



Survival Amidst the Forest: Exploring Leopard Depiction in Mannan Tales

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Abstract

Mannan is an Adivasi community residing in forty-six settlements in Idukki, Ernakulam, and Thrissur districts of Kerala. Tales constitute a major part of their copious orature. A tale is woven between the storyteller and the listener, a well-knitted mantle, which on a close reading can unfold the anatomy of their life-land nexus. In various tales, animals of their forest become characters, with leopards playing a significant role in tales that depict the theme of survival. Leopard is the most terrifying image to an *adivasi* community that could endanger their life. In a sense, the fear of leopards represents the people's fear of the dangers of the wild which they had to fight for survival. When people use the image of the leopard in their daily lives in the form of art forms and tales, they try to confront their fear. The tales are the simplistic narratives cultivated by unsophisticated people and, they are structured with the patterns from their own life. The paper traces how leopards are depicted in Mannan trickster tales and tall tales and how the depiction of leopards is related to Mannan life and survival in the forest.

Keywords: Adivasi Orature, Mannan tales, Leopards, Survival, Life in the forest



Climate Action

Animals are an integral part of tales of forest-dwelling communities. Animals act as both benefactors and antagonists in their tales. For those who live and farm in the forest, always confronting the vexation of wild animals and ferocious animals like leopards would be a nightmare. The stories echo the life of people who live in the forest. It should be noted that though anxiety about the vexation of animals is pondered, the necessity to live in harmony with nature is also emphasized in most of the tales. The paper explores how leopards are portrayed in Mannan's

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trickster and tall tales, emphasizing the relationship between these depictions and the Mannan community's life and survival in the forest.

Mannan is an Adivasi community residing in Kerala, India, and occupies forty-six distinct settlements located within the Idukki, Ernakulam, and Thrissur districts. They used to maintain a nomadic lifestyle while concurrently engaging in agrarian practices. At present, the community is the sole Adivasi community within Kerala that continues the unique system of kingship, called *naalu Mannan onpatu Kaani chattam* (law of four Mannan and nine Kaani). Their Tales constitute a major part of Mannan orature and the presence of leopards is a significant feature of Mannan tales. Leopards, fear of leopards, and trickery on leopards are recurrent themes of their tales, especially in trickster tales and tall tales.

The myth *Tekkidavathi Kata* (Story of Tekkidavathi) deals with the origin of the authoritative position, Tekkidavathi, in the Mannan community. The tale is a tall tale. The story is given below. Beyond the rock which is now known as Komakamtukki, at Pulvalliyan, a leopard killed a man during the harvest season. Terrified of this incident, the people of the settlement decided to leave the place. When they were moving from that place, they saw an old man lying on the rock. He wore only a loin cloth (*komakam*). He was lying there placing one leg over the other. The people who were leaving the settlement informed the old man about the leopard and what happened there. Then he asked them why they were leaving the field full of crops that were about to be harvested only because a kite caught a rat. He also asked what they would eat at the new place. Hearing this, Cintrandi Olimannatti of Uravanadan clan used *kani* (the community's astrological equipment) and perceived his holiness. Then they bathed him, ascended him on *kattila samsthanam* (the ceremonial chair made of reed) and gave him the title and position of Tekkidavatti. Those who left the settlement returned to the place. Then onwards, the community has the authorial position, Tekkidavatti.

Kattila samsthanam is the throne made up of reed. Each authoritative position has its own *kattila samsthanam*. *Vatti* is an important authority in the community. *Vatti* acts like a shaman and a medicine man. There are *Pulivati* or *Tekkidavatti* (one who protects the community from leopards) and *Anavatti* (one who protects the community from elephants). As per the community's belief, *Tekkidavatti* is the one who can control the leopard. The one who becomes *Tekkidavatti* is in charge of the protection of the Mannan people from leopards. Since the one who ascended him on *kattila samsthanam* is from Uravanadan clan before *Kalavoottu* (Mannan harvest festival) of *Thannikkudi*, the leader of Uravanadan clan gives eight-meter *vetti* (eight-meter waist cloth) to the current *Tekkidavatti*. Even today, if someone passes through *Komakamtukki* rock for the first time, that person would tie a cloth or piece of cloth on the tree near the rock.

Harvest is a significant period for any indigenous community. The community would never live in a place for more than three years. But the community used to move from one place if anyone died because of some natural calamity or from the attack of wild animals. During the harvest, the community gets their food for the year. Even when they leave the settlement, they would harvest and take the grains with them. And that grain would keep their life till the next harvest. Here, out of fear, they are ready to leave their grains behind. When the elder questions them about what they will eat in the new place, the question echoes the community's worry about survival and their fear of poverty.

Adu Vangiya Kata (Tale of Buying Goat), the story in which seven people go to Tamil Nadu to steal a goat conveys the difficulties and fear of forest dwellers. Seven friends went to Tamil Nadu to

steal goats. At night, they tried to steal a goat from a goat shed. They decided to steal a fat goat. They found a big one. They plucked the hair of a goat and pricked on their body with that. But that night a leopard was also in the goat shed and they plucked and tied the leopard's hair, too. The hair was strong and they decided to steal that goat since it looked healthier. They caught the leopard and mounted on the leopard to go back. They tied a rope on the leopard's neck and the one who sat first handled the rope. On the way, as the sun rose, the one who sat in front saw the face of the leopard and he said that he wanted to relieve himself and got down. So did the others. The last one was trapped. He could not escape. If he mounted down, the leopard would catch him.

On the way, he saw a cela tree (*Calophyllum inophyllum*). He prayed that the leopard would go through that road. The cela tree had two branches. When they reached the cela tree, he threw the rope onto one of the branches and pulled. Thus, he hung the leopard on the tree. Then, the leopard told him that he had been carrying seven people this far and asked him to leave him. The man had a knife with him. He hurt the leopard with the knife and let him go. The leopard decided to take revenge. He came back with his streak to revenge on the man. Seeing the streak, the man ran away and reached Karnadu Kovil (Karnadu temple). He prayed that the door of the temple should open for him and close the next second. Thus, seven doors of the temple opened for him and closed as he entered.

With his knife, he made a hole in the wall the size of a coconut shell. By that time, the leopards reached there and were stationed outside the temple. They decided to fry the man's liver and eat. The man was watching them through the hole. He boiled oil and then made the hole a bit bigger. He exhaled through the hole. Then the leopards thought that if they gave him their tail, he would catch it and they could drag him out. But when the leopards entered their tail through the hole, the man pulled in the leopards one by one and put them in boiling oil. Thus, he killed all the leopards. After confirming that there were no more leopards outside, he came out. Then he met his friends and told them that they should not have cheated on him.

This tale is a trickster tale. In "On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure," Carl Jung delineates the archetype of the trickster as the faithful representation of the indistinguishable human psyche that had barely left the animal level. In *Hero with Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell considers trickster tales as the product of the hunter age. Keith Cunningham finds the traits of a trickster as "at once subhuman and superhuman, bestial and divine, creator and destroyer, giver and negator, wise and foolish, culturally bound and a part of the psychology of all people" (2008, p. 813). Trickster is a predominant prototype in mythology and folktales around the world. Various trickster tales can be found in Mannan tales, but the theme of most of these trickster tales is survival.

In the tale, *Adu Vangiya Kata* (Tale of Buying Goat), the man traps the furious leopard. He kills the whole streak of leopards. In the Western Ghats, leopards would be the wild animals that the forest-dwelling people are most afraid of. As the characters trap and kill leopards in the stories, the storytellers and listeners try to overcome their fear of leopards.

Mullakumaran Kata (Tale of Mullakumaran) who kills leopards as they started killing people follows the same pattern as the former tale. The tale is as follows: Once, in the forest, the leopards were not getting any food and they started eating humans. There was a man named Mullakumaran and he decided to solve this problem. One day, in the forest, he was swinging. A leopard came there and he too wished to swing. The leopard informed his wish to Mullakumaran.

Then Mullakumaran told the leopard that one alone cannot swing and he asked the leopard to bring his whole family. The leopard went into the forest and brought his streak. By that time, Mullakumaran climbed the tree and cut the rope with a knife. He had already prepared kusi (small spikes made of wood) and placed them behind a rock covered with hay. When the whole streak came, he made them hang on the rope and pulled hard. He asked the leopards whether he had pulled the rope enough for which the leopards asked for more. He did that and let the rope free as he pulled it to the maximum. The rope got cut. The leopards, as they were swinging, fell on the spikes and all those leopards got killed.

This tale is also a trickster tale in which a human murders the whole streak of leopards as they start disturbing human life. The conflict between forest-dwelling people and other beings especially predatory animals is the theme of the tale. Fear of famine in the forest and fear of the aftermath of famine are the root of the story. Mullakumaran uses the hunting methods of Mannan to kill leopards. But Mannan people never used to hunt tigers. Mullakumaran decides to hunt and kill leopards because they start killing people as they are not getting enough food.

Another story, *Puttiyulla Adu* (The Wise Goat), is another trickster tale in which a goat tricks a leopard. The story portrays how a vulnerable goat tricks a mighty leopard. Though, a mild and feeble creature, the goat survives in the forest using his wisdom. The story is as follows: There was a rich man somewhere. He had a lot of goats. He also has a workman to feed these goats. One day as usual the goats were released into the woods as usual for grazing. They kept eating and went a long way. When it was time to go home, everyone came back except one. The workman could not count them. The stray goat did not know it was evening. When it was evening, the goat ran back and forth, and the way was uncertain to him and wandered. Then he heard the roar of the elephant, the leopard and the bear and became frightened and lay down in a cave. When it was midnight, the leopard, the owner of the cave, came and sniffed the smell of an animal from the cave. The leopard called and asked, "Aru en kural? (Who is this in my den?)" (my trans.). Knowing that a leopard was outside, the goat was terrified. He did not answer anything. Then, the leopard warned that he would get in. The goat did not move and then the leopard asked to show a hair if the one in the cave was that proud. The goat found a quill of porcupine in the cave and threw that to the leopard. Then, the leopard asked to show a louse on the body. The goat found a turtle and threw it to the leopard. Seeing both the quill and turtle, the leopard got frightened and thought if the animal came out, he would get killed. The frightened leopard left the place.

The leopard is characterised as a fool who can be easily tricked. The leopard is terrified by the voice coming from his den. The goat is someone who uses his practical wisdom to escape from the dangers of the forest. Though a trickster tale, the story is both a warning and advice to the community who live in the forest. As the leopard is portrayed as a fool who can easily be tricked by the intellect of the goat, the community tries to overcome their fear of leopards. The story warns the community about the dangers of the forest if they wander in the forest. The story emphasises the need to be with the group while they go into the forest. The story offers a piece of advice that even if someone is left alone in the forest, one should find shelter and survive using practical wisdom.

In *Kolaru pudicca Nari* (Trickster Jackal), a jackal tricks the leopard. The story goes like this: Once upon a time, a leopard and a jackal lived in a forest. They were friends. No matter who got food and what food, it was not eaten without giving the food to each other. Then the famine came. They were starving. There was a village near the forest where they lived. Jackal knew there were a

lot of chickens there. So, he went to the village and caught a small chicken. When he started to eat it, he remembered his friend. But the cunning jackal thought that sharing this little chicken would not change his appetite. When the leopard came looking for the jackal, he hid and kept the chicken under his feet. Leopard asked Jackal if he had found anything. Jackal replied that for two or three days he had starved and could not stand hunger, and he started to eat the chicken that was kept under his feet.

When the leopard asked what he was eating, the jackal answered that he was eating his buttocks. Saying this, jackal kept eating the chicken and he gave some chicken to the leopard. Leopard said that it tasted good and he started to eat a portion of his buttocks. Leopard ate his meat until his appetite subsided. Then he said what he needed now was medicine. Jackal said there was a rock below. They went to the rock and the jackal told the leopard to sit on the hot rock. The leopard obeyed. The rock was really hot. Leopard said that he could not sit with his burning buttocks. But the jackal made the leopard sit there, telling him the meat should get the heat of the rock. After some time, the jackal ran away, telling his friend to get up and run, as heavy wind and rain were approaching. When the poor leopard got up suddenly; the meat of his buttocks was stuck to the rock. So, when the leopard forcefully got up, his intestine came out and died.

This tale is also a trickster tale in which the leopard is fooled by a jackal. Fear of leopards and survival are the themes of the tale. In the story, there is a famine in the forest. Poverty is an element that develops conflict even in the forest. Here, hunger disturbs the friendship between the friends, the jackal and the leopard. The jackal betrays his close friend for food. To a forest-dwelling community whose livelihood is based mostly on their cultivated grain and food from the forest (tubers and small animals), famine is a nightmare. The fear of famine is under-layered in this tale. In the tale, the leopard eats his own flesh. Out of hunger, eating one's own flesh is an absurd act. Hunger makes people do absurd acts. Betrayal of the jackal may signify that poverty concocts a jackal in the human mind.

The necessity of being clever and resourceful to survive in the forest is another element of the story. The jackal saves himself and traps the leopard because he is astute. To each adivasi person who lives in the forest, shrewdness is needed. A leopard who is a fool to believe a jackal is not able to survive. Thus, a life full of vigilance is suggested in the tale. A sense of their community life can also be read in the story. In the forest, the Mannan community never lives in isolation; another adivasi community settlement would be situated near any Mannan settlement. This is a usual practice of most of the adivasi communities in Kerala. Muduvan community is the frequent neighbouring community of Mannan. Even though these two communities live nearby, each community forbids any sort of intimate relationship between the communities. They keep their own cultural identity and do not allow the members to entertain any friendship. In the tale, the friendship between the jackal and leopard conveys this notion. Jackal and leopard can never be friends. In the story, the jackal and the leopard are friends and this friendship leads to the leopard's death. As the friendship between jackal and leopard is unnatural, the friendship between two adivasi communities is also considered impossible.

It may be because of the fear of survival mentioned in the story that they did not keep intimate relationships with other adivasi communities. In the poem titled, "Palu Pongum Para," Asokan Marayoor mentions this idea of keeping themselves to their own community. The poem describes the journey of a group of Muduvan from their settlement to another Muduvan settlement to exchange kora for paddy.

It's summer there.

The law of the land is

Not to give anything to outsiders. (*Paccavdu*, 2017, p. 22-23)

The tale of *Pulim Amem* (Leopard and Turtle) is another trickster tale in which a leopard catches a turtle and the turtle asks the leopard to wash him first. The leopard did as he was instructed. Then the turtle asked to place him in water for long so that the hardness of his shell would dissolve. He asked the leopard to place him under the leopard's feet for he would not escape if the leopard stamped over him. The leopard took that as a good idea and did the same. As he was placed in the water, the turtle escaped.

With his practical wisdom, the turtle tricks the leopard and saves himself. All these trickster tales provide an imaginary satisfaction to the storytellers and audience. The psyche of the community and these tales are intertwined. In the words of Peter Brooks,

Our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with the stories that we tell and hear told, those we dream or imagine or would like to tell, all of which are reworked in that story of our own lives that we narrate to ourselves in an episodic, sometimes semi-conscious, but virtually uninterrupted monologue. (1984, p. 3)

A tale is woven between the storyteller and the listener, a well-knitted mantle, which on a close reading can unfold the anatomy of their life-land nexus. Leopard is the most terrifying image to an adivasi community that could endanger their life. The tales are the simplistic narratives cultivated by unsophisticated people and, they are structured with the patterns from their own life.

In the forest, being adventurous may not be a good quality. No adivasi community prefers the community members to be alone when they go into the forest and no members are allowed to cross the rules of the community. A law-bound life is demanded in each adivasi community. Each community has their laws on the actions and behaviour of the members. Many tales instruct the members not to cross the laws and boundaries of the community because an isolated person is always vulnerable and prone to dangers in the forest. Asokan Marayoor in his poem "Palu Pongum Para" mentions this idea vividly.

The route we go is the forest route

Leopard will come in search of a cave

If you lie on the border,

Leopard will catch you. (*Paccavdu*, 2017, p. 22-23)

People's behaviour and activity are controlled by their traditions, customs, values and beliefs. The customs, values, beliefs and traditions become patterns in their narratives.

Leopard tales and the presence of leopards in cultural forms are abundant in Kerala. *Puli Kali* (leopard Game) is a folk-art form performed in the Thrissur district of Kerala as part of the Onam celebration in which *Puli Kali* artists paint their bodies as leopards and tigers. The whole performance is enacted as a hunting game in which hunters dance with puli-s (people disguised as leopards). Leopard hunting is the theme of the performance. During Onam, *Kaduva Kali* (tiger Game) was enacted in Southern Kerala. Tiger hunting was the theme of *Kaduva Kali*. In *Kaduva Kali* too, the artists would be painting themselves as tigers and some artists would dress as hunters. In most parts of Kerala, kaduva (tiger) is also called puli, mostly varayan puli (leopard with stripes), though puli means leopard. In these performances, the leopard represents a cultural image. The forests of present Kerala were (and are) abundant in leopards and the attack of

leopards was a collective fear of people. In a sense, the fear of leopards represents the people's fear of the dangers of the wild which they had to fight for survival. When people use the image of the leopard in their daily lives in the form of art forms and tales, they try to confront their fear. Leopard has various cultural connotations in Kerala. While in stories and performances, leopard represents the fear of people, in language, the word is used to connote the heroic spirit of a person. In Malayalam, the colloquial usage that "avan puliyanu" (he is a leopard) connotes the heroic ability of a person. Thus, the leopard represents the authoritative power and wild spirit of humans in this cultural scenario.

To adivasi communities, the leopard is an image of imminent death. Though there are various predatory and wild animals in the forest from whom they can expect an attack that would result in their result, the tales feature only leopards as the danger. When the animal tales of Mannan are considered, the leopard is the only animal who is portrayed as a fool and easily tricked, while other animals, especially elephants, are portrayed as favourable characters. Thus, the leopard becomes an image and that image merges with the human beings' fear of danger, fear of death, confrontation of fear, one's ability to survive, and, one's heroic spirit.

Resource Persons

Sl. No.	Name	Kuti (Settlement)
1	Raman Kumaran	Chinnappara
2	Panchan S.	Labbakkandam
3	Ariyan Rajappan	Nooronkara
4	Chandran	Kovilmala

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