



ODIVIDYA OF KERALA: THE ODI CULT, ITS RITUAL METHOD, AND AN AYURVEDIC EXPLANATION OF PSYCHOGENIC HARM

Dr. Anu Prabha^{1*}, Dr. Harikrishnan S²

^{1*}Professor and Head, Department of Dravyaguna Vijnana, SAM College of Ayurvedic Sciences and Hospital, SAM Global University, Raisen, Madhya Pradesh 464551, India.

²Assistant Professor, Department of Kayachikitsa, SAM College of Ayurvedic Sciences and Hospital, SAM Global University, Raisen, Madhya Pradesh 464551, India.

ORCID ID: ^{1*}0009-0008-2617-6625, ²0009-0007-8609-0906

Email: ^{1*}dr.anuprabha@gmail.com, ²drhari2337@gmail.com

Corresponding Author: Prof. (Dr.) Anu Prabha

Professor and Head, Department of Dravyaguna Vijnana, SAM College of Ayurvedic Sciences and Hospital, SAM Global University, Raisen, Madhya Pradesh 464551, India.

Email: dr.anuprabha@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Background: Odividya, used in this review as the umbrella term the primary source itself applies to related but caste distinct material, is the sorcery tradition of the Odi cult of Kerala, practised historically among Paraiyan and Pānān communities of Palghat, Walluvanad and the northern parts of the former Cochin State. The earliest detailed written record, Edgar Thurston and K. Rangachari's Castes and Tribes of Southern India of 1909, names two ritual preparations directly, Pilla Thilam and Angola Thilam, and gives the second a precise botanical identity. A related rite recorded in the same volume, directed against pregnant women, uses a plant named Kotuveli, whose printed botanical gloss does not agree with the plant's own Malayalam name or with the same author's own second book on the subject.

Objective: To establish a botanically verified inventory of the ritual materials of Odividya, to record the full historical procedure of the cult in an accurate and source faithful form, to supply the classical Ayurvedic Dravyaguna and documented modern pharmacology of every identifiable plant, to explain the cult's reported effects through Ayurveda's own theory of Manas, Bhaya and Ojas, and to set out, with explicit caution, a complementary hypothesis linking the cult's staged transformation to Kerala's traditions of trained physical craft.

Methods: A structured, source critical review was carried out. Historical sources were identified through archival and digitised colonial ethnography, screened for direct primary reference to named Odividya materials, and cross checked against Thurston's two separate publications on the subject. Botanical names were verified against regional floras, Ayurvedic and Siddha pharmacognosy references, and vernacular nomenclature compilations. Classical Ayurvedic material was drawn from Charaka Samhita, Sushruta Samhita and Ashtanga Hridaya. Modern pharmacological literature on each identified plant was reviewed through general academic search rather than a registered systematic database protocol, prioritising peer reviewed studies with quantitative endpoints. A full account of the search and selection process, including its limits, is given in the Materials and Methods section.

Results: The primary source names three materially distinct preparations. Pilla Thilam is reported to have been made from human foetal and skeletal material and is treated here strictly as an unverified historical record. Angola Thilam is correctly identified in the source as *Alangium salviifolium* (L.f.) Wangerin, a plant with documented isoquinoline alkaloid content, a classical Ayurvedic placement within toxicology, and, on more recent pharmacological screening, documented analgesic, anti-inflammatory and centrally sedating activity.

The plant named Kotuveli, used in a separate rite against pregnant women, is wrongly glossed in the 1909 source but is best resolved, on cross checking against the same author's 1912 book and against the plant's vernacular name, as *Plumbago zeylanica* L., called Chitraka in Sanskrit, whose active compound plumbagin is independently documented as abortifacient, vesicant and analgesic. This resolution rests on convergent internal and external evidence rather than on direct confirmation from the original 1909 first edition page image, a limitation stated explicitly in the body of this review.

Conclusion: Odividya's ritual materials rest partly on real, pharmacologically active plants and partly on an unverified and ethically fraught claim involving human remains that should be treated as historical record only. Classical Ayurveda itself, in Charaka Samhita, Vimana Sthana eight, names Bhayadarshana and Vismapana as real, non-material therapeutic instruments of Adravyabhuta Chikitsa, and Odividya reproduces this exact mechanism turned toward harm rather than cure. A complementary and explicitly cautious hypothesis, developed from Kerala's documented traditions of trained public illusion and the dual use character of Kalaripayattu martial training, proposes that trained physical craft, supported by the same plants' genuine analgesic and sedative action, explains how the cult's central deception was reliably staged. Read together with these findings, the cult's reported

harm is best explained as a convergence of genuine plant chemistry, trained physical craft, a real classical psychological mechanism deliberately inverted, and a social order that found it useful to keep all three alive.

Keywords: Odividya, Kerala Folklore, Plumbago Zeylanica, Adravayabhuta Chikitsa, Dravyaguna.



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INTRODUCTION

In the villages of Palghat and Walluvanad, and in the northern tracts of what was once the princely state of Cochin, people once spoke of a man who could turn himself into a bull, a dog, or an elephant, and who could kill another human being encountered on a lonely path at night. This man was the Odiyan, and his craft was called Odividya. The stories were retold for generations, entering court records, colonial ethnography, cinema and modern folklore writing, yet almost nothing has checked what the earliest written account actually says against what botany, pharmacology and Ayurveda now know about the plants it names.

The earliest written source is not vague. Edgar Thurston and K. Rangachari's *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, published in 1909 as part of the colonial Ethnographic Survey of India, names the preparations of the Odi cult directly and gives one of them a precise botanical identity [1]. A closely related rite, recorded in the same volume under the Pānān community, names a second plant, and that identification has gone uncorrected for more than a century, most likely because of a simple printing slip, pointing away from what is otherwise one of the most pharmacologically active plants in the South Indian materia medica.

This article has five aims: to set out, from primary sources, the full and accurate procedure of Odividya as it was recorded; to correct the one botanical identification that does not hold up under scrutiny; to place each identifiable plant within classical Ayurvedic Dravyaguna and modern pharmacology; to explain, through Ayurveda's own theory of Manas, Bhaya and Ojas, how genuine terror and genuine plant chemistry could together account for the harm the tradition is remembered for; and to propose, with explicit caution, a complementary hypothesis linking the cult's central staged deception to Kerala's own traditions of trained physical craft.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This review follows a structured, source critical narrative review methodology, developed for

historical, ethnobotanical and Ayurvedic textual material.

This is deliberately not a systematic review in the PRISMA sense, since PRISMA is a reporting standard built for quantitative or clinical study data with numerical attrition at each stage, and no such flow diagram or quantitative synthesis is offered or claimed here. Four separate evidence streams were instead searched, screened and cross checked qualitatively, as described below.

Identification and Screening of Historical Sources

Colonial era ethnographic literature on Malabar and Cochin was identified through archival and digitised sources, principally Edgar Thurston's two publications, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* of 1909 and *Omens and Superstitions of Southern India* of 1912, together with associated caste studies and literary criticism located through general search. Sources were screened for direct, named reference to Odividya ritual materials rather than general description of the cult's supernatural claims. Of the sources examined, only Thurston's two books were found to contain direct primary documentation naming specific preparations and, in one case, a specific plant. Later folklore compilations, film related writing and popular blogs were found to repeat the tradition's general claims without adding or verifying any material detail, and were excluded from the primary evidentiary base, though they are noted in Section 3.1 as evidence of the tradition's continuing popular currency.

Botanical Nomenclature Verification

Every plant name reported in the historical sources was checked against regional floras of Kerala and Malabar, Ayurvedic and Siddha pharmacognosy references, Nighantu literature, and modern vernacular nomenclature compilations, in order to establish the accepted botanical name and taxonomic authority for each. Where a historical source's own botanical gloss conflicted with the plant's vernacular name or with the same author's other writing, both readings are reported and the resolution is argued explicitly in Section 3.4 rather than adopted silently.

Ayurvedic Textual Sources

Classical Ayurvedic material was drawn from Charaka Samhita (Sutrasthana, Sharirasthana, Nidanasthana and Chikitsasthana passages concerning Manas and Unmada), Sushruta Samhita (Uttaratantra, Amanushopasarga Pratishedha), and Ashtanga Hridaya (Bhutavijnaneeya and Bhutapratishedha chapters), read through established printed editions, together with standard Dravyaguna compendia for the pharmacological profile of each named plant [12, 13, 14].

Pharmacological Literature Search

Modern phytochemical and pharmacological literature on *Alangium salviifolium* (L.f.) Wangerin, *Plumbago zeylanica* L. and *Plumbago indica* L. was located through general academic search engines and open biomedical literature indexes, searched between June and September 2026, using search terms including combinations of the plant's accepted and synonym names with pharmacology, phytochemistry, analgesic, anti-inflammatory, abortifacient, anti-implantation, vesicant, sedative,

and central nervous system depressant. Priority was given to peer reviewed reviews and to controlled experimental studies reporting quantitative toxicological or reproductive endpoints, so that the pharmacological claims in Section 3.7 rest on measured outcomes rather than on general herbal reputation. This search was not conducted as a formal, reproducible systematic search of a named bibliographic database such as PubMed or Scopus with a registered protocol, and no claim of exhaustive coverage is made; a reader seeking full reproducibility should treat Section 3.7's citations as a representative rather than an exhaustive sample of the available pharmacological literature.

Evidentiary Classification

Every material claim in this review is placed in one of four categories: direct historical documentation, classical Ayurvedic textual evidence, modern peer reviewed pharmacological evidence, or later folklore restatement. Only the first three categories are treated as evidentiary in Sections 3 and 4.

Table 1. Source identification and screening in this structured narrative review

Stage	What was done	Outcome
Identification	Colonial ethnography, caste studies, literary criticism and folklore writing on the Odi cult located through archival and general search	Nine categories of source located, spanning primary ethnography, caste studies, literary analysis and popular folklore
Screening	Sources screened for direct, named reference to ritual materials rather than general narrative claims	Two primary sources retained, both authored by Thurston, one of them (1909) written jointly with Rangachari
Eligibility	Retained sources checked against each other and against vernacular botanical nomenclature for internal consistency	One internal inconsistency identified, the Kotuveli naming problem addressed in Section 3.4
Included	Sources meeting evidentiary criteria carried forward into Results	Thurston and Rangachari 1909 and Thurston 1912 form the primary evidentiary base for the historical source stream specifically; the classical textual and modern pharmacological streams are separately sourced and evidentially classified under Section 2.5, and later folklore is retained only as illustrative material

RESULTS

Historical and Social Context of the Odi Cult

A clarification of scope is needed regarding the word Odividya itself, stated here before the term is used further, rather than after. Thurston and Rangachari juxtapose a general shape shifting and attack practice attributed to Paraiyan practitioners with a distinct rite against pregnant women attributed to the Pānān community, and this review, following that juxtaposition, treats both under the single heading Odividya throughout, since that is how the source itself presents them and no primary evidence

consulted here directly settles the question either way. It should be stated plainly, however, that Thurston's text does not by itself establish whether Paraiyan and Pānān practitioners understood themselves to share one unified tradition under one name, or practised two related but caste specific traditions that a colonial ethnographer, working across community boundaries he was not positioned to fully distinguish, chose to group together under a common label. This is a real gap in specialist rigor rather than a settled matter, and it is flagged here explicitly, ahead of the historical account that

follows, rather than resolved by assumption in either direction.

Thurston and Rangachari place the Odi or Oti cult in the rural parts of the northern division of the former Cochin State and in the taluks of Palghat and Walluvanad in Malabar, and attribute it chiefly to Paraiyan practitioners, with a closely related form practised among the Pānān community [1]. Both groups stood at the bottom of the regional caste order, working as agricultural labourers, drummers and leatherworkers, with almost no legal protection and no ordinary means of settling a grievance against a landlord. Thurston records that by the time of his writing, reports of the cult's most violent claims, the killing of victims and the taking of unborn children, had already become rare, and he attributes this to growing fear of government officials and landlords. That is the ethnographer's own reading, offered by a colonial official, and should be read as such rather than as independent confirmation of why the practice declined.

The same volume records two nineteenth century incidents that complicate any simple account of who was harming whom. In 1829, several men from Malabar were charged with taking a Paraiyan companion to the house of a pregnant woman, beating her, and claiming to remove the child from her womb. In 1834, villagers in Malabar attacked an entire Paraiyan settlement on suspicion of sorcery, beat the inhabitants so severely that several died, and drove the survivors from their homes [1]. Fear of the Odiyan was, on this evidence, at least as dangerous to the people accused of the craft as anything the craft itself was ever shown to have done. The cult also remains a living reference point in modern Kerala, appearing in literary criticism, a major 2018 Malayalam film, and continuing oral testimony collected in popular media, which is noted here as evidence of the tradition's persistence rather than as further primary evidence. The primary source consulted for this review documents the cult specifically within the Palghat, Walluvanad and northern Cochin corridor, and no claim is made here about the consistency of the Odiyan legend's form, materials or method in other parts of Kerala, where regional and linguistic variation in the telling should be expected and would require separate primary sources to establish.

The Full Procedure of Odividya

• Initiation

A man wishing to learn Odividya went to a guru already skilled in the craft and asked, falling at his feet, to be admitted. The master would first try to turn him away, and only once the petitioner had shown persistence would testing begin. The novice followed his teacher into forests and lonely places at midnight, where the master would seem to vanish and then reappear suddenly as a bull, a ferocious dog, or an elephant, and the novice was expected to

stand his ground without fear. He was also required to spend whole nights alone in places believed to be full of howling, unseen creatures. Only after passing these ordeals was, he initiated, through worship of a goddess named Nīli, also called Kallatikode Nīli, and taught to prepare the two named oils that gave the cult its power.

• The attack on a chosen victim

Once a practitioner had a grievance against someone, he identified the enemy's house and, at night, having rubbed the prepared oil onto his body and invoked it with mantras, believed himself able to take on the appearance of an animal. According to Thurston's account, the sorcerer went out into the dark, and anyone he encountered on the way was stupefied and then killed, either by a blow to the head or by strangulation with two sticks applied to the neck [1]. No mention is made in the primary source of the victim's birth star being used to select or target them, and no mention is made of a stick being broken as a sympathetic magic act believed to snap the victim's spine at a distance. Both details recur in modern popular retellings of the Odiyan legend, but neither is present in Thurston's own 1909 account, and this review does not repeat them as historical fact. Elsewhere in the same entry, Thurston records that Paraiya magicians were separately consulted to kill a named enemy through two other techniques entirely, burning a wax image of the victim, or reciting a mantra over a human bone taken from a burial ground and depositing it in the victim's house, which are rites of sympathetic and contagious magic in the classical anthropological sense, distinct from the direct physical killing described in the Odi cult passage itself [1].

• The rite against a pregnant woman

A separate and more specific rite, recorded under the Pānān entry of the same volume rather than under the Paraiyan entry discussed above, was said to be used to obtain a preparation with the power to entice a pregnant woman from her house at night. The sorcerer bathed early in the morning, dressed in an unwashed cloth, worshipped his deity, and then went in search of a Kotuveli plant. Having found a suitable specimen, he circled it three times a day for ninety days, prostrating himself before it each time. On the last night, which had to fall on a new moon, he performed worship to the plant at midnight, burnt camphor, circled it three more times, set three small torches upon it, and advanced twenty paces in front of it before plucking it by the root in silence and without fear. He buried it in the ashes of the cremation ground, poured the water of seven green coconuts over the spot, circled it twenty-one times muttering Mantras, and then stood submerged in water up to his mouth before taking the plant, with its root, to the closed door of the intended victim's house, where the source states it had the power to compel her to come out. The account continues

directly, without any narrative break, into a description of the pregnancy being ended, the body dismembered into nine pieces, burned, and boiled with coconut water into an oil preserved for marking the forehead, structurally paralleling, but textually and terminologically distinct from, the Paraiyan entry's Pilla Thilam narrative described above [1]. This entire passage belongs to the level of ethnographic report. It was written down by a colonial official from an informant's account, it was never independently confirmed, and it is presented here purely as a historical record of belief, not as evidence that any such event actually occurred as described.

Materia Medica: Reported Preparations and Their Botanical Identity

The first oil, Pilla Thilam, meaning baby oil, is described as prepared from the foetal tissue of a woman in the sixth or seventh month of her first pregnancy, combined with powdered human skull. This is the most disturbing claim in the record and is treated here with real caution rather than simple repetition. Stories that accuse a feared or despised community of preparing magical substances from the bodies of infants recur across very different societies and centuries, from the witch trial confessions of early modern Europe to the blood libel accusations directed at Jewish communities, and historians treat such stories as a recognisable form of persecution narrative in their own right. That does not prove the Kerala account untrue in every detail, but it is a strong reason to treat it as an unverified colonial record of what the accused were said to do, and no attempt is made in this article to add detail to the reported procedure beyond what the source itself contains.

A distinct question, worth separating clearly from the truth of the claim itself, is whether South Asian ritual tradition offers any genuine, documented category into which a claim of this kind might have been placed by the people who told it. It does, though the distinction matters. Barrett's academic ethnography of Aghor practice in northern India documents a real and continuing tradition in which spiritual power is understood to be gained through

direct contact with death and human remains, ash and bone taken from the already deceased at cremation grounds, used in ritual under a guru's supervision [31]. This is a genuine, peer reviewed anthropological account of power sought through association with death in an Indian ritual context, and it establishes that such a category exists in South Asian religious life independent of anything said about Odividya. It is not, on the evidence in Barrett's own account, a category that involves violence against the living to obtain tissue from a person who has not died, and the Pilla Thilam claim as recorded by Thurston is precisely that, an accusation of violence against a targeted, living pregnant woman, not a description of ritual use of remains from a death that had already occurred. The existence of a real Aghor tradition of power through death and remains therefore explains why such a claim would have been culturally legible and frightening to a Malabar audience in 1909. It does not make the specific violent claim against Odividya practitioners any more likely to be true, and the persecution narrative reading set out above remains, on the evidence available, the better explanation for why this particular and more extreme claim was attached to an already marginalised community.

The second oil, Angola Thilam, is said to come from the fruit of the angola tree, which the source names directly as *Alangium Lamarckii*, the accepted synonym, credited to the botanist Thwaites, of the plant now generally known as *Alangium salviifolium* (L.f.) Wangerin, of the family Cornaceae. The Malayalam word for this tree, Alangi, is the very word from which the Latin genus name *Alangium* was taken, so the identification is not only internally consistent but linguistically self-confirming. According to the account, one particular fruit of the tree was believed to move on its own on dark nights, and only a person with the right occult skill could catch it. Once obtained, the oil drawn from *Alangium salviifolium* (L.f.) Wangerin was said to work in the same way as Pilla Thilam, marking the wearer's forehead and giving him the power to change shape.

Table 2. Materia Medica of Odividya: Verified Botanical Identity

Preparation	Reported source	Correct identity, with taxonomic authority	Nature of the material
Pilla Thilam	Thurston and Rangachari, 1909	Human foetal and skeletal material	Unverified colonial account, historical only
Angola Thilam	Thurston and Rangachari, 1909	<i>Alangium salviifolium</i> (L.f.) Wangerin, syn. <i>Alangium lamarckii</i> Thwaites	Real plant, pharmacologically active
Kotuvelli rite	Thurston and Rangachari, 1909, corrected by Thurston, 1912	<i>Plumbago zeylanica</i> L. (Chitraka), or its relative <i>Plumbago indica</i> L.	Real plant, pharmacologically active

Gurusi water, gourd vessel, cow dung water	Thurston and Rangachari, 1909, Paraiyan entry	Curcuma longa L. and Lagenaria siceraria (Molina) Standl.	Ritual and instrumental, not pharmacologically central
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Shaded row: unverified historical claim, no botanical identity. Unshaded rows: botanically identified, pharmacologically documented plant material.

The Kotuveli Naming Problem: Why the Question Arises

A botanical identity question exists here for a specific and checkable reason, not as a matter of opinion. A note on spelling is needed before proceeding: Kotuveli and Koduveli are the same Malayalam word in two different transliterations, the first following Thurston's own colonial era rendering, the second the more standard modern transliteration also seen in the compound vernacular names below. This review retains Kotuveli specifically when referring to Thurston's own account and its terminology and uses Koduveli as the root of the compound vernacular names discussed in the next paragraph, but both refer, throughout, to the identical referent. The single ethnographic corpus that documents this rite gives two different Latin names for the same Malayalam word, Kotuveli, across its own two publications. The 1909 volume, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, glosses the plant used in the Pānān rite against pregnant women as *Manihot utilissima*, the cassava or tapioca plant [1]. Thurston's earlier book, *Omens and Superstitions of Southern India* of 1912, reproduces the identical account from the identical informant, L. K. Anantha Krishna Iyer, describing the identical Pānān rite, and there the plant is named correctly as *Plumbago zeylanica* L. [2]. A single source contradicting itself on the identity of the one plant central to a named ritual is not a minor detail. It has to be resolved before any pharmacological or Ayurvedic claim about the rite can be treated as valid, because the two candidate plants have nothing in common botanically, chemically or in traditional use, and settling on the wrong one would either wrongly credit an inert food crop with ritual power it never had or wrongly deny a genuinely potent medicinal plant its documented role in the tradition that named it.

The resolution follows from two independent lines of evidence. First, cassava is a South American food crop that reached Kerala only in the eighteenth or nineteenth century, grown for famine relief rather than for any ritual purpose, and no floristic, botanical or ethnobotanical source anywhere associates the Malayalam word Kotuveli with it. Second, the word itself, in every pharmacognosy text, regional flora and vernacular dictionary consulted for this study, refers without exception to *Plumbago zeylanica* L., the white flowered leadwort, known in Malayalam as Vellakoduveli, or

to its red flowered relative *Plumbago indica* L., known as Chethikoduveli [15, 16]. Both are called Chitraka in Sanskrit. On this convergent evidence, the 1909 gloss of *Manihot utilissima* is treated here as a straightforward error, most plausibly a slip made in preparing or printing the larger seven volume work, and the plant actually meant throughout is *Plumbago zeylanica* L., that is, Chitraka.

Chitraka in Kerala Belief

What makes this correction more than a philological footnote is that Chitraka, once correctly identified, already carried a reputation for supernatural potency in Kerala tradition before any modern scholar went looking for it. The Pānān rite recorded by Thurston is, in effect, the magical story attached to this plant in Kerala folk memory. A sorcerer does not simply pick the herb and use it. He worships it daily for three months, waits for the exact darkness of a new moon, and treats the plant itself as the seat of the power he is trying to obtain. This is not how ordinary Ayurvedic herbs are gathered, and the ritual intensity built around Chitraka in this account shows that the community that told these stories already understood the plant to be unusually potent, hot in its action, and dangerous to handle carelessly, which matches exactly what classical Ayurveda and modern pharmacology both independently say about *Plumbago zeylanica* L. Independent field ethnobotany corroborates the plant's cultural prominence beyond ritual context, a survey of medicinal plant use among Kani tribal communities of the Kerala Western Ghats, documenting thirty five species across thirty four genera, found *Plumbago zeylanica* L. to carry the single highest use value of every species recorded, with thirteen use reports from all seven informants interviewed, indicating a level of everyday cultural and therapeutic prominence entirely independent of the Pānān rite itself [11].

A Note on Popular Tradition: Neelakoduveli

A shorter note is warranted on a further, more extreme layer of magical reputation Kerala folklore attaches to a variant it calls Neelakoduveli, literally blue Koduveli, distinct from the white flowered Vellakoduveli and the red flowered Chethikoduveli identified above as *Plumbago zeylanica* L. and *Plumbago indica* L. Contemporary Malayalam sources describe Neelakoduveli as recognisable only to the Uppan, the greater coucal, *Centropus sinensis* (Linnaeus, 1758), and credit a paste made from it with the power to reveal buried treasure and open supernaturally sealed chambers [17, 18, 19]. This regional belief in plant guarded and spirit guarded treasure is not merely a modern journalistic

invention. An academic folklore note published in Folklore in 1920 records comparable treasure guardian belief attributed to the poltergeist figure of Malabar specifically, indicating that this general belief category has a documented presence in the same region independent of any single modern retelling [32]. No source consulted for this review, popular or academic, assigns Neelakoduveli a confirmed taxonomic identity distinct from *Plumbago zeylanica* L. or *Plumbago indica* L. themselves, and it is treated here strictly as popular tradition, included only because it corroborates, from an entirely separate direction, the unusual respect and caution Kerala folk memory already attaches to this one plant family in the Pānān rite discussed above.

Ayurvedic Dravyaguna and Documented Pharmacology

- **Alangium salviifolium (L.f.) Wangerin**

Classical Nighantu literature, including the Dhanvantari Nighantu, the Kaiyadeva Nighantu and the Raja Nighantu, records *Alangium salviifolium* (L.f.) Wangerin under the names Ankola, Ankota and Nikochaka [16]. Its classical profile is Rasa Kashaya, Katu and Tikta; Guna Laghu, Snigdha to Ruksha and Tikshna; Virya Ushna; Vipaka Katu; with a Karma summarised as Kaphapittasamaka, Krimighna, Kushtaghna and Shothahara. Its root bark is classically placed within Visha Chikitsa, Ayurvedic toxicology, as an antidote for Alaraka Visha, the bite of a rabid animal, for Mushaka Visha, rat bite poisoning, and for snake venom. A plant whose own classical reputation is built around poison, antidote and the bite of animals sits naturally at the centre of a cult whose central claim is animal transformation.

Ankola carries a second and independent classical reputation that bears directly on the question of why this plant, rather than any other, was chosen for a working meant to confer power over another being. Adi Shankara's Sivananda Lahari, verse sixty-one, uses the Ankola seed's tendency to fall back and adhere to its parent tree as a simile for true devotion, comparing it to the needle drawn to a magnet, a simile repeated in the Viveka Chudamani and still cited in modern Ayurvedic pharmacognosy references on the plant [28]. This reputation for a magnet like power of attraction survives into contemporary Tantric practice: current Ayurvedic and folk pharmacognosy sources record that Tantric practitioners use Ankola for Vasheekarana, attraction or control magic, and for Agnisthambhana, ritual endurance of fire and heat [29]. This particular claim rests on a popular Ayurvedic information website rather than a peer reviewed ethnobotanical or Tantric studies source, a lower evidentiary tier than most of the citations in this review, and it is flagged here as such; a broader academic genre of magico religious ethnobotanical

survey exists and does document Tantric use of specific plants by named informants in other regions of India, which suggests a stronger, region specific replacement citation may exist for this claim, but none meeting this review's evidentiary bar could be confirmed with sufficient precision in the course of this research. A plant already carrying, independent of Odividya entirely, a centuries old reputation for binding one being to another and for granting endurance under extreme physical conditions is a plausible candidate for the oil a practitioner would reach for when the claimed purpose was to bind an animal's form onto a human body and to endure a night long ordeal without visible fear.

Modern phytochemical work on *Alangium salviifolium* (L.f.) Wangerin confirms real chemical activity independent of any occult claim. The bark, root and leaf yield a distinctive family of isoquinoline alkaloids, including alangine, marckine, marckidine, lamarckine, alangicine, ankorine, alangimarckine and alangamide, alongside flavonoids, saponins and fixed oils, as documented in the pharmacognostic review by Ghosh, Sarkar and Chakraborty [7]. A separate and pharmacologically significant line of phytochemical work has additionally identified tubulosine, isotubulosine, deoxytubulosine, cephaeline, isocephaeline, psychotrine and related compounds in this plant, placing a substantial part of its alkaloid content in the same structural family as the alkaloids of *Cephaelis ipecacuanha*, the source of ipecac, a family classically and still best characterised pharmacologically for its emetic action rather than for any established central nervous system receptor mechanism [30]. Pharmacological screening has separately demonstrated anti-inflammatory, antimicrobial, anticonvulsant and cytotoxic activity for extracts of *Alangium salviifolium* (L.f.) Wangerin, and the plant's long standing classical use in the management of Apasmara, seizure disorders, is consistent with a genuinely active alkaloid load rather than an inert ritual prop. The precise receptor level mechanism underlying the central nervous system depressant activity demonstrated behaviourally in Section 3.7.1 below has not been established in the pharmacological literature reviewed for this article, and this gap is noted here explicitly rather than filled by inference from the ipecac alkaloid family's better characterised emetic action, which is a distinct pharmacological effect.

More recent pharmacological screening adds a further, and for this review directly relevant, dimension to this profile. A controlled study of *Alangium salviifolium* (L.f.) Wangerin fruit extract by Paul and colleagues demonstrated dose dependent analgesic activity in the acetic acid induced writhing model, with the peel extract reaching forty four percent inhibition at two hundred milligrams per kilogram against forty eight percent

for the reference standard, Diclofenac Sodium, and anti-inflammatory activity in the carrageenan induced paw oedema model reaching thirty five percent inhibition against thirty eight percent for the reference standard, Ibuprofen, in that model [20]. The same study additionally recorded a significant, dose dependent reduction in locomotor activity on open field and hole cross testing, benchmarked against Diazepam, indicating a genuine central nervous system depressant action rather than a stimulant one [20]. Independent root extract pharmacology corroborates the anti-inflammatory finding in a separate paw oedema model [21]. Read together, the demonstrated profile of *Alangium salviifolium* (L.f.) Wangerin is analgesic, anti-inflammatory and centrally sedating, a combination with a direct bearing on the hypothesis developed in Section 5.1.

- **Plumbago zeylanica L. and Plumbago indica L.**

Chitraka, in both its white flowered form, *Plumbago zeylanica* L., and its red flowered relative, *Plumbago indica* L., carries the classical profile Rasa Katu; Guna Laghu, Ruksha and Tikshna; Virya Ushna; Vipaka Katu; with Karma including Deepana, Pachana, Kaphahara and Krimighna. Because the raw root is considered too sharp and too heating for casual internal use, classical practice requires Shodhana, a standardised purification process, before *Plumbago zeylanica* L. is administered internally, an explicit classical acknowledgement that the unprocessed drug is genuinely strong medicine.

The pharmacological review by Shukla, Saxena, Usmani and Kushwaha, published in Clinical Phytoscience in 2021, sets out the documented biological activity of *Plumbago zeylanica* L. in detail [8], and the toxicological review by Khatun does the same for *Plumbago indica* L. [9]. The principal active constituent of both species is plumbagin, a naphthoquinone independently documented in the wider pharmacognostic literature as a vesicant, capable of raising blisters on contact with skin, an emmenagogue that provokes uterine bleeding, and a genuine abortifacient in its own right. A separate and more specific line of evidence comes from Gupta, Ahirwar, Sharma, Jhade and Ahirwar, whose controlled study used, as the study's own title states, a plumbagin free alcohol extract of *Plumbago zeylanica* L. root, and still produced significant anti-implantation and abortifacient activity in female Wistar rats at oral doses of three hundred and five hundred milligrams per kilogram of body weight, together with a measurable fall in serum progesterone, follicle stimulating hormone and luteinising hormone [10]. This finding should not be read as demonstrating plumbagin's own action, since the tested extract was explicitly reported as depleted of plumbagin; it instead shows

that the plant's abortifacient activity does not depend on plumbagin alone, with other constituents of the root capable of producing the same reproductive endpoint. Taken together, plumbagin itself and this separately documented plumbagin free fraction give two independents, converging lines of established pharmacology, unconnected to any belief system, both of which describe outcomes matching what the Pānān rite claims to produce in a pregnant woman.

Put plainly, a preparation built from *Plumbago zeylanica* L., applied to or placed near a pregnant woman, is pharmacologically plausible as a cause of genuine harm to that pregnancy, consistent with ordinary pharmacological action and requiring no spirit, Mantra or shapeshifting to explain it. This plausibility claim needs one explicit qualification. The supporting studies cited above used controlled oral dosing in rodent models at specified doses of a few hundred milligrams per kilogram of body weight, a route and a degree of control entirely unlike the uncontrolled, historically undocumented method, dose and route of exposure implied by the ritual description itself. The translation from a controlled laboratory oral dose to an uncontrolled historical ritual exposure is not linear or assured, and the claim made here is one of pharmacological plausibility given the plant's known activity, not a demonstrated equivalence of dose or outcome. The ninety-day ritual of worship built around the plant most probably reflects a real, practical awareness, passed down without the language of modern pharmacology, that Chitraka was unusually dangerous and needed to be handled with unusual care.

Independent pharmacological work identifies a further dimension of Chitraka's action that bears directly on the argument of Section 5.1. Subramaniyan and Paramasivam demonstrated significant anti-inflammatory activity of a dichloromethane extract of *Plumbago zeylanica* L. against carrageenan induced paw oedema and cotton pellet granuloma in Wistar rats, at a level approaching that of Diclofenac [22]. Separately, Sheeja, Joshi and Jain isolated plumbagin itself, by bioassay guided fractionation, from a *Plumbago zeylanica* L. leaf extract that produced significant antinociceptive activity in both the hot plate and formalin models, using Diclofenac as the reference standard across both models and Morphine specifically as an additional reference in the formalin test, with the effect confined to the later, inflammatory phase of the formalin test, suggesting a peripherally acting analgesic mechanism attributable to plumbagin [23]. A secondary pharmacognostic compilation separately describes *Plumbago zeylanica* L. as a skin irritant that, in small doses, has traditionally been considered stimulating, in contrast to the sedating profile of *Alangium salviifolium* (L.f.) Wangerin established above [24].

This last claim rests on a secondary compilation rather than a controlled pharmacological trial and should be treated with correspondingly greater caution than the peer reviewed analgesic and anti-inflammatory findings cited above.

DISCUSSION

A scope statement is appropriate before the interpretive work of this section begins. This review takes no position on whether any Odiyan practitioner ever possessed genuine paranormal ability, and its explanatory ambition throughout is limited to accounting for the harm Odividya is reported to have caused through ordinary pharmacological, psychological and sociological mechanisms, consistent with the standard methodological principle, familiar from psychical research as much as from clinical medicine, of exhausting ordinary explanatory resources before entertaining an extraordinary one. Nothing in what follows should be read as either an attempt to affirm or an attempt to disprove paranormal causation as a general category.

Odividya Explained Through Ayurvedic Theory

- **Manas as a physical substance**

Ayurveda does not treat the mind, Manas, as a mere abstraction. It is counted among the fundamental Dravyas, the basic substances of existence, alongside Atma, Kala, Dik and the five Mahabhuta. Manas is described as Anu, point sized, and Eka, single, a classification the classical texts use to explain why full attention cannot be given to two things at the same instant [12]. Because Manas is Dravya and not simply a figure of speech, it can genuinely be acted upon by other Dravyas and forces, including food, medicine, sound in the form of Mantra, symbolic objects, and ritual action itself. A distinction is worth making explicit here for a philosophically careful reading: this is an ontological claim about what Manas is, not by itself a claim about how it is empirically observed to behave. Adravayabhuta Chikitsa, discussed next, is the functional or therapeutic claim built on top of this ontological one, namely that this substance, being genuinely actable upon, can be moved by specific, named, non-material means toward or away from equilibrium. The two claims work together but are not the same claim, and the ontological classification of Manas as Dravya is what licenses the functional claim rather than replacing the need to state it separately. A ritual built to frighten a specific, targeted person is therefore, in this framework, one physical event acting on another, not a merely imagined one. This is the first and most direct sense in which Odividya can be explained through Ayurvedic theory rather than dismissed by it.

- **Adravayabhuta Chikitsa: the classical basis for how Odividya causes harm**

Charaka Samhita, Vimana Sthana, chapter eight, Rogabhishagjitiya Vimana, verse eighty-seven, states that Karana, the instrument of therapeutic action, is Bhesaja, medicine, defined as whatever assists a physician labouring toward the equilibrium of the bodily Dhatus [12]. The same passage divides Bhesaja by method into Daivavyapashraya, recourse to the divine, and Yuktivyapashraya, rational treatment, and, separately, by form into Dravyabhuta, material therapy, and Adravayabhuta, non-material therapy administered without any substance at all [12]. It is this last category that supplies the precise classical mechanism underlying Odividya's reported effect. The text states that Adravayabhuta medicine works through Upaya, indirect means, and it names them: Bhayadarshana, inducing fear, Vismapana, inducing sudden astonishment, Vismarana, inducing forgetting, Kshobhana, agitating, Harshana, delighting, Bhartsana, rebuking, Vadha, threat of death, Bandha, restraint, Swapna, inducing sleep, and Samvahana, gentle massage. The text calls these Amurta Bhava Visheshas, incorporeal special mental states, and Chakrapanidatta's commentary, the Ayurveda Dipika, explains that they act on disease only indirectly, not as its direct material cause, achieving their result by helping to regulate the quantity of the bodily Doshas and thereby restoring equilibrium [12]. The distinction Chakrapanidatta draws matters for the argument that follows: a direct Dravya based cause acts as the Samavayi Karana, the inherent material cause of a change, in the way an ingested herb directly alters the substance of the body it enters, whereas an Upaya of Adravayabhuta Chikitsa acts as a Nimitta Karana, an efficient or triggering cause, altering the Dosha balance through the mind's own reaction rather than by any substance entering the body at all. This is precisely why Odividya can cause genuine bodily harm with no ingested substance present at the moment of the attack itself, the harm proceeds through the triggering, not the material, pathway, and it is also why the classical texts still regard that harm as fully physical rather than merely imagined.

Bhayadarshana and Vismapana are, on this evidence, not a loose analogy borrowed for this article's purposes. They are two of the named classical instruments a physician may use, entirely without any material drug, to move a patient's Doshas toward balance. Odividya reproduces exactly this pair. The sudden appearance of a transformed animal on a lonely path at night is Vismapana, the deliberate production of shock and astonishment. The stupefaction that Thurston's account describes the victim falling into upon that encounter, immediately before the fatal blow, is Bhayadarshana, the deliberate production of fear.

The mechanism is identical to what Charaka describes. What differs entirely is the direction and the intent. A physician applies Bhayadarshana or Vismapana toward Hita, benefit, to correct a Dosha imbalance already present in a patient who has sought treatment. The Odiyan applies the same two Upaya toward Ahita, harm, to manufacture a Dosha imbalance in a person who sought nothing. Odividya is not, on this basis, a corrupted or invented form of Ayurvedic treatment. It is the deliberate, harmful inversion of a real and named therapeutic category, aimed at a victim rather than a patient, and it is precisely for this reason that it must be called an affliction and never a Chikitsa.

- **Bhutavidya and the response to such harm**

Bhutavidya is one of the eight classical branches of Ayurveda, dealing with disorders attributed to Bhuta and Graha, non-human influences disturbing mind and body, treated through Mantra, Bali, Homa and Santipatha. Sushruta gives this subject a full chapter in the Uttaratantira, under the heading Amanushopasarga Pratishedha. Vagbhata devotes two chapters of the Ashtanga Hridaya to it, and Charaka describes Bhutonmada, madness attributed to Graha affliction, as a recognised and explicitly psychosomatic form of Unmada [12, 13, 14]. The correct response to a victim of Odividya, on the tradition's own logic, is Daivavyapashraya Chikitsa, a spiritually oriented therapy administered for the victim's benefit. Daivavyapashraya Chikitsa is the antidote this framework implies. It is never a description of what the sorcerer does to cause the harm, which, as Section 4.1.2 has shown, belongs instead to the misuse of Adravayabhuta Upaya.

- **Ojas and the physiology of collapse**

Ayurveda gives a specific mechanism for how fear becomes illness. Sustained Bhaya is described as depleting Ojas, the essence underlying Vyadhikshamatva, the body's power of resistance to disease. The sequence runs from belief to Bhaya, from Bhaya to Ojo kshaya, the wasting of Ojas, and from that wasting to a genuine collapse of resistance and vulnerability to sudden illness or death. Ojas and Ojo kshaya are classical humoral constructs, not measured physiological quantities, and no claim is made here that they are mechanistically identical to any specific biomedical pathway. The two frameworks are offered as a conceptual parallel rather than an equivalence: what modern physiology separately describes as sustained activation of the hypothalamic pituitary adrenal axis and prolonged catecholamine release, both known to exhaust regulatory capacity and, in extreme and sustained cases, to precipitate fatal cardiac arrhythmia, occupies a comparable explanatory position within the biomedical register to the one Ojo kshaya occupies within the classical Ayurvedic register, each describing, in its own conceptual vocabulary, how sustained fear becomes physical collapse.

Cannon's classic account of what he called voodoo death, describing people who died within hours or days of believing themselves cursed, rests on the catecholamine mechanism, and stands as the closest available biomedical parallel to the Ojo kshaya pathway described in the classical texts, offered here as an interpretive bridge rather than a claim of shared mechanism. Cannon's original case evidence has itself since been methodologically scrutinised and, in places, qualified by later psychophysiological literature, and it is cited here as the classic reference point for this mechanism rather than as an uncontested contemporary standard; a recent comprehensive review of nocebo phenomena situates the same catecholamine and expectation mediated pathway within the wider and more rigorously evidenced modern nocebo literature [3, 33].

- **Prakriti and why some survived and others did not**

The folk record itself makes clear that not everyone who believed they had encountered an Odiyan fell ill or died. Ayurveda's Prakriti model, the theory of constitutional Dosha balance fixed at birth, gives a ready explanation for this spread. Charaka Samhita, Sutrasthana, chapter twenty-eight, verse seven, defines Vyadhikshamatva directly as the twofold capacity to resist the formation of disease and to block the progress of disease already forming, and classical commentary ties this capacity to constitutional Bala, strength, which varies systematically by Prakriti [12]. A person of Vata Pitta constitution, classically more reactive and lower in baseline Ojas, would be expected on this basis to respond to the same fright far more severely than a steadier, higher reserve Kapha constitution, a pattern that lines up with modern research on trait anxiety and individual differences in susceptibility to nocebo effects.

- **The wider medical parallel**

None of this is unique to Kerala. The nocebo effect, in which negative expectation alone produces measurable physical harm with no active agent involved, is well established in clinical medicine. Anthropological work on culture bound illness across many societies, including Lang's ethnographic studies of Ayurvedic and biomedical psychiatry working side by side in Kerala, describes belief constituted sickness responding better to a culturally meaningful ritual response than to plain rational reassurance, because the harm is not occurring only in a register that logical argument can reach [4, 5]. Balsavar and Deshpande's review of hallucination in classical Ayurveda records the same distinction between false perception arising from bodily disorder and false perception arising from purely mental causes, a distinction with a direct bearing on how a belief driven state such as fear of

Odividya would have been understood by a classical physician [6].

Convergence of Phytopharmacology and a Named Psychological Mechanism

Six separate explanations for the harm attributed to Odividya can now be held at the same time rather than treated as competing accounts. There is the caste dimension, in which accusations of sorcery were used by the powerful to control and terrorise the powerless, and in which the powerless in turn found in the same reputation one of their few sources of leverage. There is the general fright response described by nocebo research and by Ayurveda's own Bhaya to Ojo kshaya pathway, in which belief alone is enough to cause real physiological harm. There is the specific classical mechanism of Bhayadarshana and Vismapana, named nonmaterial therapeutic instruments in Charaka Samhita, Vimana Sthana eight, which Odividya reproduces

exactly but redirects from healing toward harm. There is a genuine phytotoxicological explanation, since the corrected identification of Chitraka gives a real, independently documented mechanism by which a preparation aimed at a pregnant woman could plausibly end that pregnancy without any need for supernatural agency. There is, in addition, the Kankettu hypothesis developed in Section 5.1, in which trained physical craft and genuine analgesic and sedative plant chemistry may explain how a convincing deception was reliably staged rather than merely asserted, offered there explicitly as a hypothesis rather than a finding. And running beneath all five is the Ayurvedic understanding of Manas as a substance that can be acted upon, which is what allows a ritual, a plant, a trained performance and a belief to combine into a single physical event rather than remaining separate and unrelated stories.

Table 3. The six converging explanations and their evidentiary tier

Explanation	Section	Evidentiary tier
Caste instrumentalisation of sorcery accusation	3.1, 4.3	Historical record
General nocebo and Bhaya to Ojo kshaya fright response	4.1.4, 4.1.6	Classical text and modern pharmacology, offered as conceptual parallel
Bhayadarshana and Vismapana as named Adravayabhuta instruments	4.1.2, 4.1.3	Classical text, directly cited
Phytotoxicological action of corrected Chitraka identification	3.4, 3.7.2	Botanical identification and peer reviewed pharmacology
Kankettu and Kalaripayattu staged deception	5.1	Hypothesis, zero named primary sources
Manas as Dravya, the substrate allowing the above to combine	4.1.1	Classical text, conceptual

The Caste Dimension and Historical Ethics

None of the analysis in this article should be read as taking the supernatural claims of Odividya at face value, nor should it be read as excusing what was done, in the name of fear of the Odiyan, to the communities accused of practising it. The 1834 attack recorded in the same historical source, in which an entire settlement was beaten so badly that several people died, and the survivors were driven from their homes, took place because of belief in exactly the powers discussed in this article, not because those powers were real. The story of a substance made from the bodies of unborn children is a pattern that recurs across many persecuted communities in many parts of the world, and its repetition here should be read as evidence of how a feared minority was talked about, not as a factual account of what any person actually did. A proper reading of Odividya has to hold the ethnobotany and the caste history together. The plants explain how real harm could occur. The caste record explains who paid for the belief that it did.

A further methodological note belongs here rather than left implicit. The primary source underlying

this entire review is a colonial administrative account, compiled by outsiders for the purposes of imperial governance, of the practices of two historically marginalised, Dalit communities. No community sourced or descendant community perspective was consulted in the preparation of this review, which is confined by its own stated method to English language archival material. This is a limitation of standpoint as well as of coverage, and it should be read alongside the caste analysis above rather than treated as a neutral methodological detail.

Strengths and Limitations

The principal strength of this review is that it returns to the primary ethnographic source itself rather than relying on later restatements, and cross checks a single author's two separate publications against each other, which is what allowed the Kotuveli error to be identified at all. The principal limitation is that the primary sources are early twentieth century colonial ethnographies, informant mediated and shaped by the racial anthropometric framework of their period. Thurston's account records what informants reported to him. It does not

independently verify the efficacy of any preparation, the truth of any supernatural claim, or the accuracy of every recorded detail. The correction proposed for Kotuveli is argued from convergent internal and external evidence, the cross check against Thurston's own 1912 book and against the plant's vernacular name but has not been checked against the original 1909 first edition page image. The Ayurvedic correlations proposed in Section 4.1 are conceptual and interpretive and should not be mistaken for diagnostic equivalence or established biomedical mechanism. The two hypotheses developed in Section 5, the Kankettu reading of ritual craft and the belief legend account of the Pilla Thilam narrative, are original syntheses offered as testable directions for further ethnographic and historical investigation, argued from the internal structure of the primary source and from independently documented plant pharmacology and legend transmission theory, and neither should be read as an established finding on the same footing as the botanical identifications in Section 3.3 or the pharmacological data in Section 3.7. A further limitation concerns coverage rather than argument: this review's English language, archival method could not reach the substantial oral history and vernacular Malayalam print corpus on the Odiyan figure that exists beyond Thurston, including local caste histories, temple oracle traditions connected to Kallatikode Nīli, and regional folklore society publications, and a genuinely complete folkloristic account of Odividya would need to engage that material directly.

SPECULATIVE EXTENSIONS FOR FUTURE INVESTIGATION

The two hypotheses developed in this section are structurally and typographically separated from the evidence grounded Discussion above because both rest on no named primary source and should not be cited, or read, as though they carried the same evidentiary weight as Sections 3.3 to 3.7 or Section 4.1 to 4.3. They are offered as directions for further research, not as findings.

Ritual Craft and the Kankettu Question

Kerala has a documented tradition of trained public illusion, Kankettu, literally eye binding, and a martial tradition, Kalaripayattu, whose Marma Vidya is explicitly dual use, the same points serving to disable an opponent and to heal in the tradition's own Kalari Chikitsa [27]. It is conceivable that Odividya's central claim, a convincing nocturnal transformation, drew on skills recognisable within one or both of these traditions, and that the sedative and analgesic action of Angola Thilam [20, 21] and the vesicant action of Chitraka [22, 23, 24] could plausibly have supported such a performance physically. No primary source consulted for this review applies either term to Odividya by name, no

source describes Chitraka being used for deliberate skin marking, and this connection should accordingly be read only as a direction for future fieldwork on surviving oral testimony, a source of evidence the written record consulted here does not reach, rather than as an established mechanism. It does not displace the classical Ayurvedic reading developed in Section 4.1, which explains what the effect was in the tradition's own terms regardless of how, or whether, it was staged. A further caution is stated explicitly here because speculative material of exactly this kind is the material most likely to lose its own caveats under later citation: this hypothesis should not be cited by any subsequent work as an established staging mechanism for Odividya, since it rests, by the account already given above, on zero named primary sources connecting Kankettu or Kalaripayattu to either the Paraiyan or Pānān community specifically, and it further requires an entirely unevidenced transmission of martial technique across the caste distance separating Kalaripayattu's historically Nayar affiliated tradition, as documented in the standard academic ethnography cited above, from the Paraiyan and Pānān communities to whom Odividya itself is attributed.

The Pilla Thilam and Kotuveli Narrative: A Belief Legend Hypothesis

A further, more specific hypothesis follows from the internal structure of Thurston's own record and deserves separate statement, and it can now be stated more precisely than a first reading of the source suggests. Pilla Thilam and the Kotuveli rite are recorded as two distinct preparations, under two different community entries, for two different stated purposes. What close reading shows, however, is that each entry independently narrates its own complete fetal tissue procedure. The Paraiyan entry's Pilla Thilam narrative culminates in a foetus taken from a woman in her sixth or seventh month, combined with powdered human skull, into an oil marked on the sorcerer's forehead. The Pānān entry's Kotuveli narrative, entirely independently and without using the term Pilla Thilam at all, culminates in a body dismembered into nine pieces, burned and boiled with coconut water into an oil also marked on the forehead. These are not one claim recorded twice. They are two structurally parallel but textually and terminologically separate fetal oil narratives, attributed to two different communities, appearing under two different headings in the same volume. Later retellings, as noted in Section 3.1, attach a single fetal tissue claim to the general shape changing power of the cult as a whole, without preserving this internal duplication or distinguishing which community or which procedure it originally belonged to. One plausible explanation is that two genuinely separate accounts, each already sensational, fused into a single composite legend in

oral transmission, with the corrected Chitraka identification of Section 3.4 anchoring the Pānān half of that fusion to a real plant, a real and painful outcome, and a documented pharmacological mechanism. This pattern of independent parallel accounts collapsing into one composite narrative is well attested in the general study of orally transmitted belief legend. Dégh's account of the belief legend as a genre describes exactly this kind of communal reworking under retelling, and Fine, Campion-Vincent and Heath's study of rumour and legend document the atrocity rumour as a recognisable and recurrent category with its own characteristic transmission dynamics [25, 26]. A rumour that requires no botanical knowledge to retell and that maximises horror will, on this literature's own account, tend to displace a more mundane and more accurate original in collective memory, particularly where, as Odividya's caste history already shows, there was every social incentive to make the accused communities sound as monstrous as possible. This account remains a hypothesis about transmission rather than a finding demonstrable from Thurston's text alone, since the source nowhere states that the two narratives were later merged by anyone, but the existence of two independent, parallel, near identical fetal oil accounts under two separate community entries is itself a documented textual fact, not a hypothesis, and it is offered here as a considerably firmer basis for the fusion hypothesis than a single ambiguous account would provide [1].

CONCLUSION

Odividya's ritual materials are neither the complete blank that some earlier accounts have claimed nor a fully validated system of Ayurvedic medicine. The earliest written source names two preparations directly and gives one of them, Angola Thilam, a precise botanical identity in *Alangium salviifolium* (L.f.) Wangerin that holds up under scrutiny. A second, closely related rite carries a botanical gloss that does not survive checking against the plant's own name and against the same author's earlier book, and the corrected identity, *Plumbago zeylanica* L., Chitraka, turns out to be one of the most pharmacologically active plants in the South Indian herbal tradition, with a documented ability to end a pregnancy that matches the rite's stated purpose exactly, and with a further, independently attested reputation for supernatural potency in Kerala folk tradition through the legend of Neelakoduveli. On the psychological side, classical Ayurveda does not merely offer a loose analogy for how Odividya might work. Charaka Samhita, Vimana Sthana eight, names Bhayadarshana and Vismapana as real, indirect, non-material therapeutic instruments, and Odividya is best understood as the deliberate inversion of exactly this

named category, applied to a victim rather than a patient, toward harm rather than cure. Read alongside this classification and Ayurveda's account of Ojas and its wasting under sustained fear, Odividya stops looking like either pure invention or pure supernatural fact and starts looking like what it most probably always was, a combination of real plant chemistry, a real and named psychological mechanism turned toward harm, and a social order that found it useful to keep both alive.

Two further hypotheses, offered with the same explicit caution as every interpretive claim in this review, extend this account without displacing it. Read alongside Kerala's own tradition of trained public illusion and the dual use, healing and harming, character of Kalaripayattu's Marma Vidya, the demonstrated analgesic, anti-inflammatory and centrally sedating profile of *Alangium salviifolium* (L.f.) Wangerin and the demonstrated analgesic and small dose stimulant profile of *Plumbago zeylanica* L. suggest a Kankettu hypothesis in which trained physical craft and real plant chemistry, not supernatural power, produced a reliably convincing deception. And the internal structure of Thurston's own record, in which Pilla Thilam and the Kotuveli rite are two textually distinct claims that later tradition repeatedly fused into one, is consistent with established findings on belief legend and atrocity rumour transmission and suggests that the fetal tissue narrative may be a sensational accretion around a real, botanically explicable practice rather than a garbled memory of it. Odividya, on this fuller account, stops looking like either pure invention or pure supernatural fact, and starts looking like what it most probably always was, a combination of real plant chemistry, trained physical craft, a real and named psychological mechanism turned toward harm, and a social order that found it useful to keep all three alive.

Declarations

Ethical considerations

This review discusses historical claims involving violence against pregnant women and the reported use of human remains. These claims are presented solely as unverified colonial ethnographic record for historical and scholarly analysis. No operational procedure is reproduced beyond what the cited primary source itself contains, and no part of this article should be read as validating, encouraging or instructing any harmful practice.

Conflict of interest

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