

# From Little Tradition to Great Tradition: Canonising *Aithiyamala*

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## Abstract

*In an attempt to reinvent the tradition of Kerala in the light of colonial modernity, Kottarathil Sankunni collected and transcribed the lores and legends of Kerala in his work Aithiyamala in 1909. When the legends were textualised, Sankunni attributed certain literary values to the narratives to legitimise the genre. As it was a folk appropriation by a scholarly elite like Sankunni who had received English education during the colonial period, the legends moved from folk tradition to classical tradition. In their transition from Little Tradition to Great Tradition, the legends underwent huge transformation in terms of form, content, language, context and narrative style. The text became fixed, stable and structured and was eventually subjected to a canon. However, when one perceives Aithiyamala (1909) as the 'authentic' and the 'final' version of the legends in Kerala, one is neglecting and silencing the multiple oral versions and folk tradition that had been existing since the pre-literate period. The current study attempts to trace the transformation undergone by the text when it moved towards the direction of a literary canon.*

**Keywords:** Legends Transcription, Great Tradition, Little Tradition, Literary Canon.

## Introduction

*Aithiyamala*, a collection of lores and legends of Kerala was compiled by Kottarathil Sankunni in *Bhashaposhini* magazine in the beginning of the twentieth century. In his preface to

*Aithiyamala* (1909) which comprises 126 legends, Sankunni (2017: 89) states that the text had been harshly criticised by an anonymous writer on the grounds of its casual nature. He considered such folk materials a matter of negligible importance and asked the editor to encourage grand writings like that of Sheshagiri Prabhu in order to uphold the aesthetic qualities of his magazine. However, eventually, *Aithiyamala* (1909) became one of the primary reference texts for the legends of Kerala for it was the first text in Malayalam to conceptualize the genre called ‘aithiyam’ (legend). ‘Aithiyam’ or legend had already existed in the oral tradition of Kerala before Sankunni had transcribed them in *Aithiyamala* (1909). However, these 126 narratives had been collected and categorised as ‘aithiyam’ for the first time by Sankunni in an attempt to recreate the past of Kerala in the context of colonial modernity. Around 98000 copies of the text were sold between 1974 and 1995 and numerous publishers such as D. C., Mathrubhumi and many more have been engaged with the new editions of the text in the following years. Some of the notable English translations of the text by Sreekumari Ramachandran and Leela James in 2010 and 2015 respectively are also worth mentioning in this context. It has also become an object of academic enquiry when the contemporary folklorists like Raghavan Payyanad and A. B Raghunathan Nair attempted to define the nature and concept of legend in Malayalam in the light of *Aithiyamala* stories. Thus, eventually *Aithiyamala* (1909) was elevated to a canonical status. This high valuation of *Aithiyamala* (1909) and its persistence over time are worth interrogation. It is important to note that *Aithiyamala* (1909) was raised to an esteemed status owing to the fact that it is a (written) literature. In other words, the textualisation of the legends paved the way for the formation of a canonical text. The legends and other folk genres in oral tradition had always been marginalised

from the textual culture of India. It was only when Kottarathil Sankunni transcribed the legends of Kerala; they were attributed literary values and subjected to a canon. The present paper attempts to trace how the transcription of legends paved the way for the creation of certain values- literary, linguistic, political, commercial and educational, and the evolution of a literary canon.

### ***Aithiyamala's* Status as a Literary Canon**

In order to explore how *Aithiyamala* (1909) fulfils the criteria of a literary canon, one must make inquiries into the paradigms of a canon. Whenever we talk about a literary canon, the words which come to our mind are 'fame', 'reputation', 'quality', 'value', and so on. However, the actual process of canon formation is much deeper than it looks. It involves complex terms like 'division', 'hierarchy', 'bias', and so on. In other words, there exists a set of norms that determine the inclusion and exclusion of a text in/from the canon. Kummerling-Meibaurer and Anja Miller (2017: 2) point out that canon formation generally follows two approaches- aesthetic and socio-cultural. Yale critics like Harold Bloom were representatives of the aesthetic approach that investigates the literary qualities of a text. Sankunni's transcription of legends in *Aithiyamala* (1909) meets the aesthetic qualities of a literary text owing to his elevated and polished style of narration. However, the socio-cultural approach of canon formation focuses on the power mechanisms involved in the process. Peter Hunt's (2017: 15) statement that "Canons, like canons are about power- about one cultural group imposing its views and values upon another" also stresses upon this power mechanism. It is also applicable to *Aithiyamala* (1909) as a writer who belonged to the generation of the newly English educated upper-class elites and appropriated them to an upper caste discourse took up the legends. Test of time was also

regarded as one of the important criteria for canon formation for a valuable text has the capacity to pass the test of time. *Aithiyamala*'s (1909) endurance over time and the contemporary studies on the text points to this aspect. Yael Darr (2017: 24) states that a literary canon provides a national community with a sense of shared cultural past. *Aithiyamala* (1909) meets this criterion as it is a culturally significant text which attempted to create a sense of shared past for the Keralites through the invention of a tradition. Thus, it became one of the culture's acclaimed objects that play a significant role in constructing the nation-state and its regional culture. It may be observed that it is intimately bound up with the locale and culture of Kerala as it deals with legends related to the temples, kings, upper caste personages, magic, rituals, customs, martial arts, medicine, poets, scholars, and so on in Kerala. Its endurance over time relies a lot on its cultural significance. Furthermore, it attained an academic value, as it was the first text that categorised and conceptualised the genre called 'aithiyam' / legend in the Malayalam tradition. Its entry into the canon also resides in its position as an early modern text that constructs Kerala culture in terms of the daily practices, traditions, rituals, festivals and so on. For instance, the legend of "Kallanthattil Gurukkal" deals with the martial arts of Kerala; the legend of "Thalakupathur Bhattathiriyum Pazhur Padippurayum" deals with astrology; the legend of "Kadamattathu Kathanar" deals with magic and sorcery; the legend of "Kollam Pisharikkavu" deals with festivals; the legend of "Kolathiriyum Samuthiriyum" deals with kings; the legend of "Alathoor Nambi" deals with medicine; the legend of "Aranmula Valiya Balakrishnan" deals with elephant and its cultural significance in Kerala. Hence, as a literary text, *Aithiyamala* (1909) fulfils these aesthetic, socio-cultural and test of time dimensions of the Western canon; however, its journey is much more nuanced and complex than it seems.

## From Little Tradition to Great Tradition

Before the legends in *Aithihyamala* (1909) became a part of the literary text, they were part of a vibrant oral tradition in Kerala. Hence canonisation of *Aithihyamala* (1909) draws our attention to the transition of legends from folk tradition to classical tradition. It is here the concepts of ‘Great Tradition’ and ‘Little Tradition’ by Robert Redfield becomes relevant (These Western concepts were applied to the Indian context by Milton Singer in the 1960s). He states that “‘Great tradition’ said to be carried by Sanskrit, is seen as pan-Indian, prestigious, ancient, and authorized by texts. The ‘Little Tradition’ or really the ‘Little Traditions’ in the plural are seen as local, mostly oral, and carried by the illiterate” (Ramanujan 1991: XVIII). However, later the concepts were highly criticised as they were not adequate to explain specific contexts and because of their overlapping nature. Linda Degh (1972: 53) points out Andre Jolles’ view on oral literary forms as “simple, spontaneous products originating in the spoken language, as opposed to complex, consciously created literary forms”. Owing to their ‘simple’, ‘distorted’ and ‘fantasized’ nature, they used to deviate from the set of values and institutionalised authority of the literary canons. Therefore, they had not been considered worth serious study. This is one of the underlying reasons behind the delay in beginning of folklore studies in Kerala. In fact, the first phase of folkloristic pursuits in Kerala was taken up by the European missionaries during the colonial period. *Centum Adagia Malabarica* (1791) by Paulinus of St. Bartholomeo and *Pazhancholmala* (1845) by Herman Gundert are some of the notable examples. Hence, there was a strong tendency among the academic men of the times to view folklore a part of the Little Tradition and the classical arts and other grand forms under Great Tradition. The literary consciousness of the period favoured Great Tradition as it was perceived as the locus of aesthetic value. This is one

of the main reasons why folklore was neglected by the Malayalam writers of the period for a long time. The harsh criticism received by Sankunni from an anonymous man for including ‘casual materials’ in a magazine that stood for high aesthetic values points to this elitist nature of the period.

The question regarding how these ‘casual materials’ enjoy a canonical status in the contemporary society is worth interrogation. In addition, when these legends were textualised and raised to a canonical status, various oral versions of the legends that circulated in the oral tradition were being neglected. Similarly, many classical texts in India were once part of a lively oral tradition, for instance, classical texts like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* had been retellings and elaborations of folklore and legends around “the Surya, Kuru, Puru and Naga clans;” (Satchidanandan 2012: 279). So is the case with ancient texts such as *Panchatantra*, *Kathasarithsagara* and many more. They were all Sanskritised and attributed authorship. This calls for the question – who acts as the mediator between these Little Tradition and Great Tradition? It is the ruling elite who establishes a set of norms and intellectualises the former and moves them to a sophisticated space (Great Tradition).

When Sankunni textualised the legends through *Aithiyamala* (1909), it was certainly a folk appropriation by the elite. He smoothed out the oral versions of the legend and presented them in a refined language. By adopting an elevated style of writing, Sankunni made them conform to an elite discourse. Scholars like Sankunni were well versed in both Sanskrit and English. It may be observed that *Aithiyamala* (1909) is loaded with Sanskrit words which are indicative of this deep-rooted Sanskrit tradition in Malayalam. It is very apparent in Sankunni’s descriptions about kings and upper caste personages. For instance, he addresses King Swathi Tirunal in

the legend of “Swati Thirunal” as ‘Sangeetha Sahitya Sagaraparagan’ (expert in music, literature and arts) (Sankunni 2011: 440). The concept of Sanskritisation by M. N. Sreenivasan deserves special mention in this context. Indian poet and critic, K. Satchidanandan equates the phenomenon of ‘folk’ becoming ‘classical’ with that of Sanskritisation. Sanskritisation is a process by which the lower caste seeks upward social mobility by emulating the rituals and customs of the upper caste. The English education in the colonial period helped popularise these values to a great extent and as a result, instead of subverting the *varna-jati* (refers to Indian caste system) system, it reinforced it. He adds that folk “Once absorbed into the upper caste/class discourse, their disruptive energy and subversive worldview came to be smoothed out, their contours stylised and fixed for all time and subjected to canon” (Satchidanandan 2012: 282). During this time and before, there was a popular notion that Indian civilization was based on Sanskrit texts due to which written Sanskrit texts were regarded as the basis of Indian religion, philosophy, ethics and aesthetics (2012: 279). Thus, the Sanskritised version of legends in *Aithihyamala* (1909) points to its great dependency on hegemonial power structures. Moreover, when it moves in the direction of Great Tradition, its transition is from a primary oral form to a more Sanskritised form.

As mentioned earlier, *Aithihyamala* (1909) comprises 126 legends that have been collected by Sankunni from different parts of Kerala. It is also indicative of the fact that the form in which we receive these legends (only a few of them still survive in the oral tradition) today is nothing other than literary productions. They underwent huge transformation when they moved from oral tradition to print. These legends attained a fixed identity when they moved from oral to the literary space. Moreover, the textualisation of the legends also made them conform to the dynamics of print. Owing to the rigidity of print

media, it reinforces the fixity of the text. Today, *Aithiyamala* (1909) is perceived as a complete literary piece of work and its authorship is attributed to Kottarathil Sankunni although Sankunni is merely the compiler of the legends. Once Sankunni is attributed its paternity, the original practitioners of the legends are forgotten. Moreover, once it becomes an authoritative text, the author makes his or her own interventions. The specificity in time and space is a good example for this kind of intervention of the author. In order to bring historical coherence in the narratives, the author describes the temporal and spatial elements with precision and accuracy. For example, in the legend of “Kadamattathu Kathanar”, Sankunni informs the readers that Kathanar had been walking in the forest for 12 ‘nadhika’ ( 1 Nadhika= 24 minutes) and in the legend of ‘Thirunakkara Devanum Aviduthe Kalayum’, he gives an accurate direction of the place in an attempt to describe ‘veloor’ as ‘2 nadhika’ west from Thriunakkara.

Thus, when Sankunni translated the legends from orality to print, they became literary productions and adhered to certain aesthetic values required by the literary canon. The context of the birth of *Aithiyamala* (1909) explains the educational value of the text. *Aithiyamala* (1909) was the result of the concept of ‘united Kerala’ envisioned by Kandathil Varghese Mappillai, (the chief editor of *Malayala Manorama* newspaper) and Kottarathil Sankunni. Sankunni used to work as the editor of the poetry section of *Bhashaposhini* magazine, an allied journal of *Malayala Manorama*. During their leisure time, Sankunni used to narrate the legends that had circulated across Kerala to Varghese Mappilai. He was fascinated by them and suggested Sankunni that he may compile and publish them in the newspaper and magazine as they offer many deep moral and philosophical insights despite their casual nature (Sankunni 2017: 88). Thus, it may be inferred that



*Aithiyamala* (1909) was published with an intention of educating the readers. It had a didactic purpose of instilling certain moral and philosophical values in the minds of the people. At this point, it becomes a consciously created literary form in contradiction to the spontaneity of the oral versions of the legend. In an attempt to instil educational value in the text, Sankunni's translation of the legends from oral to print becomes a value-creating process.

Moreover, Sankunni's version of the legends conformed to the stylistic innovations and linguistic structures of the time period. The form adopted by Sankunni for *Aithiyamala* (1909) was essay which was an early modern form of writing. In the preface to *Aithiyamala* (1909), Sankunni states it clearly that following the suggestion of Varghese; he started transcribing the legends in the form of essays (Sankunni 2017: 89). Hence, his transcription of legends was in such a way as to fit into the structural framework of prose narratives. Thus, the mode of narration of the legends was also subjected to great transformation. Legends in oral tradition do not have definitive structure. They are fragmentary in nature. However, when they adopt the form of prose narrative, they follow a logical sequence and become finalised which is one of the typical characteristics of a literary work. They also attain self-containment in the process. The popular legends such as "Kayamkulam Kochunni", "Kadamattathu Kathanar", "Panayannarkaavile Yakshi" and so on are extremely context sensitive in nature that multiple fragmentary versions of these legends can be found in their local contexts. However, Sankunni's versions of these legends have a proper logical sequence. The translated text offers greater completeness and accuracy compared to the oral versions. Thus, Sankunni's version of legends has also paved the way for establishing prose narratives in Malayalam.

Many scholarly studies on folklore observe that a folk move from Little Tradition to Great Tradition when a society undergoes urbanisation (Allison 1997: 427). The argument proves to be valid as the industrialisation and the invention of printing press had tremendous impact on the folklore traditions across the world. Thus, another important aspect that calls for attention is the effects of the print for print have the ability to transform the effects of orality in a tremendous way. Walter J Ong (1982: 120) states that “Print is consumer oriented, since the individual copies of a work represent a much smaller investment of time: a few hours spent in producing a readable text will immediately improve thousands upon thousands of copies.”. However, this privilege of the printed text is not enjoyed by the legends in oral version. The fact that around 98000 copies of *Aithiyamala* (1909) were sold between 1974 and 1995; and 45000 copies were published in 7 editions between 1991 and 1995 indicates the course of *Aithiyamala* (1909) towards one of the best sellers in Kerala and its mounting popularity. Being a text read by both children and adults, it has entered the canon of both children’s literature as well as adult’s literature. In fact, print serves as a perfect example for demonstrating folk giving way to urban.

A. K. Ramanujan (1991: xix) points out that Great Traditions are Pan-Indian whereas Little Traditions are not. Owing to the greater diversity of narratives in *Aithiyamala* (1909), it is Pan-Indian in nature. The reference of the mythical emperor Vikramaditya (in the legend of “Parayipetta Panthirukulam”) who appears in many Indian legends is a good example to illustrate the plurality and Pan-Indian nature of its narratives.

Not only the form but also the content of the legends were subjected to change in their process of textualisation. For instance, the legend of “Kadamattathu Kathanar” centres on a Christian priest who is believed to have supernatural powers.

In Sankunni's version of the legend, the hero is kidnapped and kept in custody by a group of 'Malayarayans' who form a tribal community in Kerala. However, in many oral versions of the legend, the figure that kidnaps the hero is referred as 'pishachu' (evil spirit). The replacement of the term 'pishachu' with 'Malayarayan' in Sankunni's version can be interpreted as an attempt by Sankunni to legitimise and rationalise the legends in the light of colonial modernity.

As *Aithiyamala* (1909) appeared in the *Bhashaposhini* magazine, an allied journal of one of the leading newspapers, it had to meet the interests of its publishers too. As the editor and the writer had envisioned the concept of 'United Kerala' (as mentioned earlier), the selection of legends was also governed by such special interests. The emerging Malayali consciousness of the period of nationalism also contributed to the inclusion and exclusion of certain legends. For instance, the legend of "Parayipetta Panthirukulam" puts forth the concept of a homogenous society devoid of the strings of untouchability and caste hierarchies. Similarly, the legend of "Oru Europeante Swamibhakthi" (A European's Adoration of Swami), centres on a European's deep veneration for the culture and tradition of Kerala. It is represented in such a way that it justifies our tradition and culture.

## **Conclusion**

Thus, Sankunni's transcription of legends proves to be not only a linguistic activity, but also a process of socio-cultural exchange. When Sankunni's transcription of legends is placed in the larger framework of the socio-cultural environment of the beginning of twentieth century, it may be observed that the value system and historical consciousness of the people of the specific period were also reflected in their representation. Adoption of modern form of writing (essay), Sanskritisation, elevated style, temporal and spatial coherence, intervention of

the author in the narratives and so on were some of the literary and cultural ingredients employed by Sankunni to legitimise the narratives and the genre. When one accepts *Aithiyamala* (1909) a literary canon and part of a Great tradition, one must also understand the fact that it is nothing but a codified and intellectualised Little Tradition. A close scrutiny of the textualised version of the legends exposes the power mechanisms in the process of canon formation. As every kind of re-representation can be viewed as translation in the light of poststructuralist theories, Sankunni's transcription of legends can be perceived as a process of translation in which the conflicting world views, workings of power and changing cultural patterns of a period shape the oral text into a literary canon.

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