritual dominance while lower-caste communities such as the Pulayar and Parayar occupied marginal, often spiritual or ritualistic roles. These communities were believed to possess specialized knowledge in herbal medicine, exorcism, and black magic, often passed through oral traditions.

Within this framework, the Odiyan emerged as a shadowy assassin—employed by landlords to settle disputes or eliminate enemies under the veil of night. However, unlike a mere hired killer, the Odiyan was believed to possess extraordinary abilities through odi vidya—a form of ritual magic that included shape-shifting, invisibility, and psychological manipulation. Through the use of animal bones, rare herbs, and secret rituals, Odiyans symbolized liminal power—capable of navigating between the spiritual and physical realms.

This supernatural element reflected an animistic worldview in which nature, spirits, and human emotions were deeply intertwined. Animal transformations—most commonly into buffaloes or wild dogs—reflected both the unpredictability of nature and society's subconscious fears. The rural landscape of Palakkad, with its vast fields, thick vegetation, and forested peripheries, served as a fertile ground for these stories to flourish. Odiyan lore was often linked with specific locations: banyan groves, temple surroundings, and old landlords' homes. These places became spaces of both memory and myth.

3. Caste, Power, and the Odiyan Figure

The Odiyan myth is inextricably linked to caste hierarchies. The Pulayan and Parayan communities, often relegated to “impure” roles in death rituals and spiritual mediation, were associated with Odiyan powers. The myth acted as both a marginalizing tool and a reinforcement of caste-based fears—portraying lower-caste knowledge as mysterious, dangerous, and deviant.

However, within these very communities, the Odiyan was not merely a figure of dread but a symbol of esoteric knowledge and resistance. By mastering forbidden rituals and circumventing upper-caste dominance, the Odiyan could reclaim agency in a society otherwise governed by Brahmanical order. Thus, the myth simultaneously justified exclusion and empowered subaltern imagination.

The Odiyan also operated in an ambiguous moral space. While some narratives vilified them as assassins, others hinted at their victimhood—forced into this role by economic desperation or manipulated by landlords. This duality reveals the myth's layered nature, reflecting not only fear but also sympathy and social critique.

4. Oral Tradition and Cultural Transmission

The Odiyan myth was primarily preserved and transmitted through oral traditions, with no written scriptures or canonical texts. Grandparents, especially women, recounted tales of Odiyans to children as both entertainment and moral instruction. These stories often warned against disobedience or wandering into the night, reinforcing social discipline through fear and fascination.

In addition to domestic storytelling, community rituals and folk performances played a crucial role in preserving the Odiyan narrative. Traditional art forms such as *villupattu*, *koothu*, *theyyam*, and shadow puppetry frequently depicted Odiyan encounters, portraying them as either demonic villains or misunderstood magical beings. These performances were fluid and adaptive, changing according to local lore and community interpretations.

Among the Pulayan and Parayan elders, there also existed secret oral networks where techniques and knowledge related to *odi vidya* were shared discreetly. These oral circles reinforced community cohesion and the continuation of alternative knowledge systems outside formal religious structures. Ritual chants, herbal formulas, and initiatory rites were passed in hushed tones, making Odiyan lore a living but guarded legacy.

5. Reinterpretation and Contemporary Significance

With the decline of feudal structures and the rise of modern rationalist discourse, belief in the literal existence of Odiyans has faded. Yet, the myth survives in media and popular culture. Films such as *Odiyan* (2018) have reimagined the character not as a mere villain, but as a complex, heroic subaltern figure, prompting debates on identity, history, and caste.

Contemporary art, literature, and theatre have also reclaimed the Odiyan. In Dalit literature and performance spaces, the Odiyan is increasingly portrayed as a victim of historical injustice and an emblem of subaltern wisdom. This reclamation transforms the myth from a tale of fear into one of cultural pride and resistance.

Moreover, academic interest in indigenous knowledge systems has further illuminated the Odiyan's significance. Studies in anthropology, folklore, and subaltern historiography consider the Odiyan not as a relic of superstition but as a cultural archetype deserving critical exploration.

6. Conclusion

The Odiyan of Palakkad is more than folklore—it is a mirror reflecting Kerala's historical caste dynamics, rural belief systems, and the endurance of oral traditions. By analyzing its evolution from feared specter to symbolic figure of resistance, this study demonstrates how folklore can function as both an instrument of oppression and a tool for subaltern empowerment. In reclaiming the Odiyan, communities are not just preserving myth—they are rewriting history. The Odiyan's story continues to evolve, reminding us that folklore is not static but an ever-shifting narrative landscape shaped by the people who tell it.

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