

Spirals of Myth and Madness: An Anthropological Reading of Mythemes in Lijo Jose Pellissery's *Churuli*

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Abstract

Lijo Jose Pellissery's *Churuli* (2021) stands as one of the most enigmatic works in contemporary Malayalam cinema. This research explores the film through an anthropological lens, focusing on its mythemes — the minimal units of myth — that construct its narrative structure. Drawing from Claude Lévi-Strauss's theory of structural anthropology and Roland Barthes's semiological interpretations, the paper argues that *Churuli* functions as a cyclical myth about deception, transgression, and the loss of moral order. The parallel narratives — that of the monk and that of the policemen — represent an eternal return of human folly and spiritual blindness. Through motifs of the forest, the bridge, disguise, and the spiral, the film transforms local folklore into a cosmic allegory of moral entropy. The anthropological method here interprets *Churuli* as not merely a narrative about two policemen but a ritualistic descent into chaos, mirroring the mythic process of inversion and rebirth.

Keywords: Mytheme, Structural Anthropology, Lijo Jose Pellissery, Folklore, Ritual, Spiral Narrative, Mythic Consciousness

Introduction

Lijo Jose Pellissery's *Churuli* is not simply a film—it is an ontological riddle that dissolves the boundary between myth and reality. At its narrative core, it follows two police officers—Anthony and Shajivan—who enter a mysterious forest village in search of a criminal named Joy. However, beneath this procedural premise lies a dense mythological structure that mirrors the monk's journey in the film's prologue. This study employs an anthropological framework to decode *Churuli* as a site of mythic recursivity, wherein every event echoes an ancient pattern of transgression, deception, and repetition. The concept of 'mytheme,' developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss, becomes crucial here to understand how the film reconstructs the grammar of myth through cinematic language.

Myth and Anthropology: A Framework for Reading

In anthropological theory, myth functions as a system that orders the world through oppositions—nature versus culture, sacred versus profane, order versus chaos. Claude Lévi-Strauss proposed that these oppositions, when reduced to their smallest narrative units, form 'mythemes.' *Churuli* operates through these mythemes: the forest (liminal space), the bridge (threshold), the monk (seeker), the pangolin/Perumadan (trickster), and the spiral (eternal recurrence). Each of these components contributes to a mythic structure where reality collapses into illusion, and identity dissolves into multiplicity.

The Forest as a Liminal Space

The forest in *Churuli* is not merely a geographical backdrop—it is the archetype of the unconscious, the anthropological 'liminal zone' described by Victor Turner. It stands between civilization and wilderness, between order and chaos. Within this space, social norms are inverted, and language itself collapses into vulgarity. The shift in the villagers' behavior after crossing the bridge marks the entry into this realm of ritual inversion, where the profane becomes sacred and the sacred becomes obscene.

Perumadan and the Trickster Archetype

Perumadan, the folkloric spirit that misleads travelers, embodies the trickster archetype found across cultures—from Hermes and Loki to Eshu and Anansi. In *Churuli*, Perumadan's manifestation through the pangolin, the villagers, and finally Joy, represents the polymorphic nature of deception itself. Anthropologically, the trickster disrupts order to reveal deeper truths about human behavior—particularly our susceptibility to illusion and corruption.

Repetition, Circularity, and the Mytheme of the Spiral

The recurring motif of the spiral in *Churuli* reflects the anthropological concept of mythic time—non-linear, cyclical, and eternal. The story of the monk repeats in the lives of the policemen, and their journey, in turn, becomes another iteration of the myth. The spiral, both as a visual and structural element, transforms the narrative into an infinite loop,

where escape becomes impossible. This cyclical temporality aligns with Mircea Eliade's notion of 'eternal return,' where myth is reenacted endlessly to sustain the cosmic order—or its illusion.

Language, Vulgarity, and the Collapse of Civilization

One of the most startling aspects of *Churuli* is its linguistic transgression. The villagers' sudden shift into profanity after crossing the bridge marks a ritualistic descent into chaos. In anthropological terms, this is the 'rite of reversal,' a phenomenon observed in festivals and liminal rituals where social hierarchies are temporarily inverted. The collapse of language mirrors the disintegration of the moral order, revealing the primal violence beneath the veneer of civilization.

Dreams, Hallucinations, and Shamanic Consciousness

The film's dream sequences and hallucinatory imagery evoke the anthropology of shamanism. Shajivan's visions of alien figures, spirals, and glowing orbs signify altered states of consciousness—journeys into the mythic dimension. Anthropologically, this represents the shamanic initiation, where the self dissolves to be reborn into new awareness. However, in *Churuli*, the initiation remains incomplete—Shajivan becomes absorbed into the myth rather than transcending it.

Conclusion: The Endless Descent

Ultimately, *Churuli* is a myth about the impossibility of escaping one's own illusion. Its anthropological power lies in its ability to merge the sacred and the obscene, the real and the unreal, into a single continuum. By mapping the film's mythemes—the forest, the trickster, the bridge, the spiral—this paper argues that *Churuli* operates as a modern myth of entrapment. In its circular narrative and linguistic anarchy, Pellissery transforms folklore into a philosophical inquiry into human consciousness itself. The monk is still wandering, as are the policemen, as are we—all trapped in the labyrinth of perception.

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