INTRODUCTION

Onam Festival and the Question of a Malayali Cultural Identity

In the contemporary Kerala society, Onam celebration is an event that opens up multiple discursive spaces: to configure an identity, to claim a space, to reconstruct a history of religion, to create a bond between the state and people, and to share experiences and memory. Onam provides a platform for heterogeneous articulations and contestations while being seen as a cultural symbol of the Kerala society and the region. Contemporary Onam celebration produces the knowledge that Onam is a marker of the cultural identity of the Malayali, and this knowledge is reproduced through the deployment of various cultural signifiers such as dress, food, etc. In a larger context, Onam is an event to articulate many sensibilities and mentalities which reproduces historical knowledge through its cultural practices and performances and circulates certain cultural knowledge through the mass media. As an eventful occasion, it reproduces various political and cultural signifiers through print and other mass media; through these processes media appropriate and reselect these signifiers in order to foster the cultural identity of the Malayali.

Contemporary Kerala society identifies Onam as a cultural festival and recognizes it as part of the cultural identity of the Malayali. In this dissertation, I analyze how the Malayali identity is contested, negotiated and reconfigured through the Onam festival,
especially utilizing the media, advertisements, comedy and cartoons. Media develops the imagination and perception of a Malayali identity. The cultural identity is constructed through cultural symbols such as food, dress, ritual practices, etc. Media plays a significant role in the construction of the popular imagination of a Malayali identity and the construction of a collective consciousness. This collective consciousness works on the basis of the cultural past and cultural memory of the society. I argue that contemporary Kerala society imagines the Malayali identity through this memory of the past and Onam is used as on occasion to remember and ritualise certain cultural practices and hegemonic knowledge. The contemporary society considers Onam as an occasion for rejoicing and its rituals express the enjoyment of life. For many, Onam is an occasion for recollecting their childhood memories. From these memories, the society idealises a new world, supposedly similar to the Maveli era where everyone would be treated as equal. Contemporary Kerala society believes that Onam symbolically brings all Malayalees together, and it is the cultural signifier of a unique identity of the Malayalees.

It can be seen that the contemporary Kerala society celebrates Onam as the festival of fraternity without emphasizing its religious facet. Onam is a festival that has evolved through different practices of tradition. It has been revived and refashioned by and through different interventions of modernity, globalization, and new liberal economy of the contemporary times. Onam presents these simultaneous effects of tradition and modernity. In practice, it always shows certain preserved cultural past and sentiments. It is this cultural past and its persistence through the practices of the festival that give certain collective consciousness and identity to those who practice it. Hence, Onam presents a complex sphere of practices within the contemporary period. The practice or performance
of Onam is not completely bound with mythical and cultural sentiments, or religious sentimentalism, but is coupled with changed forms of Malayali life and consumption patterns. For instance, the changes in the family structure—the shift from joint family to the extended family—and the market economy have significantly transformed the practice and perception of Onam. In other words, Onam has to be studied by looking at the changes that it has undergone—from an occasion of ritual practices to the occasion of ritualistic consumption.

One can locate many layers and complexities in the practice and the nature of performance of Onam such as mythical, ritual, secular, nostalgic, identity, status and pride. Onam, which for many Keralites brings the reminiscence of a prosperous agrarian past of the Kerala society, is considered as a harvest festival of Kerala. For a Malayali, celebrating Onam brings into mind the prosperous past. Onam, according to Malayalam calendar, falls in the month **Chingam** (August-September). There are quite a few myths associated with Onam. The popular myth of the Onam festival is the story of the Asura King Mahabali whose reign is considered as an uninterrupted period of peace, harmony, and prosperity. Seeing the prosperity of the kingdom, the gods were jealous, and they complained to Vishnu. Vishnu agreed to help them and transformed himself into his avatar, Vamana. Vamana pretended as a Brahmin boy, visited Mahabali and asked Mahabali to give three feet of land as **dhanam** (offering) which Mahabali agreed. The Brahmin boy Vamana immediately transformed himself to giant Vishnu and in two steps he covered the whole earth and sky. He returned to the King to ask for his third step. As there was no land left, Mahabali said, “I have nothing left, you took everything, you can take me but you must grant me a boon, I want to come once in a year to visit my people
and to see that they are all right.” Vamana agreed, and Mahabali lowered his head. Vamana stepped on Mahabali’s head with his right foot, and Mahabali was pushed to the netherworld (pathaalam). The popular notion of Onam is that it is a commemoration of Mahabali’s reign and his return to earth to visit his people.

For spreading nationalist feelings among the Malayalees, in 1961, Pattam Thanu Pilla, the then Chief Minister of the nascent Kerala state declared Onam as the national festival of Kerala. The declaration of Onam as a national festival should be seen as a political strategy of the state mainly aiming at the establishment of both regional and cultural identity as a state identity. The declaration of Onam as a national festival should be seen in the context of the demand for a separate linguistic state for Malayalees and the Malayali Memorial¹ in the late nineteenth century. The declaration of Onam as a national festival was the success of those who had a hegemonic idea about the Kerala state to come.

When Onam became the national festival, the state introduced many special festival policies. The State started giving special Onam incentives like salary advances, bonus, etc. to the government employees. To make it a people’s festival, the state declared “special offers” and welfare policies during the Onam season. For instance, in 1974, Kerala government introduced small retail shops such as Maveli/Neethi stores where the public can get their basic provisions at a lower price during the festive seasons. This is a clear evidence of the ways in which the state intervenes in the festivals through policies and welfare mechanisms. On the other hand, the state uses this as one of the popular sites

¹ Malayali Memorial was a memorandum submitted to the Maharaja of Travancore by the upper castes in 1891, demanding government employment should be reserved for the Malayalees.
where effective mediation can be restored between the state’s interests and popular spirit. The state provides provident fund, gratuity, carnivals, holidays, special allowance and amusement activities to celebrate festivals. The government provides free rice and rice subsidies for those who are below the poverty line. The state encourages them to celebrate Onam with the help of small-scale funds.

**Background of the Study**

In contemporary Kerala, Onam is a topic of intense debate in terms of its practice and history. Many questions have come up about the historical and sociological understanding of Onam. The premise that Onam is a symbol of the larger cultural identity of the Malayali is contested from various corners. Against this backdrop, this study aims to analyze the contemporary practices of Onam festival as an “event”, which would help us revisit the cultural history of modern Kerala. Onam claims a secular facet, which is materialised through various practices. Compared to the practices of other Indian festivals, Onam has some unique features. First and foremost, it is an “official-national” festival of Kerala. The imagination of Onam as a marker of a unique cultural identity has been disseminated through various representational mechanisms, which include literary expressions and mass media spectacularisation of the ritual performance. The significant role that Onam has played in the making of a Malayali identity can be understood by analyzing the cultural and social signifiers associated with it. Onam is considered as a festival or a celebration that seems to bring all people together, irrespective of their caste and religious identity. Onam, especially the traditional aspects associated with it such as worshipping the Thrikkakkara appan, the local deity, performing *Thiruvathira*, etc., have undergone a sea change over the decades. However, religious elements are still present in
The festival in a subtle way. The basic premise that Onam is a secular, unique and collective cultural festival of Kerala has been challenged from various corners. The critique of Onam from various ideological standpoints, such as the feminist, the Dalit, the minority perspectives, etc. uncovers the hidden caste, religious and gender markers involved in Onam practices and performances.

The cultural turn in the 1970s has made “culture” the focus of enquiry in humanities and social sciences. The emergence of cultural studies and its emphasis on questions of representation, cultural signifiers, identity, gender, caste, etc. offers us a new prism to look at the variegated meanings that Onam produces. In the contemporary society, Onam acts as an event to express a range of feelings. The critical engagement with the cultural festival of Kerala by Dalit intellectuals has raised a significant question: whose culture does Onam represent? Many Dalit thinkers have pointed out the upper caste nature of Onam. Feminist scholarship has also raised pertinent questions about the practice and performance of Onam with regard to representation of women in the festival.

In contemporary celebrations of festivals, the intervention of media and its specific enunciation further help the common public to revive and recast the existing imagination of Onam and whereby, media acts as a mediator between festivals and the public. In this mediation, media not only functions as a promoter or defender of the cultural event but also try to portray critical engagement with the event—Onam. I have elaborated this argument in chapter three and four.

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2 For a Dalit critique of the upper caste nature of Onam celebration, see Sunny M. Kapikad 2012. “Dalit intellectual Sunny Kappikadu on Onam and its Cultural Politics.”
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YEL84Kq9VcA

3 For a critique of Onam from Feminist perspective, see Sharmila Sreekumar 2009
The present Onam celebration carries different cultural symbols together as a marker of cultural identity. Nowadays, Onam is used as an “event” or as an eventful space to mark their dissents by various groups and persons. Some protests staged on Onam day is an instance of regarding Onam as an eventful space to articulate dissent and protest. Of late, different communities and organizations have started using Onam in different and often subversive ways, with each group having its own interpretation of the festival. Some Dalit organizations observe Onam as a “black day” because, for them, it is the day their King was thrown out from his country\(^4\). Hence, as a symbolic protest, they too observe fasting on this day. Some individuals too have used the occasion of Onam as the appropriate moment to raise their protest against the state. For instance, in 2013, Collectorate Workers’ Union of Thrissur district organised a *Pattini Samaram* (Hunger Strike) in front of the Thrissur Collectorate. Solidarity Youth Movement conducted a *Samara Onam* (Onam Protest) in support of the people who were fighting against the Chemical Company and the state in Kathikoodam, Tamilnadu. These protesters argue that Onam is the remembrance of King Mahabali and his reign where there was no treachery, and everyone lived in harmony. They hold that the state is cheating all the people through policies, projects and through its corrupt practices. Here we can see that Onam is used as a metaphor to express protest against the state.

\(^4\) M. B. Manoj, a Dalit Poet and activist in Kerala, says that, in the folklore of the Dalits and Adivasis of Kerala, Mahabali is a Dravidian King under whose rule there was harmony, fraternity and equality. For Dalits and Adivasis, Onam is the day their King was murdered by upper caste and hence a black day. Nivedita Menon. “Another Onam – M B Manoj on Dalits, Onam and Malayali Identity”. *Kafila Online Portal*. 28 August 2012. See also. Dalit Movements and Onam: Interrogating Kerala Model- 4. 

It is true that contemporary Onam celebrations have largely been mediated by and through the market economy. Today, due to various forces and changes, the cultural manifestation of Onam is largely achieved through the commoditization of objects and creation of new consumer habits, through the market economy. This reorganisation is made possible through a specific combination of tradition and modern; the persistence of tradition through myth, history, nostalgia and cultural past are juxtaposed with the new social order of the modern.

The new social order of the modern is replete with the political economy of modernity. In this composite social sphere, Onam becomes a site for celebrating the traditional spirit as well as the modern aspirations of the individual and the community. It is in this composite site that one can identify the overarching presence of the market economy, which offers a new consumption order to the celebration that redefines the nature of Onam in different levels. In other words, it is this site that will help us to understand Onam in a larger framework—as an event of consumption. To understand this process, we should analyze both the state policies on public festivals as well as how the private sector is participating in the festival through their interest in “seasonal” profit maximisation construction of a new spectacular economy of consumption. The state government, for instance, starts conducting consumer festivals during the Onam season to promote local goods and market. Commercial firms give with more “Onam offers” for their customers on this occasion. Thus, Onam becomes a “festival of offers” and the practices of this festival are more dependent upon the market. The cultural legacies of Onam and their revivification through print and contemporary media as well as the ways in which the Onam event helps people to express their critical subjectivity on various
issues are some of the major concerns that the thesis try to unravel, while posing question such as how Onam and its multiple schemas of representations are invariably projected to create new popular signifiers, which is indirectly connected to the market economy of the present.

One of the significant elements of a market economy developed along with Onam celebration is “consumer fairs” to exhibit local commodities and crafts. During the Onam season, the state and other state-supported organisations or co-operatives conduct various consumer fests all over the state. The aim of these consumer fests is to market or promote the “traditional and local goods” of the state such as handloom clothes, pots, and other local goods. Consumer fest or shopping festivals are reminders of the foregone local market of Kerala. These fairs give a chance to all traditional workers like weavers, for exhibiting their products. *Kudumbasree* is also part of these fairs, and they conduct exhibition-cum-sales of various kinds of “home-made” products. The goods, which are sold in consumer fairs, are mostly considered as “traditionally” or locally produced goods of Kerala. Nowadays, all districts in Kerala organise Onam consumer fairs under the authority of district councils. The state started the consumer-fest exhibition as part of their one week Onam celebration programme. It is a strategic move from the part of the state government to promote Onam as people’s festival and a part of the tourism project.

The tourism sector is a key player in the field of market economy in promoting Onam at national and international levels as a cultural festival of the region. In this

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5 *Kudumbasree* is a women-oriented self-sufficient community formed under the Kerala State’s project, State Poverty Eradication Mission in 1998 by LDF government. The aim of this project is the empowerment of women through self sufficient groups.
domain Onam becomes a cultural commodity to procure more economic values. Local festivals are increasingly being used as instruments for promoting tourism and boosting the regional economy. The reason for promoting festivals is that, it increases the demand for local tourism and creates a space in the tourism map. During the Onam season, visitors have a unique chance to interact with the local community and have a deeper experience of local culture (Daniel 2003: 386). The Kerala state, for instance, promotes Onam as a traditional cultural festival of Kerala to boost the tourism industry and the local economy. In this scenario, Onam becomes a cultural commodity to procure more economic values. It can also be said that the commodification of Onam—as a cultural festival of Kerala—is invariably manifested in many of the advertisements released by the state Tourism Department.

One of the ways in which Onam is perceived is that it is a harvest festival which celebrates the prosperity of the region. The social structure and history reveal that certain communities have always been excluded from occupying any social space both in the agrarian economy and in the celebration of festivals. The privileged groups like landlords, especially Nairs and Namboothiries, have occupied the major part of the agricultural sector. Even though there exist many folk songs about Onam among the lower castes, they never find any mention in the mainstream narratives.

Recent feminist scholarships noted that the unequal gender positions and patriarchal and often caste-bounded hegemonies have always exercised power in the Onam celebrations (Sreekumar, 2009). Onam celebration and related art and cultural performances are meant for a wide audience. However, in these cultural celebrations and

exhibitions, women are projected as mere objects to carry the burden of the stereotypical “Kerala culture”. Their bodily gestures, performative fields, and sartorial styles in a way are objectified with this aspect of the cultural embodiment, wherein, they performed the role of a mere defender of the cultural tradition of Kerala. All the roles that are assigned to women in Onam celebrations are of less importance, thus denying them equal representation. Sharmila Sreekumar, while analysing the representational scheme of women in Onam celebrations at university campuses, writes: “at the organizational level, though women are toasted as equal partners in the production process, it has been charged that there is an insidious gendering of labour. Thus vital jobs and processes of decision making are annexed by men” (2009: 9). During Onam celebrations in educational institutions, women become the desired object of the Kerala tradition and this projected image of “Malayali women” is often represented as the unique” identity of Malayali womae. Sreekumar argues that in the enactment of Onam, for instance, women from Kerala are, by unspoken decree, required to dress in what passes as the “Kerala dress”- the Kasavu-mundu. They are enjoined to perform the “Kerala dance” – the kaikottikali and the “Kerala style of welcome” – the thalappoli” (2009: 11-12). Onam celebrations recognise women as part of it but only next to men. The same old patriarchal references have been reframed in different occasions of Onam festival. These representations of gendered space and its vocabularies and idioms-- both in print and visual media is yet another area that the thesis is trying to address through the cultural analysis of Onam festival.

It is in this backdrop that the study critically engages with the common perception that Onam is a universal secular festival. How this secular-public imagination of Onam
has encountered with certain historically specific cultural order of the society\(^7\), especially with regard to the institution of caste, gender and community is analysed here while contextualizing different popular representations and articulations appeared and circulated in print and other visual media technology, which include an analysis earlier literary representation Onam, popular media text such as Onam-special cassette= culture industry, cartoons, and Onam-special television programs. The thesis, on the other hand, will give an overall understanding of the politics of culturally legitimized popular signifiers of Kerala—both cultural and social in detail.

**Research Methodology**

Given the nature of the study, I have adopted an interdisciplinary approach. I have drawn on empirical and interpretative methods from social sciences and humanities for carrying out this study. To understand the nature of contemporary celebration of Onam festival in Kerala such as Onam special market, state’s Onam celebration especially by the Tourism Department, I conducted field work in various parts of Kerala during the Onam season in 2013 to 2015. The study uses theoretical frameworks from cultural studies, sociology, anthropology and practice-based methods. The primary materials for the study are newspaper reports, Malayalam television programmes, advertisements and cartoons related to Onam. The study relies on relevant works in the fields of popular culture, Television studies, cultural practice, memory, imagination and cultural identity. Works by Stuart Hall, Peter Burke, John Storey, John Fiske and Jyotindra Jain on popular culture

\(^7\) For instance, some cultural practices associated with Onam, such as *Onakazcha*, are a remembrance of the feudal past of Kerala. *Onakazcha*, for instance, is a practice existed in the relationship between the landlords and the tenants. In the colonial period, the landlords demanded tax relaxation on agrarian products like Banana - which is one of the renowned products for *Onakazcha*. 
and identity, Michel de Certeau’s works on everyday practices and Maurice Halbwachs’ works on memory are used for drawing theoretical insights. The works of Arjun Appadurai and Partha Chatterjee on popular culture and modernity have informed the understanding of popular culture and modernity in the Indian context that this study uses as a premise. For understanding the festival and politics of religion as well as mass media and cultural industry I use insights drawn from Raminder Kaur, Peter Manuel, Stuart Hall, John Storey, John Fiske and Peter Burke.

This study is mainly based on the selected Malayalam literary writings published in Malayalam Magazines and journals (1925-1980?), advertisements came in both visual and print media, television programmes and cartoons related to Onam. I also used the songs and comedies released in cassettes and other online websites like YouTube.

Lay Out of the Thesis

This dissertation is an attempt to understand the ways in which Onam, as an event, metaphor and symbol, produces various cultural and social meaning and identity. In doing so, this study contextualises popular texts and performances such as songs, cartoons, comedies, television programmes, advertisements, etc. in order to explore the multiple facets of Onam, which contribute to reconfiguring the Malayali cultural identity.

The first chapter of the dissertation discusses the relationship between festivals and popular culture where I offer an analysis of how Onam has become part of the popular culture in Kerala; and how Onam is used as an occasion for the recollection of cultural memory of a society and how it imagines a unique cultural identity to the nation.
The second chapter of the dissertation offers an analysis of various literary texts in Malayalam from early twentieth century to explain various popular imaginations and perceptions of Onam. In this chapter, I look at articles and other writings such as short stories dealing with Onam, which were published in Mathrubhumi Weekly (from the 1930s to 1960). In addition to this, the chapter looks at other contemporary literary works from the same period that talk about Onam.

The third and fourth chapters of this thesis mainly focus on various cultural productions and articulations featured in the domain of mass media. These two chapters offer an examination of cartoons, songs, advertisements, comedies, etc., from the 1930s to the present. These mass media representations often use the myth of Maveli as a metaphor to criticise the caste hierarchy, social injustice, and inequalities, as well as unpopular state policies and politics that prevailed in the social world.

The first chapter titled “Onam Festival: Popular Culture and Collective Imagination”, discusses the popular imagination of the festivals and formation of identities. In this chapter, I explore the formation of a community through the popular imagination of the society with the help of popular cultural elements like TV, songs, etc. In the case of Onam, the popular culture has a significant role in the articulation of Malayali identity through the deployment of cultural signifiers arising from the everyday practices of the Kerala society. In the contemporary world, popular culture products are one of the crucial tools configuring the cultural identity of society. The final section of the chapter discusses the public celebration of festivals. I look at how Onam becomes part of popular culture when it claims that, ‘Onam is people’s festival’ and how these popular mediums enable the recollection of the past through the popular cultural elements. From
this recollection, Malayali imagines that Onam is the cultural festival of Kerala and it as part of their cultural identity. The key concepts that I use in this chapter are popular culture, popular imagination, collective memory, and identity. The works of Stuart Hall, Peter Burke, John Fiske, Maurice Halbwachs, Partha Chatterjee and Aravind Rajagopal have been used in order to explain the ways in which Malayali uses various signifiers for cultural recognition and identity.

The second chapter of my thesis, “Onam: Literary Imagination and Constituting Identity”, explores the Malayalam literary writings on Onam in the period of 1930 to 1960, to understand the various imaginations of this festival. The writings in the 1930s have a significant role in the formation of Kerala state in 1956 and subsequently the declaration of Onam as the national festival of Kerala in 1961 by the Pattam Thanu Pillai government. Further, this chapter tries to find out how Malayalam writers on Onam in this period imagined Onam in their writings and how their collective memory intertwined with political, cultural and economic perspectives of the period referred.

The articulation of identity through literary imagination is the central theme of this chapter. The first section of this chapter investigates how the Malayalam writers narrated Onam and its rituals in their articles and how they collectively contributed to the cultural imagination of the Malayali. Here I focus on how the writers approach Onam from a cultural and political perspective. The second part of the chapter focusses on how these writers drawn different cultural perspective—both culturally legitimatized and socially normativized—in their works and how they codified multiple cultural signifiers to provide a collective social imagination and fantasies on Onam. In the case of political aspect, I analyze the demand for a national festival and state formation from various
sections of the society. Some of the writings in this period deal with the importance of a cultural festival in the region and they hold that a cultural festival can unite people. The last section of the chapter will look at how these writers imagined Onam as the festival of people and the region. I review their contribution to the contemporary imagination of Onam. Here I am trying to examine how these literary writings about Onam imagine a unique cultural festival.

The Third chapter titled, “Onam: Media and Construction of Identity” analyzes the role of Media, especially the TV programmes on Onam, in the formation of Malayali identity. In this chapter, I analyze how Malayalam media portrays Onam and how they use Onam for configuring the cultural identity of the people of Kerala. Media are central to the production of cultural identity. Media use various cultural signifiers such as food and dress to explore Malayali identity.

In this chapter, I attempt to follow a critical analysis of popular practices in connection with the Onam festival in contemporary Kerala. Television and newspapers make Onam as an event to create ‘special’ programmes. These special programmes are about the remembrance of Kerala’s past, and they transmit the historical knowledge to another generation. The two specific questions that this chapter raises are: how Onam is presented in the media and how that presentation reinforces the status of Onam as the cultural festival of Kerala and the marker of Malayali identity; how the occasion of Onam is used for creating a collective imagination or memory by various media, especially television, through their special programmes.
The first section of this chapter deals with the significance of the programmes broadcasted by media during the Onam festival season. In this section, I attempt to analyze the following questions: how media celebrate Onam and how they constitute a Malayali cultural identity through their programmes and what are the cultural symbols they are using to materialize this identity. I look at the politics of television programmes to explain how they create a validated cultural memory through a selective appropriation of hegemonic cultural perceptions and its circulation for wider consumption. The next section of this chapter discusses Onam songs and cassette culture in Kerala. Music plays a crucial role in the formation of identity and it, in turn, has been influenced by the society. This section explores this connection between music and identities in the context of Onam. The third section of the chapter focuses on Onam comedy programmes and their role in offering social criticism. Here, I look at how Onam comedies develop informed criticism and greater awareness about the Kerala society and state. I have tried to analyze how these comedy cassettes have developed social criticism, while using the ‘eventful’ nature of Onam.

The final section of my chapter is on Onam special advertisements and Malayali culture. Contemporary Kerala society is fast becoming a consumerist society, and Onam is part of their consumer culture. During Onam, many brands start their campaign that they are close to Kerala culture and pride. Onam is considered as the occasion for shopping festival for textiles, jewelry, electronic gadgets, home appliances and automobiles. All these brands come up with Onam special advertisements and most of them claim to represent Kerala culture and tradition. In this part, I analyze how Onam advertisements represent Kerala culture and how they constitute a cultural identity. Advertisements show
the consumer behavior of Malayalees. For analyzing the cultural representation I use both visual and print advertisements. In this chapter, I largely analyze how media construct Malayali identity, recollect Malayali memory and reflect the cultural consumption of Malayali.

Fourth chapter of my thesis, “Maveli as a Metaphor: Onam Cartoon, Comedy and Social Criticism”, deals with Onam comedy and cartoon, similarly, queries the social practices of Kerala society. The first part of this chapter analyzes Onam cartoons from different periods. Here I investigate how Onam cartoons play the critical role of political satires and how Kerala society responds to it. Cartoon is one of the many cultural symbols that help to create social awareness. Onam cartoons focus on contemporary issues, mostly on state policies and its failures. Most of these cartoons criticise trends in cultural practices of Onam festival. In this section, I divide Onam cartoons into two categories. In the first part, I analyse early Onam cartoons which were mainly published in newspapers and magazines in the period between 1950 and 1970. During this period, most of the cartoons connect Onam to the formation of the state and the nation. These cartoons draw upon different kinds of policies and legislatures initiated by national and state leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru and Pattam Thanu Pillai. In the second section, I focus on contemporary cartoons which are mainly published in newspapers. These cartoons are based on the practices of Onam and offer criticism of the state and its policies.

Largely in this chapter, I engage with the role of Onam comedy and cartoons in forming the cultural, historical and political imagination of the Malayali. My argument in this chapter is that Kerala society uses Onam as an occasion for producing many cartoons and comedies on society, which are mainly used to criticise the state. At the same time,
these comedies and cartoons produce a certain kind of imagination of Kerala’s past. From this collective imagination of the past, the Malayali enunciates a critical perspective on self and identity.

Largely, my research tries to find out how Onam is used as an event in multiple platforms to recreate the legitimized cultural tradition of Kerala and at the same time to understand how these discourses produce a self-reflexive critical perspective within the domain of identity formation. This event is used to reproduce the historical knowledge and to reinterpret Malayali identity.