

## Reinterpreting the Functions of Nērc̣ca in the Present Scenario with Special Reference to Kondotty Nērc̣ca

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**Abstract:** Folk festivals continue to function as vital cultural institutions that sustain collective memory, social cohesion, and symbolic authority in contemporary societies. In the Malabar region of Kerala, Nērc̣ca represents one of the most enduring shrine-centred folk traditions, integrating devotion, ritual performance, economy, and social interaction. This paper examines the contemporary relevance of Nērc̣ca through an in-depth ethnographic analysis of Kondotty Nērc̣ca. Drawing upon fieldwork, oral narratives, and ritual practices documented in the author's doctoral research, the study argues that Nērc̣ca must be understood not merely as a religious observance but as a dynamic social institution. By reinterpreting its multiple functions in the present social order, the paper demonstrates how folk festivals continue to negotiate identity, authority, cultural continuity, and social integration amid rapid socio-economic transformations.

**Keywords:** *Folk Festivals, Nērc̣ca, Nercha, Kondotty Nērc̣ca, Shrine Culture, Community, Identity, Malabar.*

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### Introduction

Folk festivals constitute one of the most enduring mechanisms through which communities organise collective life, ritual time, and cultural meaning. In traditional societies, festivals are not episodic celebrations but structured cultural events that integrate belief, ritual, economy, social relations, and symbolic communication. In Kerala's Malabar region, shrine-centred festivals occupy a distinctive position within the cultural landscape, reflecting the region's plural social ethos and long history of transregional interaction.

Among these festivals, Nērc̣ca continues to retain social vitality despite processes of urbanisation, labour migration, and changing religious sensibilities. Rather than declining, Nērc̣ca has adapted to contemporary conditions while preserving its ritual core. This paper examines Kondotty Nērc̣ca as a representative case to reinterpret the functions of Nērc̣ca in the present scenario, demonstrating how it continues to operate as a living folk institution.

### Literature Review

Scholarly writings on Nērc̣ca and related shrine-centred festivals in Malabar have largely emerged from regional historiography, cultural studies, and ethnographic documentation of Mappila Muslim life. These studies provide essential historical and descriptive foundations but often stop short of analysing the continuing social functions of Nērc̣ca in the contemporary context.

Among local historical accounts, *K.K. Abdul Kareem's* Kondotty Charithram Samskaram offers a concise documentation of Kondotty's historical and cultural background, with particular

attention to the shrine of Kondotty Thangal and the evolution of the Nērc̣ca. Drawing extensively on oral traditions and local memory, the work situates the Nērc̣ca as a central cultural institution in Kondotty, closely linked with community life, moral authority, and ritual continuity.

Anthropological perspectives on Muslim cultural practices in South India are addressed in *Filippo Osella* and *Caroline Osella's* *Muslim Culture in South India*, which examines everyday religious practices, shrine-centred devotion, and public expressions of faith among Muslim communities. Their observations on lived religious practices provide useful contextual insight into the social environment within which Nērc̣ca traditions operate in Malabar.

The cultural and historical roots of Kondotty are further discussed in *Umer Maduvayi's* *Kondottiyude Verukal*, which traces the formation of Kondotty as a cultural space shaped by religious institutions, migration, and collective memory. This work highlights the role of shrine traditions in sustaining local identity and continuity, directly relevant to understanding Kondotty Nērc̣ca as a place-based cultural practice.

A broader survey of Muslim festivals and customary practices in Malabar is presented in *Shakkeela A. Rahiman's* doctoral study, which documents the ritual patterns, social participation, and cultural meanings associated with festivals. Her study provides comparative insight into the structure and functions of Nērc̣ca within the wider festival culture of Malabar Muslims.

Focused documentation of Kondotty Nērc̣ca is found in *Salam Tharammal's* edited volume *Kondotty Nercha: Perumayude Nattulsavam*, which records the ritual sequence, public

participation, and festive character of the Nērc̣ca. The work foregrounds the Nērc̣ca as a collective cultural event that extends beyond devotional practice into the social and economic life of the locality.

While these works collectively establish the historical, cultural, and ritual significance of Nērc̣ca, they remain primarily descriptive. The present paper builds upon this foundation by reinterpreting Nērc̣ca—using ethnographic data from Kondotty Nērc̣ca—as a continuing folk institution whose social functions remain vital within the contemporary social order

## Methodology

The study employs a qualitative folkloristic methodology based on participant observation, oral narratives, ritual documentation, and interviews conducted during Kondotty Nērc̣ca. Data were collected across multiple festival cycles as part of the author's doctoral research. Kondotty Nērc̣ca is analysed as a case study to examine the contemporary functions of Nērc̣ca within changing social contexts.

## Findings and Discussion

### Historical and Cultural Context of Nērc̣ca in Malabar: With Special Reference to Kondotty Nērc̣ca

Nērc̣ca festivals in Malabar emerged from shrine-centred devotional practices associated with saints and sacred figures, functioning as ritualised acts of remembrance and communal participation. Malabar's historical engagement with Indian Ocean trade networks facilitated the diffusion of Sufi devotional traditions, which shaped shrine culture and folk religious practices.

Kondotty Nērc̣ca, associated with the shrine of Kondotty Thangal, has been preserved primarily through oral tradition and collective memory. Ritual narratives emphasise the saint's moral authority and intercessory power, which are reaffirmed annually through offerings, processions, and communal gatherings. Historically, the festival brought together agriculturists, artisans, traders, and later migrant workers, making it a socially integrative event.

The *Chantha* associated with Kondotty Nērc̣ca transformed ritual space into an arena of economic and cultural exchange. Despite colonial regulation and later socio-economic transformations, the festival adapted while retaining its core ritual structure, continuing to function as a cultural anchor in the present social order.

### Major Functions of Nērc̣ca in the Contemporary Social Order

The historical and cultural context of Nērc̣ca in Malabar demonstrates that shrine-centred festivals have never functioned solely as acts of religious devotion. Instead, Nērc̣ca has consistently operated as a multifaceted cultural institution through which communities organise social relationships, transmit cultural knowledge, negotiate authority, and articulate collective identity. In the contemporary social order, these functions have not diminished; rather, they have acquired renewed significance as communities respond to processes of migration, urbanisation, and cultural change.

Nērc̣ca functions simultaneously at ritual, social, economic, and symbolic levels. Its significance lies in its capacity to integrate diverse practices—devotion, performance, exchange, communication, and entertainment—within a single cultural

framework. The following sections examine the major functions of Nērc̣ca as observed in present-day practice, drawing primarily on ethnographic data from Kondotty Nērc̣ca. Rather than treating these functions as discrete or isolated, the analysis approaches them as interconnected processes that collectively sustain the relevance of folk festivals in contemporary society.

### Building Community Identity: Ethnographic Illustrations from Kondotty Nērc̣ca

One of the most visible functions of Kondotty Nērc̣ca is the construction and reinforcement of community identity. During fieldwork, it was observed that families who had migrated to Gulf countries often planned their annual visits to coincide with the Nērc̣ca period. Participation in rituals such as offering *nercha kanikka* (votive offerings) or attending communal prayers functioned as symbolic acts of reaffirming belonging.

Elders frequently narrated stories of past Nērc̣ca celebrations to younger family members during the festival, transforming the event into a site of intergenerational transmission. Through these practices, Kondotty Nērc̣ca operates as a temporal anchor, aligning personal biographies with collective ritual time and reinforcing a shared Māppila identity.

### Protecting Culture through Ritual Continuity

Kondotty Nērc̣ca functions as a mechanism for preserving cultural practices that are otherwise marginalised in everyday life. Ritual songs, oral invocations, and customary offering practices documented in the author's thesis continue to be performed despite the availability of modern religious alternatives.

For instance, specific forms of vow-offering, such as food distribution linked to personal petitions, persist as culturally sanctioned modes of expressing devotion. These practices reinforce traditional belief systems and ensure the survival of folk ritual knowledge through embodied repetition rather than formal instruction.

### Cultural Integration and Inter-folk Communication

One of the most significant yet often under-theorised functions of Nērc̣ca is its capacity to act as a space of cultural integration and inter-group communication. In the social context of Malabar, where religious, occupational, and social identities intersect in complex ways, Nērc̣ca festivals have historically provided a shared cultural platform that facilitates interaction beyond rigid community boundaries. Kondotty Nērc̣ca exemplifies this integrative function by creating a ritual environment in which devotional practice, social exchange, and everyday interaction converge.

Although Kondotty Nērc̣ca is rooted in Muslim shrine tradition, ethnographic evidence from the field indicates that participation in the festival has never been confined exclusively to a single religious group. Hindu and Christian participants have historically engaged with the Nērc̣ca through acts such as offering vows, visiting the shrine for blessings, participating in the festival market, and attending associated performances. These forms of participation do not require theological affiliation but are mediated through shared cultural practices, thereby transforming the Nērc̣ca into a socially inclusive ritual space.

The integrative character of Kondotty Nērc̣ca is particularly evident in the organisation of festival activities. Processions, distribution of blessed food, and market interactions necessitate

cooperation among diverse social groups, including shrine custodians, vendors, artisans, transport workers, and volunteers. Field observations reveal that these interactions foster informal communication networks that cut across occupational and community divisions. For instance, artisans from neighbouring villages, traders from different religious backgrounds, and migrant returnees temporarily converge within the Nēcca space, creating opportunities for dialogue and mutual recognition that extend beyond ritual boundaries.

The Nēcca market (*Chantha*) functions as a crucial site of inter-group communication. Beyond its economic role, the market operates as a social arena where individuals from varied backgrounds engage in everyday interactions through trade, negotiation, and leisure. Conversations initiated in these spaces often extend to discussions about family, work, migration, and local concerns, thereby reinforcing social connectivity. In this sense, the economic dimension of Kondotty Nēcca becomes a vehicle for cultural exchange, allowing diverse groups to interact within a shared temporal and spatial framework.

Cultural integration at Kondotty Nēcca is also facilitated through performative practices such as devotional songs, ritual announcements, and public gatherings. These performative elements employ shared linguistic and cultural idioms that resonate across community lines, enabling participants to engage with the festival even without direct ritual involvement. Younger generations, in particular, experience the Nēcca as a social event that introduces them to plural modes of cultural interaction, reinforcing the festival's role in transmitting values of coexistence and mutual respect.

In the contemporary social order, where communal boundaries are increasingly influenced by political discourse and ideological polarisation, Kondotty Nēcca continues to serve as a counter-space that foregrounds lived interaction over abstract identity categories. The persistence of inter-group participation demonstrates that folk festivals retain the capacity to negotiate social difference through embodied practice rather than formal dialogue. By enabling sustained interaction in a shared ritual setting, Nēcca fosters a form of cultural integration that is experiential, relational, and grounded in everyday social life.

Thus, Kondotty Nēcca exemplifies how folk festivals function as communicative platforms that mediate social relationships and promote cultural integration. Through ritual participation, market exchange, and collective celebration, the festival facilitates inter-group communication and reinforces a plural social ethos that remains relevant in contemporary Malabar society

### **Cultivating Culture through Performance and Practice**

The performative dimensions of Kondotty Nēcca play a crucial role in cultural sensibilities. Processions, ritual music, and public gatherings transform sacred devotion into a collective aesthetic experience. Young participants learn ritual etiquette not through explicit teaching but by observing elders and participating in festival activities.

This mode of cultural cultivation aligns with folkloristic theories that emphasise learning through participation. Kondotty Nēcca thus functions as an informal cultural school, where values, gestures, and meanings are transmitted experientially.

### **Protecting Group Rights and Ritual Authority**

Another significant function of Nēcca in the contemporary social order is its role in protecting collective rights and sustaining forms of ritual authority that operate outside formal institutional frameworks. At Kondotty Nēcca, authority is not imposed through written regulation or hierarchical religious administration but is negotiated and maintained through tradition, collective consent, and ritual continuity. This mode of authority reflects a distinctly folk cultural logic, where legitimacy emerges from shared belief and long-standing practice.

Ethnographic evidence from Kondotty Nēcca indicates that the organisation and regulation of ritual activities—such as the timing of offerings, the management of vow fulfilment, and the conduct of processions—remain largely under the control of local custodians and community elders associated with the shrine. These individuals derive their authority not from formal clerical positions but from inherited responsibility, experiential knowledge, and moral recognition within the community. During fieldwork, devotees consistently referred to these custodians as trustworthy intermediaries capable of ensuring ritual correctness and fairness, underscoring the community-based nature of ritual governance.

Kondotty Nēcca also functions as a space where the community's right to practice its cultural traditions is publicly reaffirmed. The continuation of customary practices—such as specific modes of offering *nercha*, the circulation of blessed food, and the observance of festival etiquette—asserts the community's autonomy over its ritual life. These practices persist despite the increasing influence of reformist religious discourses that often seek to standardise or discourage shrine-centred traditions. The sustained participation in Kondotty Nēcca thus becomes an implicit assertion of cultural rights rooted in collective memory rather than institutional sanction.

Ritual authority at Kondotty Nēcca is further reinforced through the symbolic presence of the saint. Devotees frequently articulate that their obedience to festival norms arises not from fear of social sanction but from reverence for Kondotty Thangal. This moral authority, attributed to the saint, functions as a regulatory mechanism that guides behaviour within the festival space. Acts such as maintaining order during offerings or resolving minor disputes are often justified by reference to the sanctity of the shrine, illustrating how symbolic authority operates effectively within folk ritual contexts.

Importantly, Kondotty Nēcca also mediates conflicts and negotiations related to ritual participation. Field observations reveal that disagreements regarding offerings, spatial arrangements, or procession routes are typically resolved through dialogue facilitated by elders, rather than through external intervention. This conflict-resolution mechanism highlights how Nēcca operates as a cultural forum where collective rights and responsibilities are continuously negotiated and reaffirmed.

In the contemporary social order, where legal and bureaucratic systems increasingly regulate public religious expression, Kondotty Nēcca represents a resilient form of community-based cultural governance. By sustaining ritual authority through tradition, moral legitimacy, and communal consensus, Nēcca protects the rights of the group to define and perform its cultural practices. This function underscores the festival's role not only as a site of devotion but also as a space of

cultural self-determination within changing social and institutional landscapes.

### **Nērc̣ca as an Open Market and Ritual Economy**

An important yet often overlooked function of Nērc̣ca in the contemporary social order is its role as a ritual economy that integrates sacred observance with livelihood practices. At Kondotty Nērc̣ca, economic activity does not exist in opposition to religious devotion; rather, it is embedded within the ritual structure of the festival, transforming sacred space into an open and participatory marketplace. This integration illustrates how folk festivals continue to sustain economic relationships while reinforcing cultural meaning.

Ethnographic observations from Kondotty Nērc̣ca reveal that the temporary *Chantha* established during the festival period functions as a seasonal economic hub for a wide range of participants. Small-scale traders, artisans, food vendors, toy sellers, and performers converge around the shrine, many of whom depend on the Nērc̣ca for a significant portion of their annual income. Vendors interviewed during fieldwork consistently described the festival period as economically crucial, particularly for those engaged in traditional or informal occupations that have limited access to permanent marketplaces.

The ritual economy of Kondotty Nērc̣ca is closely linked to devotional practices. Items sold in the market—such as incense, candles, food offerings, and containers for distributing *nercha*—are not merely commodities but ritual necessities. Their circulation reinforces the relationship between economic exchange and religious obligation. For instance, devotees purchasing food items for vow fulfilment often engage in acts of redistribution by offering meals to fellow participants or the needy, thereby converting economic transactions into expressions of social responsibility and piety.

The Nērc̣ca market also facilitates economic participation across social boundaries. Field data indicate that vendors and customers come from diverse religious and social backgrounds, underscoring the inclusive nature of the festival economy. Hindu and Christian traders regularly participate in the Kondotty Nērc̣ca market, reflecting a long-standing tradition of inter-community economic cooperation. Such interactions transform the market into a space of everyday social negotiation, where economic exchange becomes a medium of cultural communication.

Moreover, the open-market structure of Kondotty Nērc̣ca allows for informal economic learning and intergenerational transmission of livelihood practices. Younger family members frequently assist elders in selling goods or managing stalls, acquiring practical knowledge related to trade, negotiation, and seasonal commerce. This informal apprenticeship, observed repeatedly during fieldwork, highlights how Nērc̣ca functions as a site where economic skills are transmitted alongside cultural values.

In the contemporary context, where formal economic systems often marginalise small-scale and traditional livelihoods, Kondotty Nērc̣ca provides an alternative economic platform rooted in cultural legitimacy. The persistence of the Nērc̣ca market demonstrates that folk festivals continue to play a vital role in sustaining local economies, not as residual practices but as adaptive systems capable of responding to changing social conditions. By integrating devotion, exchange, and social

interaction, the ritual economy of Kondotty Nērc̣ca reinforces the festival's relevance within the present social order.

### **Entertainment, Education, and Cultural Memory**

One of the most understated yet crucial functions of Nērc̣ca in the contemporary social order is its role as a space where entertainment and informal education intersect to facilitate cultural transmission. At Kondotty Nērc̣ca, entertainment does not exist as a separate or peripheral activity; rather, it is structurally embedded within the ritual framework of the festival. Performative elements, public gatherings, and the festive atmosphere collectively create an environment where cultural knowledge is transmitted through participation, observation, and shared experience.

Ethnographic observations from Kondotty Nērc̣ca reveal that children and younger participants are often introduced to shrine culture not through formal instruction but through exposure to festival activities. The visual spectacle of ritual processions, the rhythmic soundscape created by devotional songs and announcements, and the vibrant setting of the Nērc̣ca *Chantha* collectively function as an immersive learning environment. Children accompanying elders to the shrine learn appropriate modes of behaviour—such as methods of offering vows, etiquette within shrine space, and the symbolic meanings attached to ritual objects—by imitation rather than explicit teaching. This process aligns with folkloristic models of informal education, where learning occurs through embodied participation within cultural contexts.

Entertainment at Kondotty Nērc̣ca also takes narrative forms. During the festival period, elders frequently recount stories related to Kondotty Thangal, the origin of the shrine, and miraculous interventions attributed to the saint. These narratives are often shared casually—in tea stalls near the shrine, within family groups resting after rituals, or while waiting for offerings to be distributed. Such storytelling transforms leisure moments into pedagogical encounters, embedding historical memory and moral values within everyday conversation. Through repetition across festival cycles, these narratives become internalised as part of collective cultural knowledge.

The Nērc̣ca market further enhances this educative dimension. While the *Chantha* provides entertainment through toys, games, sweets, and performances that attract children and youth, it simultaneously familiarises them with the traditional festival economy. Field data indicate that young participants often assist elders in purchasing ritual items or selling goods, thereby learning economic practices associated with folk festivals. This engagement introduces them to concepts of reciprocity, seasonal trade, and the relationship between ritual obligation and livelihood—knowledge rarely transmitted through formal education systems.

Importantly, entertainment at Kondotty Nērc̣ca serves to sustain intergenerational interaction. Public performances and festive gatherings draw together individuals across age groups, creating opportunities for dialogue between elders and youth. In such spaces, cultural values related to devotion, respect for saints, and communal responsibility are communicated subtly, without didactic instruction. The pleasure associated with festival participation ensures that cultural learning is experienced positively, increasing the likelihood of continuity.

In the contemporary context, where digital entertainment and mediated forms of leisure dominate everyday life, Kondotty Nērc̣ca offers an alternative cultural pedagogy rooted in physical presence and communal interaction. The festival thus functions as a living classroom, where entertainment becomes a vehicle for education and cultural memory. By integrating pleasure with learning, Kondotty Nērc̣ca ensures that folk knowledge remains relevant and accessible, reinforcing the festival's role as a sustainable cultural institution in the present social order

### **Nērc̣ca in the Contemporary Social Order**

In the present social order, Kondotty Nērc̣ca exemplifies the adaptability of folk festivals. While incorporating modern organisational practices and media visibility, the festival retains its ritual logic and cultural significance. Nērc̣ca mediates between tradition and modernity, enabling communities to negotiate social change without abandoning inherited cultural forms.

### **Conclusion**

This study has demonstrated that Nērc̣ca, as exemplified by Kondotty Nērc̣ca, continues to function as a vital folk institution within the contemporary social order. Far from being a residual or declining ritual form, Nērc̣ca actively mediates between devotion, culture, economy, and social relations, reaffirming its relevance in a rapidly transforming society. Through an examination of its historical roots and present-day practices, the paper has shown that Nērc̣ca sustains collective memory while simultaneously accommodating change.

The analysis reveals that the significance of Nērc̣ca lies in its multifunctional character. It operates as a site for the construction of community identity, where individuals and families reaffirm their sense of belonging through ritual participation and shared remembrance. At the same time, it serves as a mechanism for protecting and transmitting cultural practices that are largely absent from formal institutional frameworks. Through embodied performance, oral narratives, and ritual repetition, cultural knowledge is preserved and communicated across generations.

Furthermore, Kondotty Nērc̣ca illustrates how folk festivals function as spaces of cultural integration and social communication. The festival's inclusive nature allows participation beyond rigid religious and social boundaries, reinforcing Malabar's plural cultural ethos. Its open ritual economy, manifested through temporary markets and performance spaces, underscores the interdependence of sacred practice and livelihood, revealing how folk festivals continue to sustain local economies and social networks.

In the contemporary context marked by migration, media influence, and changing modes of religious expression, Nērc̣ca functions as a temporal and symbolic anchor. It reconnects dispersed community members to their cultural roots and aligns individual life cycles with collective ritual time. The persistence of Kondotty Nērc̣ca thus highlights the adaptive capacity of folk traditions, demonstrating how they negotiate continuity and transformation without losing their core cultural meanings.

By situating Nērc̣ca within broader discussions of folklore, ritual, and social order, this study contributes to an understanding of folk festivals as dynamic cultural processes rather than static survivals. The findings suggest that Nērc̣ca remains a powerful medium through which communities articulate identity, authority, and belonging in the present scenario. Future research may further explore comparative shrine festivals across regions to deepen insights into the evolving role of folk traditions in contemporary society.

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