Chapter II

Onam: Literary Imagination and Constituting Identity

This chapter analyses literary writings in Malayalam in the period from the 1930s to the 1960s and their imagination of Onam. The three decades between 1930 and 1960 are very crucial in the social and political history of Kerala. Though the main focus of this chapter is on the writings from the 1930s, I will also look at the earlier writings on Onam, both by the colonial and the native writers, for a historical understanding of Onam. In this chapter, I explore how literary writings in Malayalam during this period imagined Onam, and how the collective memory worked in the literary sphere of Kerala. I will examine how these writings imagined Onam in relation to the cultural, political and economic signifiers of the region. The writings in the 1930s have a significant role as they appeared in the formative period of modern Kerala society. While a United Kerala state based on the linguistic reorganisation of Indian states came into existence in 1956, Onam was declared as the national festival of Kerala in 1961 by the government led by Pattam Thanu Pillai.

The period between 1930 and 1960 witnessed the emergence of many social and political movements in Kerala, building upon the earlier reform and renaissance movements. The emergence of a print culture and the literary public sphere has contributed to the manifestation of people’s cultural identity. Print culture has a major role in the spread of earlier forms of regional consciousness and nationalism as Benedict Anderson has pointed out. It became a tool for constructing a larger
imagination of cultural identity and consciousness based on geography, language, habits and other specific symbols and practices in Kerala. The print media helps the society to articulate and reconceptualise their knowledge of their cultural pasts, and practices, while bringing forth myths, local histories, customary rituals and the like. By the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, the print culture played a significant role in creating an “imagined community” of Malayalees, based on the use of Malayalam language. The print technology brought about many-sided changes in the life and imagination\(^1\) of the speakers of the Malayalam language. It helped people to share their memories in a collective perspective. This popular knowledge and its circulation through various modes of print communications help to spread an awareness of a new conscious of cultural unity and strengthen the claim of a unique cultural heritage. According to K N Panikkar, “the written word as cultural factor

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\(^1\) In Kerala, printing was introduced by the Christian Missionaries in the nineteenth century. The first printing press was established in Kottayam in 1811, by the missionaries as part of spreading Christianity in Kerala. Christian missionaries printed the first Malayalam magazine in 1848 by Rev. Benjamin Baily called Njana Nikshepam (The Treasury of Knowledge). The early newspapers aimed at spreading Christian religious verses. Another notable incident in the print history of Kerala is the works of the German missionary Dr. Herman Gundert and his English - Malayalam dictionary (1872) and Malayalam grammar book (1859). Print has a significant role in the formation of a community. When the publication of literary works began these works focused on the portrayal of the practices of the community. In the words of E V Ramakrishnan, “Malayalam literature has contributed to the configuration of Malayali identity” (2001: 489). Some of the Malayalam magazines aimed at the upliftment of the community. For example Nasrani Deepika started in 1887 (Christians), Sujananandini started 1892 and Mitavadi started in 1913 (Ezhavas), Kerala Deepakam started in 1878 (Muslim) and Sadhu Jana Paripalini started in 1913 (Dalits). Print standardised the languages and it made the entrance of a community into the public domain. According to Arunima “Alongside, the standardisation of language did not imply either a total erasure of older literary, cultural practices, or a simple homogenisation of an ethnic identity centred on language (Malayali). Nor indeed was the new public realm that was created a purely ‘secular’ one, where secularisation implied in rupture of faith” (2006: 73). In the case of Onam festival, print media has significant role in the democratisation of Onam festival.
became increasingly important and influential during the course of the nineteenth century. The context in which it occurred was the access to print technology and the consequent commodification of ‘vernacular’ literature” (1995: 129). In other words, the early form of print capitalism and its circulation in the various realm of Kerala society influenced the creation of new sensibilities, not only about the individual self and identity but about tradition and significant cultural pasts of the region. This mechanism of refashioning of self and tradition within the context of modernity is one of the chief characteristics quests of “our modernity”.

The circulation of print in the early period in the form of periodicals, magazines, newspapers and literature have had a great role in popularising the mythical and ritualistic idea of Onam as a collective regional festival of Kerala. Locating Onam as part of the collective cultural identity of the Malayali has a wider political significance in the context of the debates about the formation of the Kerala state in the immediate aftermath of India’s independence. It is in this backdrop this chapter examines how the narratives of Onam envisaged a community identity and enunciated a tradition within the nation. In this chapter I have heavily relied on P. Ranjith’s book *Malayaliyude Bhoothakalngal: Onavum Samoohyabhavanalokavum*\(^2\) (2011) to understand the literary history of Onam festival in Kerala.

This chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section, I offer an analysis of the early writings on Onam. The foreign travellers, colonial officers and the native writers had described the festival of Onam and the characteristics of the festival

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\(^2\) P. Ranjith’s book is one of the few academic studies on Onam and festivals in Kerala. This book enquires the cultural past and social imagination of the Malayali through Onam festival. Ranjith examines the different narratives on Onam. According to him, “Onam festival is the narratives from eighteenth century to twenty first century” (2011: 15). In this book he narrates the historical understanding of Onam and contemporary social imagination of Onam festival.
in their writings. These writings help us to have a proper understanding of the cultural aspects of Onam. I will discuss how the native writers describe Onam as a festival related to the culture of Kerala while the colonial writers viewed it as the festival of particular communities like Nairs or particular regions like Malabar.

In the second section, I will examine the Malayalam literary writings on Onam published during the period of 1930s to 1960s. The aim of this section is to find out the various narratives that the Malayalam writers created on Onam and its symbols and cultural practices, thereby contributing to the imagination of the cultural identity called Malayali. I will look at some of the historical and literary writings on Onam to understand the debates on Onam during this period and the historicity of the festival. Some writers have argued that Onam was mentioned in some of the colonial texts and they try to claim a long historical lineage for Onam. While contextualising these writings I will explain how Onam was narrated in these writings and the ways in which scholars, writers, and travellers looked at Onam celebration in Travancore and Malabar regions. Apart from these, this section will look at some of the early vernacular texts such as K.N. Ezhuthachan’s article, “Mahabaliyude Katha” (The Story of Mahabali), which states that Onam is one of the oldest national festivals in Kerala, in order to locate different perspectives on Onam Festival. Ezhuthachan says that Onam is mentioned in ancient literary works such as Unnuneeli Sandesham in the fifteenth century (1954: 33).

In the third section, I will engage with the question of how the writers approach Onam from a cultural and political perspective. This section deals with the cultural and political aspects of Onam, either implicitly or explicitly discussed in their writings. To understand the cultural signifiers, I focus on the ways in which these writers anticipate different cultural practices associated with Onam in their works and how they are
connoted with the multiple and sometimes dialectical cultural practices that had existed in the society. Though most of these works try to articulate a unique cultural identity to the Malayali and connects to specific cultural past, the codified signifiers covertly express a hierarchical and hegemonic social relation in the Kerala society. In the case of connoted political signifiers, I will try to analyse the demand for an identification of a national festival in order to strengthen the argument for the formation of a regional - linguistic state. Some of the writings in this period deal with the importance of a cultural festival in the region which the writers believed would have the power to unite people. According to these Malayalam writers, Onam was the finest festival to bring people together beyond consideration of religion and caste.

The cultural life—way of life—of a contemporary Malayali has been shaped not only by religious rituals and caste related practices but also through literature and cultural and performative art forms. It is noted that Kerala has attained its cultural identity with its own peculiar traits of literature and art. For the purpose of this study, I will concentrate mostly on the forms of literature which substantially talks about the relation between Kerala tradition and the Onam festival. Every regional literature has its own role in the formation of cultural identity, and to a certain extent in the development of nationalist feelings. The cultural tradition of a society is shaped by the collective consciousness of a society (Panikkar 1995: 127). Literature and other narrative forms in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Kerala have significantly contributed to the formation of a collective consciousness. Literature in these period illustrates many whims and fancies about the unique cultural past of Kerala, irrespective of whether it is dealing with matters related to the socio-religious or political life of the people.
My enquiry in this chapter is about the role played by the literary imagination on Onam in the debates on the formation of a unified Kerala state and the emergence and consolidation of Malayali nationalism. The literary and cultural sphere of Kerala contributed to the making of a Malayali identity. In the case of Onam, the literature celebrates the cultural life of the Malayali and simultaneously elaborates an idea about Malayali identity. This imagination draws from the collective experience from the past as well as its negotiations and dialogues with the present, specifically in the context of vernacular modernity. Most of the Malayalam writings on Onam are recollection of memories which are connected to the present. For instance, an article titled “Thiruvona Smaranakal” (Onam Memories) by Dr S.K Nair narrates his memories about Onam. These writers are anxious about contemporary ways of Onam celebrations or they are complain that the rituals of Onam have changed because of the development of individualism and emergence of the new social life facilitated by various factors such as the rise of nuclear families, social division of labour, migration, etc. The change in the social structure and the collapse of taravad centered joint family system in the wake of colonial modernity gave way to new mentalities and worldviews. Most of the literature dealing with Onam has these articulations in the form of nostalgia. In Kottakkal Krishnawarrier’s view, this changing tendency is mostly seen in upper-middle-class families and the reasons for this is competitions in the life and the attraction towards new trends in the society (Ranjith 2011: 170).

According to the popular narratives of Onam, it is a day of celebration and recreation of the “golden age” of the Asura King Mahabali and his kingdom where people lived in harmony and prosperity. Onam is believed to be celebrated by both

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Hindus and non-Hindus as an occasion when the unity of the family and kin groups is particularly emphasised (Osella 2001: 139). However, the practices associated with Onam have Hindu religious features within them. Some communities in Kerala, especially the lower castes have dissenting voices\textsuperscript{4} about Onam celebration. Most of the cultural symbols of Onam are associated with the Nair community in Kerala. The communities who have disagreements with the mainstream narratives of Onam come up with their own narratives drawing from history and folklore that criticises the mainstream ways of celebrating Onam. However, Maveli is the common figure in all narratives. All these narratives try to reconstruct or imagine a golden era, which is the reign of Maveli.

The term collective memory or imagination signifies a process whereby groups solidify the individual memories into a shared narrative. This memory creates a relationship between the past and the present. It recollects the past and shares the memory in a group. In a society, collective memory is exchanged through rituals. For example the Onam ritual \textit{Onakkazcha}, remembers the agrarian and feudal past of Kerala. The rituals or cultural symbols and various practices and other art and literary forms help to determine the collective memories of an individual or a group. These cultural symbols and their connoted signifiers or social meanings are associated with the cultural habits of the society. In contemporary society, festival is an occasion for

\textsuperscript{4} The dissent voices on Onam are about its declaration as the national festival of Kerala. The writers like, Achuthamenon and KVM, demanded a unique cultural festival for Malayalee and they argued that it would help to consolidate the linguistic. They argued that it would unite the Malayalees, as all the people in Kerala celebrate Onam without any regional or religious barricades. At the same time some other writers have different opinion on the declaration of Onam as the national festival. They argue that, there is no need of national festival when we have national level festivals like Independence Day, etc. In the 1990s, the writers like K. Mukundan started discussion on caste in Onam festival. See K. Mukundan. “Onam Arudethu”. In \textit{Avarnapaksha Rachanakal} by Cherayi Ramdas (1997).
sharing people’s memories and nostalgia to refigure a collective identity for the community and the region. Literature has a major role in this process of sharing memories. The dominant literary narratives give a unique cultural identity to an imagined society and region to anticipate a unique and homogenous culture. In the case of Onam festival, this imagination works with the help of myths associated with Onam. The popular Onam myth of Mahabali talks about the society where all people were treated as equal. The literature on Onam talks about equality and they imagine a society in which all the people should be treated as equals. This imagination emerges from a collective consciousness whereby the connotations involved in a popular myth has been treated with certain historical sensibilities. The cultural practices associated with Onam and its rituals and performances have gained a place in the historical legacy of Kerala by Onam being declared as the national festival of Kerala. The myths associated with Onam have gained a historicity through this process. In this context one should rethink whether this historical myth was popularised in order to sustain certain morals of a hierarchical society based on caste and religion. This question about the myth and the persistence of connoted signifiers of the caste and community hierarchies involved in Onam needs to be elaborated further while looking at the literature produced during this period.

**Early Writings on Onam**

In this section we will look at the early writings Onam on by the colonial and native writers till the 1930’s. There are some references to Onam in the travel writings on Kerala by the westerners. It proves that Onam celebration had started centuries ago. These writings help us to understand how Onam was celebrated in the past. Some of the travellers and colonial officers such as Dan San Bartolomeo, F. Fawcett and William Logan discussed Onam celebrations and practices in their works. In their
works, they try to identify the different communities in Kerala and their life. They had also described the fauna and flora of Kerala. These writers talk more on the cultural aspects of Onam than its religious practices. Most of these writings talk about how Onam was practised and how it was associated with certain communities.

The records of Logan and Da San Bartolomeo say that Onam is the festival and celebration of Malabar. For Logan, Onam is about feast and games. He writes “in Malabar region, on the day of Onam people used to get food from landlords’ house and it is the national feast of the people” (1951: 61). In Bartolomeo’s view, Onam is the beginning of a new season. In his travelogue, *Voyage to the East Indies* (1800) Translated from German by William Johnston, he writes that Onam is the grand festival celebrated in Malayalam region and he connects Onam to the sacredness of Hindu gods. According to him:

> the fourth grand festival celebrated in Maleyala, is called Onam, and happens always in the month of September, on the day of the new moon. About 10 September the rain ceases in Malabar. All the nature seems then as if renovated: the flowers again shoot up, and the trees bloom; in a word, this season is the same as that which the Europeans call spring. This festival seems, therefore, to have been instituted for soliciting from the gods a happy and fruitful year. It continues eight days, and during that time the Indians are accustomed to adorn their houses with flowers, and to daub them over with cow’s dung; because the cow, as already observed, is sacred animal dedicated to the goddess Lakshmi, the Ceres of the Indians. On this occasion, they also put on new clothes, throw aside all their old earthenware, and supply its place by new (1800: 360).
Here Bartolomeo describes the practices of Onam, especially how the Malayalees start the new season and new life with Onam celebration. Bartolomeo points out that Onam is the remembrance of god Vishnu’s visit to the earth to observe the lives of the people and they receive him by decorating their houses. Bartolomeo further observes:

about this time the god Vishnu is accustomed, as the Pagans pretend, to pay a visit to the earth and to wander about under a thousand forms, in order to observe in what state terrestrial affairs are: whether, for example, there has been a good harvest; whether princes rule their dominions properly; and other things of the like kind. They prepare, therefore, in honour of Vishnu, a large wheel, which is the symbol of this god, made of flowers, and place it in the fore-court of their houses. During my residence at Ramapurata I had several times and the opportunity to seeing such wheels, which are called Ciacra, in the habitations of the Brahmans (1800: 360 - 361).

In Logan’s opinion, Onam is an agrarian festival and the festival of the feast. He mainly focuses on the practices of Onam and connects them to the Mahabali myth. He writes,

At Onam which is perhaps the greatest national feast in Malabar, the houses are made gay with wild flowers, which are collected for the purpose by bands of children singing shrilly the appropriate Onam hymn. To understand aright the significance of this feast to the people nowadays it must be remembered that the good old days of when perfect justice, perfect trust and perfect
truth prevailed upon the earth are believed to have been during
the reign of Mahabali (1951: 61).

Logan looks at Onam within the context of an agrarian society and he connects it
to the relationship between the Landlord and the tenant. While Bartolomeo focus
on the religious practices of Onam festival, Logan focuses on its cultural
practices. Logan’s another work, *A Collection of Treaties, Engagements and
Other Papers of Importance*, deals with colonial administrators engagement with
the local kings. He talks about the British revenue officers’ engagement with the
Onam festival. Logan had collected some treaties that talk about giving special
preferences to festival bonuses. He says that the colonial officers were willing to
give these bonuses even though the local kings were not paying tax. He writes,
“for the good continuation of the Honorable Company’s friendship with the
King and for the same freedom of trade in his country as formerly, the
Honorable Company promise to pay him 1,200 fanams⁵ per annum at the feast of
Ona and Bisu” (1989: 108). He says that the company officers believe that it was
their duty to help the people to conduct the Onam celebration, especially for the
Brahmin and Nair communities in Malabar. One letter dated 9th January 1973,
which was sent to Zamorin of Calicut by the Company officers (W G Farmer,
Jonathan Duncan and Alex Dow) which said that officers are concerned about
the taxpayers and they need to attend the festival. The letter says that
by the ancient customs of the Malabar country, we learn that the
Nairs, Brahmins and other landholders paid no tribute to the
Rajas for the land they held, being only obliged to attend them in

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⁵ Fanam is a coin and seven fanam is equal to a rupee.
war, but on the feasts on Onam and Bishoo and other occasions, the Rajas took presents from their subjects according to their circumstances. (1989: 173).

T K Gopal Panikkar, a noted scholar in colonial Kerala, in his book, *Malabar and Its Folk*, describes the Onam celebration in Malabar. According to him, Onam is the remembrance of the reign of Mahabali which was the “golden age” of Kerala. He narrates Onam based on the Mahabali myth. He notes that “this important Malabar Festival is in commemoration of the reign of Mahabali which is believed to have been one uninterrupted period of peace, plenty and prosperity; and in fact the golden age of our national history” (1900: 90). In, *The Travancore State Manual* (1940) T. K. Velu Pillai observes that Onam celebration is part of the social amusement in Malabar region and the Christians and Hindus used to celebrate Onam. According to Velu Pillai, “in the month of August, all Malabar, Hindu and Christians alike, used to celebrate a national festival called Onam which was attended by sham fights and sports” (1996: 411). In his description of Onam, he is arguing for reclaiming the old ‘golden days’ of Kerala or Malabar. The writers in the 1930s and 1940s followed this idea of reconstructing the “golden days” of Kerala.

F. Fawcett’s *Nayars of Malabar* a colonial scholarship on Nair community records that Onam is the celebration of the Nair community in Malabar. He says that there are some similarities between the Onam game, Onathallu and the Roman boxing. Fawcett’s narrative shows the religiosity and feudal roots of Onam. According to him, Onam is a cultural festival of the Nairs. He considers Onam as an occasion for reunion and joy. According to him, “it is the great occasion for general rejoicing when everyone gives and receives
presents, when the children are to be seen roaming everywhere gathering flowers, to make the flower carpets which are a distinctive feature of this happy season” (1915: 292). Bartolomeo had pointed out the similarities between Onathallu and Greek games. He says most of the Onam games are performed by young men and it is an occasion to show their masculinity. According to him,

The men, particularly those who are young, form themselves into two parties and shoot at each other with arrows. These arrows are blunted, but exceedingly strong; and are discharged with such force, that a considerable number are generally wounded on both sides. These games have a great likeness to the Cerealia and Juvenalia of the ancient Greeks and Romans (1800: 360).

Fawcett and K. P. Padmanabha Menon, Kerala historian, understood Onam as part of the cultural life of Nair community, especially the Nairs in Malabar region. These two scholars tried to sketch the Nair community’s life in Malabar. They scholars see Onam as one of the rituals of the Nair community. These scholars argue that Onathallu, the participation of which is predominantly Nair men – is a game about the masculinity of the community. Menon writes,

every year during Onam festival, sham fights were arranged throughout the country when the adult members of the community ranged themselves into two parties under their respective leaders and tried their strength in the open field. Large

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6In K P Padmanabha Menon’s book *History of Kerala. Vol- 3*, he mentions that Onam is one of the chief festivals of the Nayar community (52). Fawcett writes that, Onam and participation in Onam games like, *Onathallu* are the customs of Nayar community (*Nayars of Malabar*. 295).
crowds used to gather to witness the combat, and even Nayar
ladies, attired in gay apparel and decked with jewels, graced the

Logan says that the British colonial officers associated Onam with Nair
community and they were ready to give some special concessions to the Nair
community. According to one of the letters in Logan’s book, “And likewise we
agree to give for each Nair aforesaid six fanams at the feast of Ona, and six
fanams at the feast of Bisu, and to allow one hundred and sixty fanams annually
for providing them with clothes” (1989: 96). From all these records, we can
understand that earlier Onam was associated with the Nair community and it was
part of their culture and identity. In contemporary society, it is attributed to all
Malayalees and considered as the cultural festival of Malayalees. This
knowledge was produced through literature and songs.

From the reading of these writers, we can conclude that in Malabar Onam was
a ritual which mostly centered on the games and entertainments. In southern Kerala,
Onam festival was closely related to temples such as Thrikkakara temple in Kochi and
in Padmanabha Swami temple in Thiruvananthapuram. The colonial scholars write that
in Malabar Onam is a celebration of people. They give examples of games like
Onathallu and practices like Onakazcha to emphasis the fact that people participate in
this festival at a wider level. In these two practices, we can see the people’s direct
involvements. But in the case of southern Kerala, Onam festival begins with the
participation of Kings and their visit to the temple. So here, the Onam rituals are
temple - centric or religion - centric. For instance, let us take the case of
Athachamayam. Athachamayam is the ritual of the visit of the King of Kochi to
Thrikkakara temple. In Kochi Onam begins with Athachamayam – Atham is the first
day of ten day Onam celebration. On the day of Atham, the king and his entourage visit Thrikkakara temple for receiving the blessings of Thrikkakara Appan. The Onam festival begins from that day. Nowadays Athachamayam is organised by Thripunitura Corporation as part of official Onam celebration by Kerala State. There are different stories on Athachamayam. Some people say that it is the journey for war; some other say that it is help to identify the region (P. Menon 1958: 17). In Thiruvananthapuram, on Onam day, the King’s family visit Padmanabha Swamy temple and offer Onavillu (Onam bow). This bow is made of wood with the pictures of Vishnu’s incarnation. On Onam day, the King offers this bow to the temple. Recent writings connect Onam with the social-cultural life of the people and these writings validate a culture with the narration of Onam. Though these writings show that, there are variations in Onam celebrations in different parts of the state they refer to a single, homogenous cultural life of Kerala.

Indian writers have acknowledged the colonial writings on Onam. They argue that those writings help us to understand the historical value of Onam. Ilakulam Kunjan Pilla writes that foreign traveller’s account will help us to understand how Onam was celebrated in the ancient periods and the historical importance of Onam. However, these foreigners did not write on the cultural practices of Onam. They focus on other aspects like the games, Onathallu, which are less popular in the practices of Onam in the contemporary period.

Making a Cultural Festival: Literature from 1930 to 1960

The Kerala state was formed on 1 November 1956, as per the recommendations of the State Reorganisation Committee which was set up to explore the viability of linguistic reorganisation of Indian states. The newly formed Kerala state consisted of
the Cochin and Travancore princely states and the Malabar district of Madras presidency which was under direct British rule. The formation of the united Kerala the outcome of the campaigns to form a state for the Malayalam speaking people. There were movements like Aikya Kerala Movement\(^7\), (United Kerala Movement) which campaigned for a unified Kerala. The Communists in 1940s too advocated the idea of a ‘United Kerala’ (Osella 2001: 143). From the beginning of the twentieth century itself, the people imagined Kerala as a united state and they demanded for the formation of the state, but it was officially declared only in 1956. Osella writes that,

the Communist party, elected for the first time in 1957 and then periodically returned to office as the main partner of Left coalitions, set itself the explicit task of establishing ‘an appropriation for and a preservation of a “purely Malayali Kerala”, asserting a collective identity in which all Malayalis, regardless of caste, religion and region, could recognize themselves. Central to this project of constructing an ‘imagined nation’ has been sponsoring of statewide Onam celebrations (2001: 143).

The campaign for a united Kerala was started in the 1930s. The people stood for a united Kerala argued that the Malayalam speaking community had unique cultures and language so they need a region based on their linguistic identity. Indian National Congress started to form different states committees based on the linguistic principle\(^8\). It reflected in Kerala too. The origin of Kerala society was related to so many myths and beliefs. The mythical story about the origin of Kerala can be found in

\(^7\) *Aikya Kerala Movement* was started by Kerala Provincial Congress Committee (KPCC), a committee formed by the Indian National Congress for the activities in Travancore, Cochin and Malabar. It stood for the formation of united Kerala on linguistic basis.

\(^8\) See, James Thanickan’s essay, “United Kerala Movement: A Descriptive Essay”.
a text called, Keralolpathi⁹, which is considered as one of the oldest text on Kerala. According to the myth of the origin of Kerala, Parasurama, an incarnation of Vishnu, reclaimed the land from the sea by throwing an axe from Gokarnam to Kanyakumari. As per the story, the sea withdrew from the territory traversed by Parasurama’s axe when he threw it into the sea after the slaughter of all Kshatriyas.

From this mythical interpretation of the origin of Kerala, we can argue that Kerala society imagines an identity, which connects to the God or claims some sacredness. The claims of the divine origin of the state have been the unique characteristics of the state all the time. The literature of the above mentioned period promoted the demand for the formation of state and claimed that there are social and religious customs that are unique to Kerala. The group who demanded the state argued that, though there were three different administrative units - Malabar, Cochin, and Travancore - they perceived a nation with a common language¹⁰.

The Malayalees developed their own culture broadly in the process of absorbing Aryan and Arab elements (Miller 1976: 5). These elements made a significant role in the process of making a culture. Malayalees have different culture and tradition that is based on their day-to-day life practice. The state formation tried to bring all differences under a singular culture and tradition. For unifying these multi-cultures, they used language and festivals as the major tools for uniting people in the name of culture. On the other hand, these processes ignored the culture of smaller sections in the society. The mainstream Kerala society believes in a homogenous culture within a multicultural platform. According to Miller,

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⁹ Keralolpathi is a book that gives the ancient history of Kerala from its mythical origins.

¹⁰ A. K. Pilla in his essay, “Kerala Samsthanam, Pinne Kerala Sarvakalashala” argues that, Kerala is a unique region with a unique culture, even it is divided into three regions - Malabar, Cochin and Travancore with artificial causes. So we have to break the artificial boundaries and unite (1932: 5).
within Malayali culture, there are both unifying elements and much inner differentiation. Regarding the latter, it may be suggested that Kerala society today represents as a multicultural amalgam. Contained within the narrow confines of the state is a bewildering range of cultural patterns as the large and obvious divisions into Hindu, Christian and Muslim communities break down into smaller groupings, each having a distinct way of life (1976: 5).

Onam is used as a tool for developing uniqueness among all cultures. The cultural forms of arts, literature and folk songs have a significant role in this process of making a singular culture. Onam became part of Malayali identity along with the formation of Kerala state through democratic process, and the construction of a “common sense” (Jayakumar 2014: 32).

The major concern of the literature in the 1920s and 30s were the linguistic identity and the need for a separate state. K. P. Kesava Menon, the first editor of Mathrubhumi weekly stated in 1923 that,

[A]lthough Keralites, who speak the same language, share the same history and myths and follow the same customs and practices, are now under four regimes, it is necessary for these people who live in different parts of Kerala to be kept united. Therefore, Mathrubhumi will continuously strive for achieving that objective (qtd. in. Thanickan 2006).

Here we can see that people in Kerala are imagining Onam and origin of state in the same way. They connect it to the cultural unity and say that Kerala has unique culture and customs. The literary works on Onam and state formation both recollected
and reproduced the cultural memories from a collective consciousness. Here Onam is used as the symbol of Kerala culture. There is the notion that there will be some symbols that resemble the culture and heritage of that region. For example A K Pilla, in his paper titled, “Kerala Samsthanam, Pinne Kerala Sarvakalashala” (Kerala State, Then Kerala University), writes, a university in a region is the symbol of the culture in that region’ (1932: 5). In the 1950s, C. R Narayanan in his article “Keralathile Desheeyaghoshangal” (National festivals of Kerala) discusses Onam as a national festival, even before it became the national festival of Kerala. (Ranjith 2011: 179).

During the 1930s to 1960s, a group of Malayalam writers produced many writings on Kerala culture and its significance. They used Mathrubhumi – one of the prominent Malayalam weeklies in that period – to spread their ideas on the nation and its welfare. The articles in the 1940s and 1950s, especially published in Mathrubhumi Weekly had widely discussed the importance of Onam and popularised the Maveli myth (Suraja 2011: 70). Through the popularisation of Maveli myth, other folk narratives disappeared from Onam narratives. These writers had a major role in the integration of nation and its culture. Some prominent writers on Onam in the period of 1930 and 1960 were, Puthezhathu Raman Menon, K P Kesava Menon, Thayatt Shankaran, N V Krishnawarrier, P. C Kartha and so on. Some of these writers wrote about the history of Onam and how it was celebrated in the past. Some of them connected it to the state and society they were discussing and suggested the need for a unique festival that could unite the society. They argued that a cultural festival could unite the people and it would help the integration of the nation. Most of these works recollect the authors’ childhood memories and connect them to the contemporary celebration. They imagine a unique identity to the state devoid of any religious or caste hierarchies. They also argued that the state should include Onam in other fields like
tourism which would help to popularise Onam and it could be used to spread the
greatness of the cultural heritage of Kerala all over the world.

Most of the articles on Onam in the period between 1930 to 1960 talk about the
goodness of Malayali life in the past. In these articles, the new ways of Onam
celebration were compared with the old ways and the authors lament that in
contemporary society Onam celebration has lost its values and goodness, and became a
mere mechanical process. Some articles discuss the Onam celebration in the cities. In
the cities, people do not get enough time to celebrate Onam “properly”. So when they
celebrate Onam, it becomes a mechanical process devoid of the goodness of village.
For some people, Onam is all about goodness and memories (Vikraman 1954: 50).
Onam celebration in the villages is the real celebration: it has the feeling of goodness
and togetherness. Onam is all about the remembrance of past and memories. In the
cities, only the people in the streets enjoy Onam because on that day they get enough
food to fill their stomach and they are not concerned about the nostalgic feeling
(Vikraman 1954: 50). The writers who write on Onam argue that Onam celebrations in
the villages are the real and “authentic” celebration. The people in the city have a
major role in making Onam a festival of memories. There are two important elements
associated with the ‘authentication’ of Onam. The first one is about the goodness of
the village. The village has been identified with the moral virtues of the land as
opposed to the mechanical urban life. The idealisation of village life—irrespective of
its social hierarchies based on caste and religion—and the celebration of Onam as a
unique cultural legacy of Kerala are replete in most of the writings. The Second feature
of this recollecting past in the context of Onam is related to the hunk or modern
lifestyle and contested changes of Onam celebration. Almost all writings during this
period make a distinction between “those days” and “these days” in order to mark the
difference occurred in the customary celebrations of Onam festival as well as to reinforce the point that Onam should be celebrated without violating any ritualistic traditions in order to sustain the cultural legacy and unity of Kerala society.

The non-resident Malayalees use Onam as an occasion for sharing their nostalgic feelings of home and to recollect their memories of their homeland. They use it as an occasion for a get-together and sharing their experiences. It was the Malayalees who were settled in places like Singapore, Myanmar, England and Rangoon who started Onam celebrations outside the country. Madras and Bombay were the two cities where non-resident Keralites celebrated Onam in a grand manner. It was often under the leadership of Malayali associations in various places that Onam celebrations were conducted. These associations also demanded the creation of a United Kerala state for all Malayalees. There was a special column called “Marunattile Malayaliyude Katha” (The Story of Non-resident Malayalees) published in Mathrubhumi weekly to discuss the Onam celebration of Malayalees in different countries. In these celebrations, all the Malayalees in that country sat together and shared their memories. They also conducted Kerala cultural programmes. According to them, for the people in Kerala Onam is just a ten days’ celebration. But for the non-resident Malayalees Onam is a celebration that may happen at any time at the year because most of the times they would not get time to celebrate on the exact day of Onam. So they celebrate it on some day on that month or after that. S K Nair writes that for the non-resident Keralites Onam is more about memories than its history and its contemporary narration (166). He says that primarily, there was a feeling that Onam was the celebration of nostalgia.

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11 See “Marunattile Malayathu Kada”. Mathrubhumi Weekly. 30 Sep. 1935. P- 29. “Marunattile Malayathu Kada” was a column published in the Mathrubhumi Weekly during Onam season. This column aimed to report the Onam celebration outside Kerala such as celebration in Singapore, Burma, Malaya, Ceylone, etc.
of home (Kerala) for non-resident Keralites. Nevertheless, for the individuals, it is about the feeling of community and society (Ranjith 2011: 167). According to P V Krishnawarrier, Onam is one of the important special days of Malayalees. Onam is the most popular and universal festival in Kerala and there are no other festivals in the state which has been celebrated for such a long period (1934: 4).

Festivals and Articulation of Identity

Festivals are celebrations of the cultural tradition of a community or a region. A festival contains elements of art and other cultural forms. The central arguments of the Malayalam writings Onam is that Onam is part of the culture and tradition of Kerala and it shows the cultural heritage of Kerala. At the time of Onam, people discard some of their old goods and purchase new ones. They believe that they have to start their new year with new objects such as clothes, gadgets, etc. People use Onam as an occasion to start their “new life”. Most of the writers claim that all the people in Kerala are part of Onam despite their different religious identities. K.P. Kesava Menon writes that Onam is an occasion in Kerala when the people belonging to different communities and different religions sit together and celebrate without any religious markers. He regards that Onakkodi\textsuperscript{12} as a marker of the cleanliness that Kerala society prides in (1958: 8). Onam is used as a medium to recollect the cultural memory of the past, where culture is located within ideas of hegemonic virtues and cleanliness and hence indirectly connected with the symbolic capital of the upper-middle class society.

Other writings in this period share the common perspective mentioned above. For instance, Sukumaran Pottakkadu in his photo feature titled, “Onam – Keralathinte

\textsuperscript{12}Onakkodi, is a new dress worn on the day of Onam and it is considered as the traditional dress of Kerala.
Kalolosavam” (Onam – the Art festival of Kerala, 1950) says that, in South Malabar, the lower caste groups used to play Onam games wearing their “new dress”. He also argues that there was no gender discrimination in Onam celebration. Both men and women participate in this game and people heartily enjoy and celebrate Onam in its real sense (1950: 5). What he tries to argue here is that the lower castes were also part of Onam celebration and there was no caste or gender discrimination in Onam celebration. Ranjith criticises Sukumaran’s observation. He argues that Sumukaran’s observation is not an evidence for the direct involvements of lower caste people in Onam celebration (2011: 183). In reality, the lower caste groups perform traditional art forms like Mudiyattam, Kaikottikali, Kolkkali, etc in Nair's ancestral homes (Taravads) and they did not get representation in Onam narratives. Later Dalits started criticising Onam and its narratives. In the article “Onam – Keralthinte Kalolsavam”, Pottakkadu argues that lower castes have a major role in Onam celebration in Malabar and they were part of this culture. The game which he took as an example Onathallu (an Onam game), was performed by lower castes in his narrative. However, the earlier records like the writings of Logan and Fawcett said that this game was performed by Nair youth to show their masculinity. Kesava Menon in his article, “Onathallu”, opines that Onathallu reminds the tradition of the struggle of a community. From this, we can understand that this game is associated with the Nair caste because they claim that they were the warrior caste and they fought for various Kings.

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13 By “struggle of a community” Kesava Menon refers to the Nair community in Kerala. Nair community is considered themselves as a warrior caste and they were part of the army of a local king. Kesava Menon identifies Onam and Onam games as part of the Nair culture. When he says that Onathallu reminds the tradition of the struggle of a community, it means that, Onathallu is the reminder of Nair’s warrior past. Majority of the participants in Onathallu are members from the army of Naduvazhi (Local Chieftain), mostly Nair youth and it happens in front of the Naduvazhi.
Writers like Kesava Menon look at the various cultural practices of Onam festival and talk about how Onam should be celebrated and how it was connected with the Kerala culture. Kesava Menon dwells more on the rituals of Onam. In his article “Onaghosham” (Onam Celebration), he talks about how to practice the rituals of Onam like Onakkodi, flower carpet, poove poli\textsuperscript{14}, food and games. On food, he writes, “during Onam, the people who are suffering for their daily bread should forget their poverty and other worries and celebrate Onam with all its aspects. It is the duty of the wealthy people to help the poor to participate in it” (1938: 8). He points out that there are differences in Onam celebration in different parts of the state. For example, the Onam game Onathallu is not common in all parts of the state. It is more popular in the Malabar region of the state. Some colonial writers like Fawcett had noticed these differences in Onam practices. Kesava Menon proposed that Onam should be included in the tourism project of the state which in his view would help to promote Kerala culture all over the world. He had suggested that the state should adopt other State’s festival rituals to make Onam as part of Kerala culture. This inclusion could develop a feeling of unity and a cultural pride among the Malayalees (1958: 8).

There is a cultural change in Onam celebrations. In Menon’s view, in the 1920 and 1930, there was a massive change in the celebration of Onam. He complains that people no longer celebrate it as much as they used to. The main reasons for this shift were the collapse of the joint family system, economic recession, development of individualism and political empowerment. All these causes affected the celebration of the “national festival.” He says that this has to change and the celebration has to be

\textsuperscript{14}Poove Poli – is a folk song the children used to sing while collecting flowers to make Pookkalam (flower carpet). In the early period children would go to some places to collect the local flowers and they call the flowers by name and request the flowers to fill the flower baskets soon.
rejuvenated. This awakening of Onam could “help the cultural growth and unity of the nation” (1938: 8). Menon opines that the state should promote Onam and bring back the cultural heritage of the state.

Literature during 1930 - 1960 presents the multiplicity of the culture of Kerala, but Onam had acquired a position as a unique cultural festival of Kerala. Different parts of Kerala celebrated Onam differently in tune to the folk and mythical tradition prevailed. In Malabar, according to the early writers and travellers, Onam was more about the games than religious rituals. On the other hand, in Kochi, it is all about Thrikkakara temple and Vamana\(^\text{15}\). In Travancore, it was closely related to the King and Padmanabha Swami temple. Some of the writers point out these differences. Pisharady, in his article titled “Onavum Vadakke Malabarum” (Onam and North Malabar), writes that the uneducated people in Malabar are not aware of the Mahabali myth. He says that “only educated or modern people know the relation of Onam to Thrikkakara Appan (deity). They did not learn it from their grandmothers. School texts are the teachers for them. Mahabali’s relation to Onam was new to this region” (1934: 26). Pisharady argues that Malabar had a different way of celebrating Onam which was focused more on physical games and art forms rather than ritualistically grounded practices. The people were not much aware of the mythical or religious background of Onam festival. What is most important in these discussions on Onam is that these writings show the heterogeneous cultural tropes associated with Onam and it elaborates various ways in which people appropriate the foregrounded myth of Onam, which is invariably mediated by the localised historical traditions and customary worldviews. Most of these writings subsequently reframed a point irrespective of its

\(^{15}\) Vamana is a Hindu mythical character. He is the fifth incarnation of Vishnu in a dwarf form. Vamana incarnation is associated with Onam myth. In this myth Vamanan sent Maveli to the nether world.
local variations and differences. The concepts and metaphors involved in Onam festival had a symbolic power to imagine the greater collectivity of Malayali identity.

It is interesting to note that some of the writers give more preference to the cultural practices prevailed in the southern Kerala as the authentic lineage of Onam festival, and they draw a parallel between this authentic cultural trait of the south with the other forms of Onam festival celebrated in North Malabar. Ranjith points out that there is regional discrimination in Krishanawarrier’s article on the rituals of Onam, titled, “Thiruvonam: Ee Desheeyaghoshathinte Chittakalum Chadangukalam” (Thiruvonam: Rituals and Practices of this national festival). Ranjith says that Warrier knows that there are some rituals and art forms associated with Onam like Onapottan, Thuyilunarthur, performed by the lower caste groups in Malabar. However, Warrier did not mention any of these in his articles. The reason for this should be the nature of these performances, regional identity and lower caste presence (2011:172). Warrier gives more importance to the cultural performances of Onam in the southern region of Kerala. As Ranjith says, Warrier did not pay much attention on the Onam performance in Malabar. One of the significant Onam rituals in Malabar is the visit of Onapottan and Onathar. This is performed by the lower castes and it is not much associated with temple. Onapottan visits the houses on the day before Onam and people believe that Onapottan is another form of Mahabali who visits them to enquire about their welfare. People in Malabar receive Onapottan with Nilavilakku (stands lamp) and rice. Onapottan silently visits people and blesses them. Onapottan informs the people that Onam has arrived. Onapottan is an integral part of Onam performances in Malabar. Writers like Warrier does not give much attention to the cultural practices of Onam in Malabar region. Warrier’s focus is on the central and southern parts of the state.
These writers never focused on the cultural disparity in Kerala and they argue that Onam generates feelings and emotions about the unique culture of Kerala. The authenticity and uniqueness of the cultural festival are always equated with the symbolic capital of dominant groups. The subordinate groups and their performances were included within the marginal sphere of these representations. Their performances and rituals were either excluded or subordinately included as forms of different practices prevailed. However, the “cultural authentication” and metaphorical syntaxes came from the upper echelon of the society. Onam, in this context, predominantly figures with the emotions, feeling and nostalgia of the upper caste mentalities and filled with their everyday cultural practices. Like the mythical origin of Onam, the imagined collective consciousness is replete with mythical presuppositions and validations. It bypasses many complexities and nuances when it addresses the question of caste, religion, and region. These presuppositions and attributions of new codified cultural signifiers of collective identity and their circulations through the print and vernacular literature paved a new way to think about Malayali identity and the grounded aesthetic associated with such imagination, and in this discourse of cultural validation and identification, Onam became an important cultural signifier to imagine both the cultural and community unity of the Malayali.

Onam introduces a new way of cultural life. Kalpetta Narayanan opines that Onam celebration was new to Wayanad and it articulates a new culture into that region. In his article “Smaranayude Ulsavam” (Festival of Remembrance), he recollects his childhood Onam memories. He talks about how Onam celebration started in Wayanad district and how it was different from Onam celebration in other parts of the state. According to him, Onam was migrated to Wayanad from southern Kerala. For the people in Wayanad, there would be nothing to do in the month of
Chingam. A month before Chingam they finish all works and wait for the harvest to come after two months. There is no past for Onam celebration and the people who are celebrating Onam are celebrating their memories of their ‘home’ (2014: 13). The people who are celebrating Onam with their memories are the people who had migrated to Wayanad from the southern parts of the state. Narayanan says that people in Wayanad imitate the Onam celebration of migrated people (2014: 14). This memory is more or less the same as the Onam celebration of the non-resident Malayalees. On the day of Onam, they recollect their memories. At the same time, they ignore the culture of indigenous people in that region. Narayanan’s reading of Onam celebration of Wayanad ignores the myth that is popular among the Adiya\textsuperscript{16} community in Wayanad. They also have Mahabali myth, which is more or less similar to the popular myth of Onam. I argue that the migrated people introduced a new culture to the Malabar and they imposed it as a culture of the people. They constructed a common cultural identity based on their way of life.

**Conclusion**

The period between 1930 and 1960 witnessed the emergence of the consciousness of a collective Malayali identity. The cultural identity of the Malayali is an outcome of the imagination through various narratives of collective experiences. The contemporary imagination of Onam is constructed by a set of writers through their works. They were trying to make a cultural identity for the Malayalee based on Onam. I argue that while Onam was earlier celebrated by a group of people, especially the upper caste Hindus with all religious rituals it has become more of a practice of consumer consumption now. From the reading of colonial writings we can understand

\textsuperscript{16}Adiya is one of the tribal communities in Kerala.
that Onam was festival predominantly an upper caste, Hindu festivals. Writers like K P Kesava Menon write from the perspective of the Nair community and he presents Onam as the festival of all Keralites. In the post-state formation period, it became the festival of people in Kerala without any “religious practice” but it has religious markers in its practices. The writers in the 1930s and 40s and their works in *Mathrubhumi Weekly* had a significant role in the making of this cultural festival a “people’s festival” of Kerala; as the writings were commenting on the day-to-day life of the ‘common people and their practices.

The imagination of Onam starts with myths and stories. These myths come from the rituals and other folk traditions like songs, tales, etc. Maveli’s myth is the prominent myth in Onam and it connects with Malayalees ‘golden age or glorious past’. Contemporary literary works look back to this golden past and romanticise their experience or memories. The majority of contemporary writings on Onam dwell on the nostalgia of the past life. The literature in 1930s to 1960s use Onam as an object to form a new Malayali identity on the basis of the pride of their cultural heredity and the nationalist feeling created by the Malayali nationalism. Malayalee have the feeling that Kerala is their nation and they should be proud of that. The literary works in this period had a significant role in the spread of this regionalist or nationalist feeling among the society. An imagined community was formed through the pride in the tradition. Onam is one of the occasions to celebrate this pride. Later this celebration of pride was taken carried forward by the media by constructing a Malayali identity through various programmes. The various programmes in the visual media also articulates the idea that Onam is an integral part of Malayali life and work as a mediator in the imagination of a Malayali identity which is the main concern of the next chapter.