



12

Sacred Knowledge in Digital Spaces: Participatory Archiving of Kerala's Sarpa Pattu

Dr. Kavitha Gopalakrishnan*

*Assistant Professor, Department of English, Baselius College, Kottayam

Page No. 81-84

Received: 10/12/2025

Reviewed: 16/12/2025

Accepted: 23/12/2025

Abstract: *Sacred Knowledge in Digital Spaces: Participatory Archiving of Kerala's Sarpa Pattu* explores the intersection of ritual performance, indigenous knowledge systems, and digital humanities through the contemporary documentation of Sarpa Pattu, a serpent-worship ritual tradition of Kerala. Traditionally transmitted through oral narration, performative enactment, and collective memory within specific caste and community contexts, Sarpa Pattu embodies ecological ethics, cosmological beliefs, and sacred aesthetics deeply rooted in Kerala's cultural landscape. With rapid socio-cultural change, urbanization, and declining ritual practice, this fragile heritage faces the risk of marginalization and loss.

This study examines how digital platforms enable participatory archiving, allowing ritual practitioners, community elders, performers, and researchers to collaboratively document, preserve, and reinterpret Sarpa Pattu. By situating sacred knowledge within digital spaces—such as online repositories, audiovisual archives, and interactive community platforms—the paper interrogates questions of authenticity, ownership, accessibility, and ethical representation. It argues that participatory digital archiving not only safeguards intangible cultural heritage but also democratizes knowledge production, challenges elite custodianship, and fosters intergenerational transmission. At the same time, the paper critically reflects on the tensions between sacred secrecy and digital visibility, emphasizing the need for culturally sensitive archival frameworks.

Keywords: Sarpa Pattu, Sacred Knowledge, Digital Humanities, Participatory Archiving, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Kerala

Introduction

Sarpa Paattu, also known as Pulluvan Paattu, represents one of Kerala's most distinctive forms of serpent worship. These rituals are performed to appease various serpent deities such as Nagaraja (serpent king), Nagayakshi (serpent queen), Karinagam (black serpent), and Anchilamaninagam (the five-hooded, jewel-bearing serpent). Sarpa Paattu is more than a religious observance as each performance carries generations of oral history, artistic knowledge, and community memory. Hence, it is as much a living archive as it is a ritual practice. The *Pulluvan Pattu* is performed in the houses of the lower castes as well as those of the upper castes, as well as in serpent temples. What is taken under the purview of this paper is the *Sarpappattu* or *Kalam pattu* or *Kalam ezhuthu pattu*—the songs conducted by the Pulluvar in sarpakavu, the snake groves of Nair taravads, ancestral homes,

The ritual begins with constructing a Pandhal—a temporary canopy woven from palm and plantain leaves, decorated with flowers and garlands. Within this, a Sarpa Kalam is drawn—an intricate and colourful depiction of serpents created using natural powders called the Panchavarnam (five sacred colors): white (rice flour), green (leaf powder), black (paddy husk ash), yellow (turmeric), and red (turmeric and lime). Beyond the visual appeal, these colours and the design also symbolise the



Panchabhutam (five elements: air, water, fire, sky, and earth) and the Panchendriyam (five human senses). Once the Kalam is completed, members of the Pulluvan community—traditional ritual performers—conduct the ceremony using instruments like the Pulluvan Kudam, Naga Veena, and Kuzhi Thalam.

However, now this rich tradition of the past faces an uncertain future. The Pulluvan community, once widely respected for its sacred role, now has fewer opportunities to perform as fewer families now conduct *Sarpa Paattu*. With urbanization and migration, younger generations are reluctant to take up these practices. Many sacred groves (*Sarpakavu*), once vital to the rituals, have been encroached upon or destroyed. What we are witnessing is not just the loss of a performance tradition but the erasure of an entire knowledge system tied to ecology, ritual, and community identity.

Over the years there is also a decline in participation from within the community itself. Economic instability, lack of support from funding agencies, and absence of recognition have all contributed to the diminishing presence of Pulluvan rituals in public and private religious life. Despite the cultural richness and historical value of *Sarpa Paattu*, it remains largely undocumented and unarchived. Many Pulluvans now take up other jobs, leading to a break in transmission. There are very few skilled performers left, and this makes structured efforts to document their practices an urgent one.

Existing cultural preservation methods do not address the needs of traditions like *Sarpa Paattu*. The Digital repositories, such as the Traditional Knowledge Digital Library (TKDL), for instance, primarily focus on textual and medicinal knowledge, failing to capture the performative, oral, and spatial aspects of rituals. *Sarpa Paattu* involves music, visual art, movement, and sound—elements that cannot be reduced to written descriptions alone, and there is no structured digital or physical archive preserving the songs, the kalam drawings, and the ritual contexts (space, sound, materials). Hence, the absence of multimodal and performative archives is a gap that needs to be filled. The *Sarpa Paattu* exists outside mainstream cultural archives since the performances are oral, ephemeral, and caste-based, and often go unnoticed. There are very few audio, video, or written records that are systematically collected.

One needs to document not only the songs and instruments but also the spaces, gestures, and community relationships that constitute this tradition. The lack of a structured, culturally sensitive, and community-approved archive has created a vacuum. Without intervention, we risk losing not just a ritual, but an entire worldview encoded in art, rhythm, ecology, and belief. Documentation of *Sarpa Pattu* or Pulluvan Pattu began when the colonizers began to record the local customs, practices, and beliefs. They even participated in such local rituals. Shailaja Menon, in her article “The Pulluvans, Sacred Serpents and Performative Healing in Kerala,” elaborates:

These customs and rituals entered the modern archive through the colonial gaze (Dubois, 1983 [1899]; Egnor, 1983; Elmore, 1913; Fuller, 1944). The British civil servants, missionaries, and ethnographers recorded the mythologies, varieties of snake worship, and ritual performances to appease them and the communities who participated in these recitals. Edgar Thurston (1989 [1906], p. 132) made interesting observations on the ritual performances of Kerala and commented on the intricate link between snake worship and fertility. He quoted the 1871 Madras Census Report that ‘probably so long as the desire of offspring is a leading characteristic of the Indian people, so long will the worship of the serpent, or of snake-stones, be a popular cult. (160)

However, these documentations do not help to experience a total and immersive sensory experience of these rituals. Only an ethnographic fieldwork, participatory archiving by working along with Pulluvan performers can help in proper cultural documentation. Ethnography allows for an immersive engagement with the community, capturing the subtle performative aspects of the ritual. Participatory archiving ensures that the Pulluvan community has agency in what and how information is recorded. Though digital humanities methods are not the focus here, the concept supports a multimodal understanding of how knowledge can be preserved beyond written records. Digital humanities offers a useful framework here because it rejects the assumption that only written knowledge counts as legitimate. *Sarpa Pattu* includes oral songs, visual kalam art, movement, sound, and ritual space, which are all forms of knowledge that need multimodal preservation, not just written



transcriptions. In the context of archiving Sarpa Paattu, a digital humanities perspective encourages the creation of multimodal archives that include photographs, field recordings, interviews, ritual songs, and visuals of the Kalam. It also emphasizes the importance of community collaboration and consent, recognizing that cultural memory must be preserved not just for research but as a living heritage. Furthermore, DH enables broader access, allowing younger generations, diaspora communities, and cultural researchers to engage meaningfully with these endangered traditions.

Documentation can take many non-intrusive forms. Photographic documentation should capture different stages of the Kalam drawing, while audio-video recordings can focus on the ritual sounds, chants, and musical accompaniments. Ideally, spatial and environmental aspects of the ritual—such as the setup of the Pandhal, the arrangement of lamps, and the surrounding natural setting—should also be documented to preserve the full sensory experience.

Pulluvan performers have always been storytellers. Traditionally, Pulluvars travelled from house to house, especially to Nair taravads, to perform these songs as acts of ritual healing and to cure ailments such as Naga Dosha. Their songs are not merely ritual chants but rich oral narratives that convey myth, memory, and social meaning. Scholars have often pointed out that narratives are central to cultural survival. Cielo Festino emphasizes “the centrality and relevance of narratives” (qtd. in Festino and Andrea 212), arguing that:

There is no culture that does not need to hear and know the stories of its own experience and community. This propensity to narratives is due to the fact that, by imposing a certain order on the chaos of existence, they help man to make sense of his circumstances, shortening the distance between ‘being’ and ‘knowing’. (qtd. in Festino and Andrea 212)

In the case of Sarpa Paattu, each song narrates cosmologies of the serpent lords, ecological beliefs, ancestral lore, puranas and social ethics. Dr. Lalitha and M. Nandini in “Songs for the Snake God” notes- “Most art forms of the Pulluvar community are ritualistic in nature, though songs are based on Puranas and agriculture (n.p). Archiving these narrations not only safeguards linguistic and artistic expression but also preserves the worldview of a community. When such oral traditions are ignored or excluded from archives, we lose access to unique ways of seeing and interpreting the world. Therefore, preserving both the performance and its embedded narratives is crucial to any meaningful documentation of Pulluvan traditions.

Another aspect that cannot be undermined to fully understand Sarpa Paattu is caste politics. The Pulluvan community belongs to a traditionally marginalized Dalit group, yet they perform sacred rituals for upper-caste households—including Sarpam Thullal ceremonies led by upper-caste women. This creates a complex dynamic where spiritual authority does not translate into social power. Caste hierarchy, gender relations, and patronage systems all shape how this tradition functions and who benefits from it. The ritual economy, in which the Pulluvans’ labour is both spiritual and performative, often sees their contributions appropriated or undervalued. Mapping these intersecting social forces not only reveals the structural inequities surrounding the tradition but also complicates the process of archiving it, as documentation must account for issues of voice, ownership, and representation.

This paper does not propose elaborate technical systems here, but simple documentation tools—camera, audio recorders, and interviews. Documentation should focus on the full process, from the drawing of the Kalam to the conclusion of the ritual. Recording interviews with elder Pulluvan practitioners to record stories, meanings of the songs, myths associated with specific rituals, and their personal experiences would be helpful. The archiving process should be led by or conducted in partnership with the Pulluvan community. They should decide what is shared, how it is recorded, and who has access to the material. This would give the Pulluvan community more visibility, and this could, and perhaps should, be a process of discovery of their lost respectability. Even basic digital files stored in local libraries, temples, or community centers can help retain this knowledge for future generations.

Archiving Sarpa Paattu traditions can serve as a tool for intergenerational dialogue within the Pulluvan community. By preserving audio and visual elements of the ritual, younger members of the community can connect with their heritage more meaningfully. Such documentation can also allow members of the diaspora to access ancestral rituals and knowledge systems from afar.



Archives could spark renewed interest among young people who have grown up disconnected from these practices. It can also contribute to strengthening cultural memory in a gender-inclusive manner by capturing the often underrepresented voices and roles of female participants, such as Pulluvathy. Documentation must be conducted ethically and sensitively, especially when female-led performances are involved, to respect privacy and community norms.

Sarpa Paattu connects ecology, ancestry, and spirituality in ways that are increasingly rare in contemporary Kerala. Preserving such traditions is important not just because it is culturally valuable, but because letting them disappear means losing irreplaceable knowledge about how communities have historically understood their relationship to the natural and spiritual worlds. Archival practices combining cultural sensitivity, digital design, and community ownership would be ideal. By taking simple, respectful, and community-oriented steps, we can create meaningful spaces to safeguard this endangered tradition.

Works Cited

- Festino, Cielo G., and Andréa Machado de Almeida Mattos. "Memory, Postmemory and the Role of Narratives Among Women Writers from The Adivasi Communities of Goa". *Ilha do Desterro* vol. 74, no.2, p. 209-230, Florianópolis, mai/ago 2021. DOI: 10.5007/2175-8026.2021.e78365
- Lalitha, M., and M. Nandini. "Songs for the Snake God." *The Hindu*, 5 Nov. 2015, www.thehindu.com/features/friday-review/music/associated-with-snake-worship/article7846097.ece. Accessed 10 Dec. 2025.
- Shailaja Menon. "The Pulluvans, Sacred Serpents and Performative Healing in Kerala". *Caste in Everyday Life Experience and Affect in Indian Society*. Edited by Dhaneswar Bhoi and Hugo Gorringer. Palgrave Macmillan, 2023. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-031-30655-6_7