

An Investigation of the Snake Boats of Kerala as Cultural Heritage

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Abstract

The Snake Boats of Kerala are traditional boats associated with a variety of nonmaterial cultural aspects like myths, rituals, celebrations, and craftsmanship. A cultural heritage-based approach of investigation can highlight how such watercrafts have a meaning above their functional use and how these evolve with the passing of time. This research attempts to investigate and document the origin and evolution of the Snake Boats and articulate them as cultural heritage of Kerala. Using historical and ethnographic research methods, it explores the history and evolution of the Snake Boats from 17th century to present times, noting their continual mutations – from supposed origins of a martial boat, to one of ceremonial significance, to that of a race-boat, and finally emerging as an iconic signifier of the identity and culture of Kerala. Through extensive field surveys, participatory observations, and stakeholder interviews, the research develops twenty-five inventories that methodically documents the two types of Snake Boats evidenced in the contemporary era, along with a systematic documentation of associated objects, structures, sites, and various aspects of nonmaterial culture. The complex inter-relationship and co-dependence of these elements, as established through cultural practitioners, custodians, and other stakeholders, is mapped, and the cultural significance is articulated. In conclusion, the research identifies the way forward, indicating tentative safeguarding measures.

Keywords: Snake Boat, Cultural Heritage of Kerala, Cultural Heritage Resources, Heritage Practitioners, Custodians of Heritage, Culturescape