House as Ritual: Stories of Gender, Space, and Caste in Colonial Kerala

Devi Nayar
devi.nayar@yale.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/envdesign

Part of the Environmental Design Commons

Recommended Citation
https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/envdesign/6

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Yale School of Architecture at EliScholar – A Digital Platform for Scholarly Publishing at Yale. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters of Environmental Design Theses by an authorized administrator of EliScholar – A Digital Platform for Scholarly Publishing at Yale. For more information, please contact elischolar@yale.edu.
House as Ritual: *Stories of Gender, Space, and Caste in Colonial Kerala*

DEVI NAYAR

A Thesis submitted to the faculty of the School of Architecture in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of: Master of Environmental Design.

11 April 2022

Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen (Primary Advisor)

Helen Siu (Secondary Advisor)

Helen Siu (Reader)

Keller Easterling (Chair)
Acknowledgements

I am indebted to many exceptional people for bringing this thesis to fruition. My advisor, Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen, has been pivotal in helping me think outside the box. Eeva has also been a source of inspiration. I thank Eeva for her encouragement, support, and fascinating conversations on spatial practices, domesticity, and the need to question global frameworks and dig deeper into micro histories. I am equally indebted to Keller Easterling and Helen Siu for their support and guidance. Keller’s invaluable feedback has been critical in my research and steered me to step into the study with both courage and curiosity. My secondary advisor Helen Siu nurtured and encouraged me to ground my analysis through sound reasoning and intricate ethnographic work. I would also like to thank Alan Plattus and Kishwar Rizvi for their valuable feedback and encouragement.

The fieldwork and archival research, including the short film, would not have taken off had it not been for four architects who worked hard on the ground in Kerala. I am deeply indebted to Mamtha Iyer, Prashanth MS, Annet Edwin, and Hannah Mathew for their extraordinary work both on the sites and in the archives. Despite the challenging times of a global pandemic, they went over and beyond to sift through thousands of records, travel across the state, hold interviews, and film with rigor and passion. Access to certain sites and interviews would not have been possible without Subrahmannian Thekkumparamb Narayanan, who extended much support in contacting interlocutors and house owners. I am very grateful to him for his sincere efforts to make it happen. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Jennifer Strtak at the Poorvo Graduate Writing Lab for shaping my writing and the long hours spent reading my work. The archivist at Trivandrum State Archives, Nandakumar, was also crucial in enabling easy access to the archives, especially during the pandemic, and I am grateful to him.

I also extend my gratitude to my MED colleagues: Tianyi Hang, Mila Samdub, Alex Klein, MC Overholt, Laura Pappalardo, Alex Kim, Cayce Davis, Brunno Douat, Juliana Biancardine, and George Papamatthaiakis for their critical inputs, interest in my work and constant support.

I was blessed with two grants that funded my study. The Yale Macmillan Center's South Asian Studies Council Fellowship and the Yale Center for Study of Race, Indigeneity, and Transnational Migration (RITM) grant supported archival research, filming, and fieldwork remotely.

Finally, I thank my father and stepmother for believing in me, for being ever ready to help with problematic translations at untimely hours, and for passing on memories of being a Nayar and a Nambuthiri.
## Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... 3  
Glossary: ........................................................................................................................................... 4  
Prologue: ........................................................................................................................................... 10  
Introduction: ....................................................................................................................................... 24  
Site One: Olappamanna Mana: Touring the Nambuthiri’s Illam ...................................................... 44  
Site Two: Thkkeparambu Illam: .......................................................................................................... 77  
Site Three: Madapullikalam House ..................................................................................................... 82  
Site Four: Puravankara Tarawad ......................................................................................................... 136  
Colonialism & Aftermath: .................................................................................................................. 148  
Conclusion ......................................................................................................................................... 170  
Interview Excerpts: ............................................................................................................................ 177  
Bibliography........................................................................................................................................ 180
Abstract

Kerala, the southwestern state of Independent India, had gained its distinct architectural heritage by the time the British East India Company began colonizing India in the 17th century. Upper caste Nambuthiris and Nayars organized their agrarian homesteads — four-winged courtyard houses with gender as their axis of internal regulation. Although the house layout remained the same, the gendered inhabitation varied based on caste. On their arrival, British colonists began reordering and reshaping this native cosmos into a perceived anglicized 'normative'. The existing political and social terrains were fractured, revised, and reworked to create an anglicized model of society. The joint family system of the agrarian society was fragmented through top-down urban policies, thus impacting the lived spaces of the natives. It changed how families lived their daily lives and had a long-lasting impact on Kerala's traditional culture's social and physical landscape. It ultimately altered the choreography of Kerala's domesticity.

In this thesis, I take a closer look at the agrarian houses and trace the alterations to the spatial organization and domestic practices of these homes through colonial intervention. My period of study covers the mid-19th to mid-20th century as this period represented the beginning of a shift in Kerala society: from a traditional agrarian society built on a joint kinship structure to a market model that encouraged nuclear family arrangements. Through an interdisciplinary methodology, my approach is to analyze space through the lens of anthropology. I compared existing house layouts with archived blueprints to study temporal alterations and gendered divisions. I parsed archival records such as marriage acts, judiciary records of family disputes, property rights, and land committee reports to find evidence of how the abolishment of feudalism and women's empowerment led to changes in the domestic sphere. I employed oral histories as a road map to locate pertinent records and reconstruct past spatial practices.

By combining architectural history and theory with the anthropology of dwelling, this study attempts to open the conversation on broader practices relating to State making and domestic spatial production in developing countries. Today as Kerala further adopts neoliberal policies, the housing patterns have altered to accommodate new modes of living. By focusing on the case of agrarian homesteads in Kerala, this study explores spatial production under the weight of a matrix of socio-cultural, political, and economic forces that continue to evolve in the global south.

---

1 The British endeavored to transform the native urban fabric into an English model. They encouraged the growth of commercial ties, administrative reforms, and nuclear family models that reflected English society and its structures.
Glossary:

A:

Antharjanam: The female counterpart of a male Nambuthiri Brahmin.

Ayaniyoonu: A process before marriage, of having traditional bathing and lunch, at an auspicious time.

Adukala: Kitchen

B:

Bhagavathy: is a word of Sanskrit origin, used in India as a polite form to address or as an honorific title for female deities in Hinduism. The male equivalent of Bhagavatī is Bhagavān. The term “Bhagavati” can be used instead of Devi or Ishvari.

Bhramaswom: Lands owned by Kerala Brahmins or Nambuthiris.

C:

Chengannur: is a Municipality in the Alappuzha district of Kerala State, India. It is located in the extreme eastern part of the Alappuzha district, on the banks of Pamba River.

Cheriya adukala: Cheriya denotes small. Cheriya adukala is a small kitchen.

Chinakathoor Pooram: is an annual festival, which is celebrated in temples dedicated to goddesses Durga or Kali held especially in Valluvanadu area and other adjoining parts of north-central Kerala (Present Palakkad, Thrissur, Kannur, Kasaragod and Malappuram districts) after the summer harvest.

Choroonu: First rice feeding ceremony for the new born child.

D:

Desom: The subdivision of a Nadu, which is a kingdom. Smaller units for easier control and domination.

Devaswom: (transl: “belonging to God”) are socio-religious trusts in India, whose members are nominated by the government and community. They oversee Hindu temples and their assets to ensure their smooth operation in accordance with traditional rituals and customs. The devaswom system notably exists in the state of Kerala, where most temples are either managed by Government of Kerala-controlled devaswoms or private bodies or families. The properties of each temple are deemed to be the personal property of the presiding deity of the temple, and are managed through a body of trustees who bear allegiance to that deity.
Devathanam: Lands owned by temples.

Dharmashastras: (Sanskrit: “Righteousness Science”) ancient Indian body of jurisprudence that is the basis, subject to legislative modification, of the family law of Hindus. Dharma-shastra is primarily concerned not with legal administration, though courts and their procedures are dealt with comprehensively, but with the right course of conduct in every dilemma.

E:

Ettukettu: A traditional Kerala dwelling with eight halls and two central courtyards.

G:

Ganapathy Homam: is a ritual dedicated to Lord Ganesha, performed to seek his blessings and achieve success before imparting on any venture. As per Hinduism, the grace of Lord Ganesha can remove obstacles in life and fulfill any task that you are undertaking.

Goddess Parvathy: is the Hindu goddess of power, nourishment, harmony, devotion, and motherhood. She is Devi in her complete form. She is the principal goddess of Hindus.

Gothram: is considered to be equivalent to lineage. It broadly refers to people who are descendants in an unbroken male line from a common male ancestor or patriline. Generally, the gotra forms an exogamous unit, with marriage within the same gotra being regarded as incest and prohibited by custom. The name of the gotra can be used as a surname, but it is different from a surname and is strictly maintained because of its importance in marriages among Hindus, especially among castes.

H:

Homams: rituals where offerings such as ghee, grass and seeds amongst many other sacred symbolic elements were placed into a sacrificial fire.

I:

Idayas, Villavas and Pulayas: Tribal groups of Kerala

Illams: Namboothiri houses (Brahmaalayam, Mana, illam) were built invariably according to the canons of Vaasthusaasthram (Vaasthuvidya priciples, the science and art - architecture - of building in harmony with the eternally active, creative, and all pervasive 'Spirit' and 'Nature') and in conformity and proportion with the usually large compound or plot.

Irikkanamas: Inferior Nayar women who served the upper caste Brahmin women.

J:

Jenmi system: landed aristocracy
K:

Kaanipayur: is a family of Vedic experts and astrologers in Kerala.

Kalam Ezhuthi Pattu: The ‘kalam’ is a unique drawing also called ‘dhulee chithram’ or powder drawing. The artist uses the floor as his canvas. Kalamezhuthu pattu is performed as part of the rituals to worship and propitiate gods like Kaali, Ayyappan or Vettakkorumakan.

Kalari: is an Indian martial art. It is believed to be the oldest surviving martial art in India, with a history spanning over 3,000 years.

Kanthallur Utsavam: Utsavam refers to a celebratory festival with pomp and show. Kanthallur is the name of a place.

Kizhaku: East

Kochukalapuraiyidum: A Nayar house located in Kanam, a district in central Kerala.

Koodiyatam: Also known as “combined act,” it is a traditional performing art form in the state of Kerala, India. It is a combination of ancient Sanskrit theatre with elements of Koothu, an ancient performing art from the Sangam era.

Koothu: is an ancient art, where artists play songs with dance and music in storytelling the epics.

Lord Parasuraman: is the sixth incarnation of the god Vishnu in Hinduism. He is known as the ‘Rama holding the axe.’

M:

Makathayam: was a system of patrilineal inheritance. This was practiced mainly among the Nambuthir Brahmins.

Mana or Madhom; Another name for a Nambuthiri’s family home or illam.

Marumakkathayam: was a system of matrilineal inheritance prevalent in regions what now form part of the southern Indian state Kerala. Descent and the inheritance of property was traced through females. It was followed by all Nair castes, Ambalavasi and tribal groups. The elder male was considered the head known as karanavar and the entire assets of the family were controlled by him as if he was the sole owner. The properties were not handed to his sons but to the daughters of his sons or to their sisters.

Mundu: A mundu is a white cotton cloth tied around the waist. The traditional costume for men and women.

N:
Naalukettu: A traditional Kerala house for the upper-caste community which has a single central courtyard with four wings or halls.

Nada: A “nada” is the house or innermost shrine that houses the temple deity.

Nadu: refers to a kingdom, the large region under which a “desom” would be defined.

Nambuthiris: also transliterated as Nampoothiri, Nambūdiri, Namboodiri, Nampoothiri, and Nampūtiri, are a Malayali Brahmin caste, native to what is now the state of Kerala, India, where they constituted part of the traditional feudal elite, owning a large portion of the land in the region of Malabar until the Kerala Land Reforms starting in 1957,[1] and intermarrying with the Nair monarchs and aristocracy through sambandham.

Nayar: Upper-caste group in Kerala, known for their martial arts, polygamous lifestyle and matrilineal descent system.

P:

Padinaarukettu: is a traditional Kerala house that had sixteen halls and four central courtyards.

Padinjatu: West

Padipura: Gatehouse to the house.

Panchayat: Traditionally, Panchayats consisted of wise and respected elders chosen and accepted by the local community. These assemblies settled disputes between both individuals and villages. However, there were varying forms of such assemblies.

Pandrendukettu: is a traditional Kerala house that had twelve halls and three central courtyards.

Pathayapura: A building where grains were stored and also facilitated as the men’s living quarters.

Pathinnaadi Antharjanam: Antharjanam denotes the female Kerala Brahmin and Pathinnaadi refers to the wife of a Somayaagi Brahmin who has acquired the status of a Vedic priest.

Pooja (puja): is a worship ritual performed by Hindus to offer devotional homage and prayer to one or more deities, to host and honour a guest, or to spiritually celebrate an event.

Prasad: Ritual offerings such as flowers and sweets are considered blessings.
Rameshwaram Koil: is a popular Hindu temple dedicated to Lord Shiva located in Rameswaram, now in the state of Tamil Nadu.

Sabha pothuval: The word “sabha” denotes an assembly. Pothuval is a caste of Ambalavasis (Brahmins with non-priestly duties) in Kerala. Ambalavasis are broadly grouped into the sacred thread (Upanayana) wearing castes and the non-threaded castes, and Pothuvals belong to the latter group. The males were usually employed as managers, accountants or store-keepers in temples.

Salas: educational institutions or schools for Brahmins.

Samanjitha: a temple accountant whose duties included the maintenance of temple expenditure, the custody of the treasure chest and the daily reading of the expenditure details to the devotees gathered for the evening prayers.

Samudaya Bharanam: refers to ruling the people and society as a whole.

Sekom: A rite to be performed just before the first sexual intercourse after marriage.

Shodasakriyakal: refers to sixteen rites to be performed by all Nambuthiris. A Nambuthiri male member, after performing these sixteen Grihya (or household) rites, becomes eligible to perform Sroutha rites like Yaagams. Some of them are meant also for female members.

Shudham-ashudham: Namboothiris were traditionally very fastidious about cleanliness - Sudham and Asudham, almost to a level of obsession, so much so the concept of cleanliness got absorbed and strictly codified into their daily routine and integrated into the overall caste system. Sudham means cleanliness and Asudham, pollution or defilement. Ayitham is the colloquial form of the Sanskrit word Asudham. If one gets Ayitham or polluted, bathing is necessary to return to Sudham. Depending on the environment or reason for Asudham, the degree of pollution varies. Accordingly, the remedial exercise also vary.

Shudras: The lowest rung in the caste hierarchy in Kerala.

Sroutha: The word “Sroutha,” rooted in Hindu scriptures, is used to describe a ritualistic person or practice.

Taalikettu: is a marriage ceremony which denotes tying of the wedlock. The rituals vary between Nambuthiris and Nayars for tying the wedlock on the bride by the groom.
Tarawad: is a Malayalam word for ancestral home, usually used as the common house for the joint family system practised in Kerala, India. Hermann Gundert in his Malayalam—English dictionary published in 1872, lists tharavad as "ancestral residence of land-owners, kings" and also as "a house, chiefly of noblemen". Contemporary usage of the word is now more generic to all social classes.

Thekku: South

V:

Vaastu Shastra: The Science of dwelling

Vadakekettu: Lunch hall for Namboothiris for noon meals.

Vadakku: North

Variyam: Executive Committee of two persons to administer temple affairs for a specific period of time

Vastu Purusha: The foundation man who is referenced in the science of dwelling and its theories.

Vastu Purusha Mandala: a metaphysical square divided into a grid of 81 equal parts provided the mathematical and diagrammatic basis for the house layout

Velichapad: were “oracle men.” They were believed to be men of the Goddess and were mediums through which the Goddess would communicate with the people. Their performance in temples was usually combined with trance-based enactments where they uttered messages directly from the Goddesses

Y:

Yaagams: Vedic fire sacrificial rituals

[Note: All definitions provided in this glossary have been sourced from scholarly works, books and websites.]
Prologue:

In this study, I chronicle life in the agrarian homes of upper caste communities — Nambuthiris and Nayars in the southern Indian state of Kerala. I trace how traditional spatial practices in their homes gave way to a colonial interpretation of dwelling, ultimately transforming the way people lived. I examine the houses, often called "Naalukettu" — the hallmark dwelling unit of high caste Nambuthiris and Nayars — intertwined with gender, ritual, superstition, sorcery, and a pantheon of Gods and Goddesses for members of the highest caste. My period of study is from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, where this domestic transformation was most visible as the region moved away from an agrarian to a market economy.

The slim littoral state of Kerala, along the southwestern coast of India, had teemed with mini chiefdoms and their architecture that typified society’s caste structure and echoed its religious beliefs, superstitions, and myth in plenty. Historians speculate that this courtyard house began emerging on the arrival of the Brahmins into this region around the 8th C.E. Although very little information is available on the origins of these houses, historians have traced the evolution of these four-winged agrarian houses as a natural evolution to single-unit dwellings of the lower-castes.\(^2\) Operated on ritualistic concepts and practices that outlined gender roles through a ceremonial lens and caste-based kinship structures, these houses had four quarters centered on a courtyard and multiple axillary buildings that supported them functionally. Set in acres of agricultural land which provided them with sustenance, these homesteads thrived through centuries until the early twentieth century. Together with their people and land, these

\(^2\) *Manushyalaya Chandrika* the prime regional treatise on residential architecture provides classification of dwellings based on the number of wings and their assembly. Ekashala, dwishala, trishala and chatushala denote one, two, three or four rectangular spaces assembled together to create a dwelling of a given caste or community. Further information can be found in: Balagopal T. S .Prabhu. "Kerala Architecture". Kerala Council for Historical Research. Archived from the original on 21 July 2011.
houses could be taken as a cosmological node. That is, the inhabitants, both Nambuthiris and Nayars, held a robust set of belief systems and associated themselves as people with authentic religious affiliations. Moreover, the land, which is Kerala today, also had its mythological origins. According to Hindu legends, this land was reclaimed from the ocean and gifted to Nambuthiris when the sixth avatar of Lord Vishnu flung an axe into the water. Together they came to be a self-sustaining cosmology that operated on beliefs and was maintained on religious principles. However, this node subsequently ruptured. As the British began to introduce new laws from 17th century onwards from Marriage Acts to land practices, this cosmological node immersed in rituals and ceremonies found itself losing prominence in the native’s lives. Ultimately, as a result the once impartible entity became a partible real-estate artifact. Following independence form the British in late 1940s, Kerala became a communist state in 1957. After almost thirty years of communist governance, the state began to adopt neoliberal policies in the 1990s. Assuming the position of a developmental state, Kerala has thus embraced since 2000 what the historian and feminist J Devika calls an “infrastructural imagination,” which is most evident in the newly emerging high rise apartment complexes, gated communities, and tarred highways.

3 Although Nambuthiris and Nayars formed the high caste groups, other lower caste groups and tribes too existed in society. This study focuses on the upper caste mainly as their house layout becomes an inspiration and status symbol for other communities, at a later period. In fact, the power play is also most visible in these upper-caste homes.


Although Nambuthiris and Nayars formed the high caste groups, other lower caste groups and tribes too existed in society. This study mainly focuses on the upper caste as their house layout became an inspiration for different groups and reflected status. The power dynamics between not only gender but also caste are most visible in these upper-caste homes. As the fascination with western-style housing continues to rise, small pockets of ancient agrarian homesteads are left to their own accord. These three hundred plus-year-old houses, aged into the twenty-first century, still sustain vestiges of ancient social practices while being inhabited by a new generation of owners who embrace unique lifestyles and imageries from abroad. As the state rushes its citizens to align with new housing models through real estate mobilizations, it conveniently looks the other way, ignoring these ‘relics’ as mere misfits in the new housing regime. However, a sizable number of homesteads remain that manage to sustain and practice the past with ritualistic fervor sans caste. In so doing, they re-appropriate the past ways of inhabiting space. In an attempt to resist change, they persist through time by re-evoking the ceremonial aspects that helped them create their home in the past.

To grasp a sense of this upper caste community's life until the twentieth century, it is crucial to foreground some of the critical social factors that they hinge upon, such as caste, religion, and rituals. The “house” — as we know it today — did not exist here prior to this period. Surely there was the material artifact - embellished with aesthetically driven architectural elements such as timber roofs, clay tiles, carved ornate columns, and such. And while it mirrored the materiality of an architectural edifice, it beheld a unique set of beliefs drawn from mythology and religion. It could then be understood as a microcosm of daily living — layered with customs and rituals — practices that hinged on caste norms and religion. Such practices outlined gender roles and gave the house its meaning. That is to say; in the absence of caste and its allies such as
ceremonies and beliefs peppered with mythology and superstitions, the house as a material artifact was empty of meaning.

Simply put, rituals that stemmed from caste norms and beliefs gave men and women specific roles. These performative roles combined created a kinship structure that shaped the operations within the home, ultimately defining the space itself. In fact, it is safe to say the house was a ritual — passed onto future generations, posing under the veneer of ancestral inheritance, impartible and definitely not real-estate. This was a unique world, and it was in the crux of its complexity that the house stood.

A close reading of the social aspects of these communities is necessary to understand how the house interacted with the people’s identity. There is no doubt that these spaces were highly gendered. Yet, unpacking the living patterns within the house necessitates a deeper understanding of intangible concepts such as caste norms, myths, and belief systems. Much of what this study pursued revealed that gender here was a "practice" than a social construct — one that merged with spatial patterns of living, where rules and interpretations varied even within the same community according to the space and ritual at hand. For instance, most temples banished menstruating women from entering their sacred environment. Yet, the natives could celebrate the menstruation cycle of the Goddess Parvathy in the renowned Chengannur temple\(^6\) situated in the town of Alappuzha that dedicated an entire festival to her. Such instances, brimming with oddity, mysticism, and a ritualistic fervor, shape the narratives in my study. In the same manner, this work highlights the spatial practices that define women’s role within Kerala's agrarian houses, which offer a unique perspective of how gender is produced within and through spatialized

rituals, They defy both Western conceptions of gender as well as binaries such as modern and traditional. Intricately associated with its anthropology of dwelling, this architecture evokes the fluidity of both spatial concepts and boundaries. Even as the society has changed, these historical sites and life in them still exist in present-day Kerala, where the conventional ways of living are being re-appropriated by the native population.

The Kerala house was at once material and immaterial as its internal and external architecture hinged on the rituals, beliefs, and superstitions that emerged from this caste-based society, which relied on a joint family system as a main unit of agricultural economy. Rituals engulfed and permeated people's lives, translating lives into a spatial language sculpted through complicated gender roles, which entailed matriarchal landownership as well as polygamy. As a result, these houses and the society they entailed were frequently misinterpreted by the colonial state — this confused sentiment was echoed in their attempts to dissect and categorize the native Malabari's living practices; which seemed incoherent to them. For example, precolonial sightings of the polygamous life of the Nayar women equally piqued the interest of many foreign travelers leading them to romanticize these practices without fully comprehending their underlying meaning or associations with living practices and kinship structure.

I take note that by the mid-twentieth century, a slow metamorphosis in Kerala's upper-caste domestic life had become commonplace. It was visibly more "anglicized,"7 as the British colonial state had hoped it would become. Standardized housing and nuclear family units began emerging, replacing Kerala's iconic agrarian homesteads. Until then, these historic homesteads

---

7 The British endeavored to transform the native urban fabric into an English model. They encouraged the growth of commercial ties, administrative reforms, and nuclear family models that reflected English society and its structures
were a self-sustaining ecology — a constellation of buildings with its main courtyard house and supporting smaller axillary buildings set amidst acres of agrarian land.

Before Colonial intervention, there was a lack of sources that elaborated the Nayars’ cultural and social life. Although before the 17th century, foreigners such as the Portuguese traveler Duarte Barbosa have chronicled the polygamous life of Nayar women in detail, it was during the British colonial period that a serious undertaking of recording Nayar customs and rituals came into play. While I rely on the British anthropological records from early 1900 that I also draw from more recent works of anthropologists who have taken an interest in the relationship between these houses and their kinship structure. These studies that began in the postcolonial period are ethnographic works that often reflect the Nayar traditions through a western lens. It is their analysis that I depend on to make my connections and arguments of gendered space in a conventional Nayar setting. Key among these are F. Fawcett, a British anthropologist who produced records for the Madras Museum in the 1900s; Melinda Moore, who conducted fieldwork in many Kerala villages in the 1980s; and Kathleen Gough, who worked on Nayar kinship structure between 1947 to 1949 in Malabar. While Fawcett elaborates on the Nayar customs and rituals overall, Gough is renowned for her take on Nayar matriliny.

On the other hand, Moore spatially connects the house and land with traditions, providing this study with a lens to examine the gendered aspects of such spaces. In addition, the late 1900s saw a handful of architects and historians, particularly Prof. Raj Mohan Shetty and Denise Lawrence. They also contribute to an anthropological relationship between space and kinship — some of which I foreground in this study. Even as I depend on these scholarly works, this study does give significance to many of the literary works of Malabar writers and poets such as Kamala Das and MT Vasudevan Nair, who were both born at the brink of India's independence.
Whether in the form of a novel or poetry, their work was often semi-autobiographical and offered an affective depth to my study. Lastly, oral histories that I collect from the house owners stand as testimonies to the distant past and as a way to reconstruct practices spatially.

While the legacy of Nayar women's polygamy has been exhaustively addressed, less noted are the domestic lives of their female counterparts, the Nambuthiri women, also known as *Antharjanams*. They have also not been included in social and ritual studies partly because their participation in rituals was marginal and partly because they lived more secluded lives. Apart from a few Finnish Indologists and ethnographers such as architectural scholar Henri Schildt, Indologist Asko Parpola, and anthropologist Marjatta Parpola, whose documentation of the Nambuthiri illams and their women primarily during the 1970s have gained prominence, much of the focus remained on Nayar families. This lack of sources is one reason, in addition to oral histories, I also rely on literary works of Antharjanams, Devaki Nilayamgode, and Lalithambika Antharjanam. They wrote literary memoirs on their lives in Nambuthiri illams. Considered significant in Malayalam literature, their works add to my study, offering a window into the daily spatial practices in their homesteads.

To be sure, native spatial living intertwined in ritual, gender, and caste beliefs was not easy to unpack into simple concepts. This becomes evident in the many attempts by colonists and scholars alike to simplify their understanding of the nature of domesticity in Kerala. The nineteenth century saw a keen interest in doing so and the methodical interrogation by foreigners, mainly the British, who assumed that caste and religion were the sociological keys to “knowing” India.\(^8\) Through census collection and the documentation of social hierarchies and

differences in Indian society, the colonial state after the 1860s generated numerous ethnographic studies of castes and tribes.\textsuperscript{9} *Anthropology, Nayars of Malabar*, published in 1901 by the Madras Government Museum, was one such record. Identifying the different castes entailed recording all facets of community life from customs, traditions, habitation styles to facial and body measurements, such as the configuration of the nasal notch, quantity of hair on each body—according to age, and stature, to name a few. The differences among castes determined by nasal and cephalic indices were further cemented by distinctions and similarities in the rituals and customs of these groups.\textsuperscript{10} In addition, the text’s chapters were also dedicated to astrology, magic, and witchcraft. Spirits — evil and beneficent also fared a spot in these documents. By dissecting caste-based living of the Nayars and Nambuthiris — communities whose habitation processes form the core of my study—the colonial state compartmentalized deeply intricate habitation practices of the natives into definitions and concepts in an effort to make sense of them. This attempt to normalize should be set aside when reading Kerala's architecture, for it becomes reductive and obscures the complexities of gender and space that it offers.

Therefore, my study is significant on two accounts — first, it provides an alternate perspective on the alliance between gender and space that departs from global assumptions and classifications. Second, it allows us to better understand the impact of foreign influence such as the colonial state, its goals of urbanization and state making, and the ways in which foreign influence played an active role in diminishing the power of rituals, customs, and beliefs that paved the way for kinship structures to metamorphose, gradually leading to alternate processes of habitation.

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid
Until the mid-twentieth century, the built environment in Kerala was the material marker of caste. They were also important sites for living and experiencing caste. But caste mandated explicit ways of orchestration. With family at the core of the social unit, gender and kinship hierarchies played a quintessential role in expressing notions of caste through the domestic sphere. The Kerala house can thus be understood as a site of active negotiation between gender and caste marked by "mutual accommodation" and encapsulated in mystic rituals.

Caste and its accompanying rituals were essential to these communities until its abolition in the mid-twentieth century. The everyday lives of these communities began with the sounds of devotional chants and the ringing of copper bells, emanating from nearby temples, which set the tone for daily rituals and practices in their own homes. With the Nambuthiris obeying a patrilineal theme (known as Makathayam) and the Nayars, a matrilineal, (known as Marumakkathayam) we find these houses brimming with commanding men, feisty womenfolk, Goddess worship, devotion, polygamy, martial arts, festivities surrounding agricultural land and comestibles, spiritual performances, and scriptural orations. Therefore, these houses are an iconic representation of lived practices where the inhabitants outlined gender roles through a ceremonial lens.

What this architecture had to offer was hiding in plain sight, refusing to contain itself within defined binaries — indiscernible to the foreign mind. These distinct architectural and social environments grouped together make this traditional house a complex entity with various social and spiritual elements collectively manifesting spatially. More specifically, one cannot understand Kerala architecture by isolating its material, aesthetic and social configurations. This

---

is because the natives had developed a far more complex idea of space which is not as much a physical manifestation as an expression of rituals. Therefore, it offers a valuable setting from which scholars can delve deeper into notions of spatiality and its tie with gender.

What is more interesting is that the spaces are masterfully juxtaposed in a manner that challenge western gender hierarchies and relations. For example, in the Nayar houses, a matrilineal form of inheritance allowed women property rights. The womenfolk lived in the main house, and the Nayar men inhabited the external axillary buildings, aligned with this concept. Yet, the dwelling process around which daily rituals were founded necessitated the women to embrace gendered roles, such as matronly figures who nurtured their men. Therefore, despite dominating the house, the womenfolk did not hold much authority beyond that which was spatial. Such ceremonial rituals further shaped the anthropology of dwelling in these houses, making way for a fluid gendered living form and allowing ritual norms to mold them.

Whether from the Aristotlian concept of space, the universal notions developed by Galileo, the philosophical perspectives offered by Descartes, or discourses on the psychological and embodied spatial experiences; the western theories of space are many and evolving. Kerala architecture is, therefore, a potent site to push boundaries on deepening our understanding of this changing concept of space. In my attempts to understand Kerala's upper-caste domestic architecture, it became evident that social and religious elements such as caste beliefs, peoples’ identity, rituals and ceremonies played a crucial role in its development. The houses of Kerala demonstrate this by being malleable in their uses and their accommodation of society’s rules and expectations.

---

There is an autobiographic side to my story as well. In addition to my fieldwork in 2021 in a few select sites, which were prominent agrarian houses built almost one hundred and fifty years ago, I have memories of personal visits to Kerala during my childhood. These visits during the late 1990s provide me with a glimpse into the remnants of an ancient world that co-existed with a neoliberal state, which Kerala was positioning itself at the time—evoking my interest in this study.

Visiting Kerala in my childhood summers from the Middle East always evoked mixed emotions. My brother and I would be transplanted from my maternal house in Ernakulam, a city thriving with modern homes, tall concrete buildings, ice cream parlors, and movie theatres, to my paternal house in Vazhoor, a rural town set amidst an estate of rubber trees and a diverse range of vegetation such as jackfruit, plantain, pepper vines and a thicket of tropical plants. The city life provided me with a continuation of a familiar urban setting. Yet, the rural life made me aware of Kerala society's established expectations of girls. I was required to dress appropriately and avoid engaging in conversations with outsiders, especially men. I visited the village temples, attended fire ceremonies alongside family members who would pour in from distant cities, and paid homage to family ancestors. In addition to the many performative stipulations, I was also privy to unspoken rules of the house that my paternal grandmother seemed to abide by. Kuttan, the lower caste neighbor who helped cut overgrown grass and collect fallen fruit on the estate for my grandmother to later pickle, never stepped into the house. I often found him talking to my grandmother from the stone steps in the backyard, a safe distance from the kitchen rear door. Chinna, the lower caste servant, was only allowed in the kitchen to wash utensils and clean the floor, but never to cook our food. I often noticed my grandmother anxiously checking if Chinna had touched the food prepared for the family. Visits to the temples informed us that we, the
Nayars, were unique in some way. The Nambuthiri priest would step out of the nada\textsuperscript{13} after the evening rites to give my grandmother some extra prasad\textsuperscript{14} and even managed to offer some additional prayers to the deity for our family's wellness. Similar treatment was not meted out to the few lower caste men and women present.

Kerala is replete with such scenes of rural and urban life. Even as the urban landscape burgeoned with motor vehicles, roadways, multi-storied buildings, bungalows, trading markets, telephone lines (with international calls as a specialty), and electric posts, the cosmological rituals of the rural villages never seemed to dissolve. The electric bulbs in the Vazhoor house would flinch in the low voltage even as electricity lit Ernakulam in abundance. While men and women, dressed in western attires, smoking tobacco pipes and drinking brandy attended Christmas parties in social clubs in Ernakulam, the villages held onto remnants of a past, where gender and caste were seemingly essential topics, where temple deities and homage to the clan were still crucial to their way of life. In this crux of the urban versus rural, Kerala exists, even today. Travelers might attest to the changing imagery — constant transportation between old new — as they move across Kerala’s cities, towns, and villages. The landscape - constantly shifting between stark modern buildings and clay-tiled traditional dwellings, from tarred double-lane highways lit by electric posts and swathes of paddy fields, from the India Post mailman in his pantaloons and the Malayali man in his white mundu\textsuperscript{15}— locates Kerala in a space underscored by past and present. These visits revealed the unique spatial juxtapositions of gender and the plethora of rituals that engulfed these spaces.

\textsuperscript{13} A “nada” is the house or innermost shrine that houses the temple deity.
\textsuperscript{14} Ritual offerings such as flowers and sweets are considered blessings.
\textsuperscript{15} A mundu is a white cotton cloth tied around the waist. The traditional costume for men and women.
Both Nambuthiri houses, known as *illams*, and Nayar houses, known as *tarawad* or *veedu*, culminated from caste-based rituals. Although similar in their spatial assemblage, materiality, and aesthetics, they differed particularly in their kinship systems. These systems of patriliny and matriliny, followed by the Nambuthiris and Nayars, respectively, determined gender’s spatial authority and access within the house. *Illams* defined boundaries for men and women within the home, whereas a *tarawad* saw women dominating the house with men relegated to external spaces. Although highly gendered and organized around male and female members of differing castes, the organization of these houses stemmed from ritualistic spatial practices that linked the house, its inhabitants, and its fields and groves, highlighting the hierarchies and roles of other family members as well. Therefore reading the house also requires an understanding of the anthropology of dwelling and the spiritual beliefs around which daily rituals were established and recorded over time through various actors in various historical contexts. Since my research builds upon their work, a brief summation of these previous efforts and their historical context is necessary place before I begin with my own observations, especially considering the curiosity and even condemnation of the Nayars’ sexual customs many westerners.

*But before that,*

I use the space here in this document to not “argue” about concepts of space and living in the homes, but more as a way of looking at life here. Sure, the transformations in habitation centered on many socio-political forces, as had been voiced by scholars. Still, during the process of this study, I felt the need to come up with many different ways to grasp the ongoings in these homes. As I explain in the upcoming methodology section, I relied on oral histories too. And beyond that, I needed more space, like a short film, to present what cannot be expressed in
words. Therefore, this piece is an aggregate of smaller fragments from lived experiences, histories (some of which are still debated and under construction), and my own beliefs and assumptions as a Nayar woman. In fact, space here could be taken as an aggregate of these smaller narratives. Multiple voices of — God, religious initiation, landlordism, rituals, caste rules, and power are all visible in these houses. Not one particularly stands out, although rituals carry the space forward. That ethereal act binds it together. These homes could be seen as a stage setting, where men, women, and children alongside lower caste servants and cultivators stand at the margins. Each of them takes the role of an actor with their own script. Despite the house layouts of both castes being the same, the author of the script (or the many authors) decided to try out different stories and power plays between the characters. And so, I intend to not look at a structured argument but one that can open the conversations of living.
Introduction:

A brief history of Kerala is in place before we start. Kerala, the south western state of Independent India, had gained its distinct architectural heritage by the time the British East India Company began colonizing India in the 17th century. The region, once an open landscape of loosely connected tribal communities and mini chiefdoms spread across its hills, rivers and plains, coalesced into built temples dedicated to a pantheon of Hindu gods, domestic houses, schools, medical centers, granaries, and feeding houses. This development manifested over a course of a few hundred years, starting in the 8th C.E when historians speculate the Nambuthiris (Brahmins) entered the region from the northwestern parts of India. It is commonly held that it was the Nambuthiris who first negotiated with local chiefdoms and mediated the creation of thirty-two Brahmin villages across Kerala, four of which still exist in 2021.

Between the 8th C.E and 16th C.E, these Brahmin villages drew eclectically from the temple norms, caste hierarchical principles and Royal codes to promote land practices that developed into an agrarian economy that centered its politics on the temple. With the temple dominating external land policies, tenancy regulations and land ownership management, hierarchies sustained by caste and politics also permeated the built environment. The architecture that emerged was thus based on similar hierarchical policies of caste and politics. Upper caste courtyard houses, educational institutions, medical centers, and military training centers were grounded in hierarchical principles of caste, politics, and agrarian policies that reflected Kerala’s agrarian and hierarchical society.
From the 17th century onwards, British colonists began reordering and reshaping this native cosmos into a perceived anglicized ‘normative’\(^1\). Their first act was to segregate Kerala into the Malabar area in the north, Cochin in the center and Travancore in the south. The British governed the Malabar area directly and the Cochin and Travancore kingdoms through subsidiary alliances. The existing political and social terrain was fractured, revised and reworked to create an anglicized model of society, as was the routine of the Empire in its colonies. In its attempt to manifest this model, the joint family system of the agrarian society was fragmented through top down urban policies, thus impacting the lived spaces of the natives. The arrival of the British in Kerala therefore represented the beginning of a shift in Kerala society: from a traditional agrarian society built on gendered kinship structures to a market model that encouraged nuclear family arrangements. It changed the ways in which families lived their daily lives and had a long lasting impact on the social and physical landscape of Kerala’s traditional culture. It ultimately changed the way domesticity was choreographed.

Temples played a crucial part in developing social customs and traditions in Kerala that permeated into norms on how people should live. An analysis of the upper-caste’s daily life necessitates a brief description of religious entities, such as the Hindu temples and their relationship with society. Temples were sites of active interaction between the religion and society. From taking on the role of cultural and religious facilitator to serving as a site for educational activities. Hindu temples emerged during the period of the Chera dynasty—one the three proliferating powers in southern India during the early Common Era. The Chera dynasty

\(^1\) The British tried to transform the native urban fabric to fit into an English model. They encouraged the growth of commercial ties, administrative reforms, and nuclear family models that reflected the English society and its structures.
ruled Kerala from 800 AD to 1102 AD. The empire that stretched from north to south constituted multiple kingdoms, which remained loyal to the dynasty. The kingdoms, also known as “nadu,” were, in turn, ruled by an individual who reported to the Emperor. In addition, each nadu established a local assembly of people that guided the ruler in decision-making. The nadu was further subdivided into “desom,” which were controlled by an assembly. Each desom was divided into a village, which was supervised by a “Panchayat”—an administrative unit that exists to this day. Through this multi-layered political governance, Kerala enjoyed the benefits of a constitutional government as far back as the 8th century. With a well ordered system of law and justice, offenders, for instance, were punished by fine, death or imprisonment, which included selling prisoners into slavery. Considered a source of income by local rulers, those who owned slaves were required to pay a slave tax. In addition, land tax was levied with one-tenth being offered to the king himself.

The period from 800 to 1102 AD saw the large-scale construction of Hindu temples in Kerala. In fact, the natives, from commoners to rulers, donated land for the building of temples. The administration of temples and their associated landed properties, however, were taken over by a committee composed mostly of upper-caste Brahmins (Nambuthiris). The Brahmin administrators facilitated performative art forms such as Koothu and Koodiyam—as a means to attract the natives and as vehicles of religious propaganda. Historians also speculate temples authorized staged drama performances to disseminate religious knowledge. By providing a space inside their property to promote dances and festivals, temples thereby played a critical role in the

---

18 Ibid  
20 Koodiyattam is a Sanskrit theatre performance, meaning “combined acting” in Malayalam.  
21 Ibid
cultural progress of Kerala. In addition, they were also asylums of refuge and bastions of defense. Ultimately, temples were the nucleus of urban development, with villages and towns flourishing around them. Temples were centered within communities, thereby activating trends and patterns in urban development.

The importance of temples as centers of education is also noteworthy. Schools set up by temples known as “salas” materialized through the 9th and 10th centuries. Historical records mention examples of schools such as Kanthalur Sala, Kottarakara Sala and Thiruvalla Sala, as well as the names of the Brahmin villages in which they thrived. Sala maintenance, which was comprised of the expenses of its resident students, which included their daily food and sustenance, was shouldered by patron donations. Therefore, in addition to land donations for the construction of temples and schools, material donations of paddy and cloth constituted “daily expense” donations. That is to say, temples were sites of material and comestible exchange, by which I mean the devotees, donated their cultivated produce, cloth and jewelry to the temple, in return for their blessings. It’s important to examine this particular system of exchange/currency because it elucidates relations between the community, land and religious institutions. Day to day maintenance of temples was dependent on the people, their land and produce. The temple in turn provided them with concepts of rituals and taught them about their significance in daily life.

This knowledge transfer occurred through both the cultural and religious activities/operations set up by the temples and in the Vedic education provided in their schools. At the same time, land was equally crucial in holding together these homes as its agricultural

---

23 Ibid
25 Ibid
production, which was mainly paddy, provided nourishment to the upper-caste homes and a livelihood to the field cultivators who were from the lower-castes. On a collective level, land turned out to be the currency for people’s existence and the establishment of a religious entity.

Alongside their religious and cultural investments, temples in Kerala also had an economic facet. The donated land and its cultivation served as a means of sustenance for the temples. Generally, even though land was donated to temples, it continued to be cultivated by donors who were mainly the landlords themselves. At times, donors would appoint a tenant who would work the land. In either case, temples levied taxes from land cultivators—whether they were donors or tenants. But the difference was that cultivators who were “donors” were deemed to pay a lower tax as compared to those who were “tenants.” Taxes were in the form of produce. This meant that a donor would submit 1/6 or 1/8 of the agricultural produce to the temple, whereas a tenant would usually give back 1/4 or 1/5 of the produce. The way taxation was structured forced people to donate more land to the temples. This was for both economic and religious reasons. The economic benefit was that on donating lands to temples, donors could forfeit the tax to the king. The religious benefit was more personal—one would attain salvation if they donated land to the temple—“salvation” from life and rebirth were, after all, the ultimate goals of a devout Hindu. Knowing that donating land to temples was akin to offering land directly to the Gods, people were incentivized to access easy blessings that promised them. as Historian Pillai puts it, “an easy road to heaven.” Such incentives—both economic and personal—ensured that land was donated by both upper-caste communities and poorer peasants,

---

27 Ibid
28 Ibid
who donated smaller holdings that they might possess. In the end, all the land that belonged to the temple came to be known as “Devathanam,” which meant “offering to the Gods.”

The role of temples as facilitators and propagators for customs and rituals was further invigorated through their positions as enterprising institutions. At the same time, temples also formed a crucial element through which the “jenmi” system, or landed aristocracy, evolved in Kerala, which in turn impacted the social hierarchies, land practices and taxation. Together, these sociological and economical registers of hierarchies and land ownership layered over the peoples’ social life, culminating in a way of life that was embedded in the relationship between temple and society. The Jenmi system (landed aristocracy) that evolved at a later stage, during the Chera rule in Kerala, was a direct result of the misappropriation of temple wealth and power by its committee members who were the Nambuthiris. Historians speculate that this was also the juncture at which large scale land amassing by the highest castes was dominant. As the Jenmis or landlords garnered a stronghold over land and their power over temples through expropriation of material wealth, the caste system began to entrench into the social and political behavior of the people. Although caste hierarchies existed until that point, it was the added economic benefits that pervaded the daily ongoings of land and domestic spatial practices. To understand what the Jenmi system entailed and how it impacted social relations, including the workings of the domestic sphere, an account of the temple’s management structure and the hundred year war that stretched back to 1028 A.D is required.

Historical records show that transference of land from private ownership into the hands of powerful temples occurred over time, beginning in the 9th century. Private landownership

---

31 Ibid
existed in Kerala long before the Sangam age. Landlords at the time consisted of agriculturist groups such as the *Idayas, Villavas* and *Pulayas.* From the 9th to the 13th century, this structure remained intact, but land ownership passed to the upper-caste landlords. When construction of temples through direct influence of Brahmins over the Royal families gained prominence, there was also the formation of temple committees. The temple committees eventually renegotiated land ownership in their favor through the vested interests of their board members. The temple board members were mostly upper-caste members of society, with a majority of Brahmins who made decisions about the functions of the temple and property management. For the efficient control and management of each temple, the trustees elected a “Variyam” (Executive Committee) of two persons to administer temple affairs for a specific period of time. Temple inscriptions indicate that while most temples elected what was known as the Variyam, some others opted to elect two members known as a *Sabella pothuval* and *Samanjita.* The former’s duties were to take over the properties and ornaments of the temple on behalf of the trustees. For example, one historical record known as the Mampalli Inscription shows that in 149 K.E (947 AD) the Ayirur temple and its properties were made over to “Changannur Pothuval Chathan Chadayan.” The *Samanjita* on the other hand was the accountant whose duties included the maintenance of temple expenditure, the custody of the treasure chest and the daily reading of the expenditure details to the devotees gathered for the evening prayers. Overall, in the initial developmental phase of temples, strict rules of management were implemented to avoid misappropriation of funds.

---

32 Ibid
The 12th century witnessed a departure of power from the hands of the ruling kingdom into that of the Nambuthiris’. This is not to say that the kingdoms were erased. They remained in existence, however certain political and social decisions were slowly retracted from Kings and chieftains by the Nambuthiris. The war between the Chera Empire and another wielding power of the southern region, the Cholas, had far-reaching consequences in the history of Kerala that was eventually responsible for the emergence of the jenmi system. Economic decay prevailed during this time with the diversion from trade, agriculture and temple affairs to warfare. This period also saw the rise of the military system known as Kalari and the suicide squads led by the warrior caste, the Nayars. The disintegration in economic life led to further social decay as the temples, which were the focal point of culture, education and economic activities until then, gradually receded. With the neglect of day to day temples activities, such as daily ceremonies (poojas), and schooling, the properties entrusted to the trustees for management became sources of income without corresponding expenditure. Pillai points to several instances where trustees forced tenants to pay their dues despite a lack of temple expenditures. In many cases, he notes, cultivation rights were retained by those who had donated land to the temple. Eventually, donors and tenants were evicted from the land they donated or cultivated, especially when they defaulted on their payments. Thus, land amassing by the temple board members was very high during this period.

While Nambuthiri trustees accumulated land that belonged to temple donors in their own names, they also assumed a sovereign-like function by establishing authority parallel to that of the royals. In fact, Keralolpathy, a widely read ancient text that covers the ancestry of Kerala Brahmins and other castes equates this aspect of Brahmanical authority with “social control” or *Samudaya Bharanam* (read: ruling the social).\(^{38}\) The Nambuthiri had risen in power so much so that even the royals had no dominion over them through a judiciary system. In fact, temple trustees would go to the extent of sanctioning capital punishment—an aspect which until that point was solely under the jurisdiction of royals. An inscription of 1102 AD engraved on a pillar in the *Rameshwarathu Koil* at Quilon heralds the commencement of the “Nambuthiri Age” in Kerala history.\(^{39}\) Eventually, through this power play and misappropriation of temple wealth and land, Nambuthiris began to absorb all temple-related property known as Devawoms into Bhramaswoms—property fell directly under private Brahmin ownership.\(^{40}\)

There were multiple reasons that enabled the Nambuthiri community to easily acquire economic and political power easily. The Brahmins claimed they were pure-blooded and chosen ones. Through these powers they subsequently created and instilled a fear in the local people. And this was how they mastered them to obey. In fact, the belief that they held the keys to heaven and the much sought after “salvation” of the Hindu instilled a fear in society that a “Brahmanical curse” could befall them if a Brahman was displeased in any way. By then, mythological tales also helped bolster the belief that this priestly class had close alliances with the Gods which elevated their position even above that of the royals. Rituals and holy men created by Nambuthiris paved the way to further embed these notions. For example, Oracle men

\(^{39}\) Ibid
\(^{40}\) Ibid
known as “Velichapad” were part of temple rituals. Considered to be superior to Nambuthiris, these Men of the Goddess were mediums through which the Goddess would communicate with the people. Their performance in temples was usually combined with trance-based enactments where they uttered messages directly from the Goddesses. These messages would often dictate devotees to lead their lives in a particular way, or to make an additional offering to the temples, and were largely based on the theme of providing a framework for a ritualistic life removed from sins. Any dissent on the people’s side to obey was arbitrated by the Nambuthiri, who would warn the people of incurring the wrath of the Bhagavathy or Goddess. They would mediate and force people to pay fines to the temples and pledge their future obedience in such cases, informing them that this would help divert any curses their way.41

Priesthood further mobilized the position of Nambuthiris as the righteous performers of “homams” and poojas. *Homams* were rituals where offerings such as ghee, grass and seeds amongst many other sacred symbolic elements were placed into a sacrificial fire. The fire was produced within a pit reinforced with bricks. The priestly members would sit around the pit chanting Vedic shlokas and mantras. Homams were performed in every significant ceremony or event in a Hindu household. For example, the Ganapathy Homam was performed when a house was newly inhabited. Lord Ganesha, the elephant God’s blessings had to be incurred for new beginnings. Therefore, events that symbolized new beginnings often preceded a Ganapathy Homam. This ritual is still followed in present day Kerala, with Nambuthiri priests residing over these homams. But there was also a prescribed set of rules in order for them to be conducted without which it was believed to be futile. Therefore, the Nambuthiri’s presence and his knowledge were critical in the process of performing a homam ritual.

Temples therefore played a significant role in laying the groundwork for consolidation of power by the Nambuthiris. By outlining landownership norms, taxation rules in the name of “donations,” temple authorities compelled Hindu devotees from other castes to concede to this authority, by toying with their fears about the almighty and indicating that their disobedience would transform into suffering in their next life/birth.

Rituals, festivals and ceremonies marked the life cycle of the Hindu people in Kerala. From birth ceremonies, attainment of puberty, marriage and finally death — these crucial moments called for specific rituals and remained intricately embedded in the house. In addition, festivals were also markers of the harvest cycles and tightly bound to the activities in the house. At the same time, daily poojas (elaborate prayers usually in the presence of a priest) and ceremonies were performed in households to maintain the sanctity of the house. Together these rituals gave meaning to the functions of the house and the caste-based identity to its inhabitants.

Caste, in Kerala, unlike the rest of India\(^{42}\) was stratified into the “priestly class” or Nambuthiris, the “military elite” and “ruling class” or the Nayars and Shudras who formed the working lower castes, further subdivided based on their skilled labor. While caste-based identity elevated the upper-caste socially, it was the daily and annual rituals and festivals that provided the framework for gender based spatial roles within the house. These roles equally hinged on the kinship organizational structure which was embedded in the inheritance pattern and descent. The Nambuthiris followed a patrilineal system where the descent was traced through the male members of the family. Nambuthiri caste norms dictated that the eldest male member would marry an Antharjanam (a female Nambuthiri), while the younger brothers would usually marry a

\(^{42}\)The Indian caste system (except in Kerala) generally modeled the four-fold division of society, known as “varnas,” into Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras.
Nayar woman. On the other hand, Nayar customs predicated on the matrilineal system traced the descent through the mother’s line. In such families, with the women having authority over house and land also had the freedom to establish conjugal alliances with other upper-caste men.

Methodological Overview and Thesis Structure:

During my fieldwork in Kerala, I identified four houses — two Nambuthiri illams and two Nayar tarawads — which could contribute spatially and ethnographically rich sketches of upper-caste domesticity during the colonial period. The Olappamanna illam, my first Nambuthiri site, is an illuminating context in which to look at upper-caste Brahmanical domesticity because it was an authority on the caste-based ritualistic life that this study seeks to examine. Their wealth, status, and the socio-cultural contributions of the family over the last three hundred years provided this study with details on rituals, caste-based gendered living, social politics, and agrarian and temple life in Nambuthiri homes. Similarly, the Thekkeparambu illam, although an economically modest illam in comparison to Olappamanna, was packed with instances of rituals and agricultural land practices, serving evidence of how the internal domesticity integrated with external land practices. On the other hand, in the Nayar sites, the Madapullikalam tarawad — known for its philanthropic engagement with the village community serves as an illustrative example of ceremonies and agricultural land practices that outline gendered living in Nayar communities. The final site in my study is the Poorvankara tarawad, although comparatively humble spatially and economically in contrast with Madapullikalam, it offers evidence on practices of polygamy and caste-based external spatial practices highlighted through performative arts.
Methodologically, I combined spatial analysis with archival records and oral histories. I first relied on the spatial analysis of selected houses. I documented their existing floor plans and compared them to 19th-century survey plans and blueprints, kept with the families or archives. Cross-examining these materials helped me understand the temporal alterations, as certain rooms and spaces disappeared or changed entirely in their utility. I relied on oral histories of the generation born at the cusp of India's independence to reimagine their spatial practices and gain clarity on the internal organization of gendered space allocation. Oral histories also informed me of the current ways in which both men and women utilize space. Comparing these diverse oral histories helped understand the evolution of the domestic house and its relationship with gender. In addition, I also parsed the room sizes, the size of window openings, and the construction materials, which revealed how the community represented the gender hierarchies within these homes. For example, in the Nambuthiri illams, the women's wing had smaller rooms with little ventilation and light than the men's wing, which had spacious rooms.

To bring forth an idea of the spatial relationships in these homes, I begin with two scenes that were described to me by the current homeowners of the sites on which my study focuses. Just as actors in a play unfold the events of a story, so too these women in these scenes through their real life performance provide us with a glimpse of life in the agrarian homes.

**Act [1]** Year 1940: In the courtyard of *Kochukalapuraiyidum*, a Nayar *tarawad*[^43] in the village of *Kanam* in Kottayam district, the matriarch — *Ittooly Kutty Amma* draped in the white *mundu* from the waist down, with uncovered breasts, sits on the courtyard threshold, chewing her daily dose of betel leaf. Hearing the voice of the field workers at the main entrance, crying out her name, she walks to the main door of the house — to see what the issue was.

[^43]: The word is used to denote the combined unit of the Nayar house and the kinship that lives in it.
Act [2] Year 1987: In the *Thekkumparambu illam*, in the rural village of *Karalmanna*, Palakkad district, the *Pathinnaadi Antharjanam*[^44], wearing a *mundu* — a white fabric wrapped around the waist— and bare chested, rushes inside to the smaller women’s wing of the Naalukettu, as she hears guests approaching the parambu[^45] of her *illam*. She cannot be seen by other men beside her husband. She then moves to inspect the ceremonial fire that has continued to burn in the vadakinni[^46] since 1955. A few yards away, the young wife of her eldest son, draped in the newly fashioned Kerala *sari*, moves to the front portico to greet guests that include both men and women.

Act 1 shows a Nayar woman who lived authoritatively within her own house. The Nayar *tarawad* was her domain. Her way of inhabiting the house, the way she dressed and her interactions with the peasants who work on her fields, is emblematic of the long lasting traditions of a matriarchal kinship organization that dictated the agency of women in navigating their domestic sphere. Act 2 shows both the traditional and a newly emerging modern Keralan society juxtaposed in the same house. As Nambuthiri women were prescribed certain wings of their house, we find the older woman adhering to those traditional practices by moving back to the women’s quarters while simultaneously heeding to the caste notions about Nambuthiri women remaining invisible to outsiders. However, the younger woman, a product of more recent colonial influence, adopted a different way of living. Her dressing is more in tune with the westernized Victorian values and her interactions with outsiders departs from caste based practice. In her book *Negotiating Domesticity* (2005), professor of architectural theory Hilde

[^44]: Antharjanam denotes the female Kerala Brahmin and Pathinnaadi refers to the wife of a Somayaagi Brahmin who has acquired the status of a Vedic priest.
[^45]: A term used to denote the landed property on which the house sits. It continues to be used today, both colloquially and in legal records, to show property lines.
[^46]: Northern wing of the upper caste agrarian house where rituals are conducted.
Heynen notes that analyzing spatial choreographies from a critical perspective demonstrates how gendered bodies construct as much as they are constructed by the architecture of their inhabitants. Attending this weighted relationship between space and gender within these homes, I attempt to read closely the gendered spatial organization of these houses, where the lines of space and gender intersect clearly. I ask the following questions — how were gendered spaces created in Kerala’s traditional agrarian economy? How significant was this engagement of domestic space with gender, and how did this intersection collaborate with colonial policies? I am interested in understanding how architecture acts as a material vehicle for social relations, and also how a typical agrarian house is retooled to accommodate altered gendered and caste perceptions. More specifically my study focuses on this complex relationship of the state and its politics of caste and colonization in reimagining Kerala’s domesticity and by extension its gender roles.

To further understand the motivations underlying the spatial manifestation of these homes, I referred to ancient texts known as Dharmashastras that illustrate hierarchical notions of gender among the Brahmin community. Nambuthiris referred to the Dharmashastras as they prescribed moral codes to living. In addition, Vedic architecture texts that offered ancient architectural principles on house building provided insights into critical aspects of space utilization within medieval Kerala homes. I overlapped these latter materials with the oral histories and the Dharmashastras to better understand how caste-based gender norms intersected with the spatial program. What is more, historical records of land tenancy agreements and British Committee reports from the 1880s and early 1900s have articulated shifts in agricultural policies, which manifested in the urbanization of the farming sector, eventually removing landlordism and the rise of individualized land ownerships. My review of feminist magazines and journals of the
early 1900s that took their cue from the British sisterhood also offered evidence of changing gender roles in Kerala society by the turn of the 20th century. This evidence revealed the culmination of a new type of native woman who found employment opportunities in the emerging market job sector as well as the advent of the nuclear family model and its new ideas of living. A close reading of all these documents offered me a nuanced understanding of how social relationships grounded in caste and gender impacted architecture.

The findings of this study opened up the conversation on the relationship of architecture with the anthropology of dwelling. It revealed that spatial design is hinged on many external factors grounded in social relations. Architecture, then, is a vehicle that carries forth these relations, thereby proclaiming its agency in shaping and modifying relations. That is to say; as architects and planners, the onus falls on us to not simply mirror the external world inside. Our shaping of this material artifact can, in fact, reshape society through spatial practices and ways of inhabiting it.

My interpretation of these houses is informed by writings of contemporary geographers, feminists, anthropologists, and urbanists. They provide key theoretical tools to contextualize space within a social framework, gender roles and symbolism. Geographer Doreen Massey’s work on gender and space has influenced my understanding of the relevance of social relations with space. In her book, Space, Place, and Gender (1993), she developed a notion of spatiality as the product of intersecting social relations. The book traces the development of ideas about the social structure of space and place and related these concepts to issues of gender and various debates within feminism. In my work, I use these notions of externally produced social norms to show how the changes to administrative policies and political conventions impacted and transformed gendered spaces within the homesteads. Architectural theorist Hilde Heynen’s work
in her book *Negotiating Domesticity: Spatial Productions of Gender in Modern Architecture* (2005) gestured towards the complicated exchange between the materiality of architecture and lived practices. I draw from the essays in her book where she critically analyzes programmatic sections of the house to gender roles to craft my analysis of the homesteads through a similar process. Feminist and author J Devika’s notes on Kerala's women, labor, and patriarchy have been constructive in my investigations and understanding of today's neoliberal aspirations of Kerala society. Symbolism and rituals form an essential segment in my formal analysis as these homes were abodes of ritually initiated spatial practices. To understand the symbolic dimension of these spaces I draw on anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of the symbolism of domestic spatial patterns of the Berber House to make the connection between Vedic architecture, *Dharmashastras*, and the experiential living that I assimilated through oral histories.

Spatial manifestation and gender relations require multiple interpretations extending beyond our normalized understanding through a western lens. These historic agrarian homes offer us an alternate perspective on gendered living. At the same time, it also helps address the matrix of socio-cultural, political, and economic forces that shape spatial practices and domesticity. Is space only a physical manifestation or does it extend to a ritualistic realm? These homes offer us another perspective from which we could rethink our notions of gender and space.

The main body of this thesis is not divided into chapters. Instead, it is fragmented into four sites. In each site, I offer a spatial analysis of the house and the buildings that support it. I also elaborate on the temples and shrines that accompanied these structures. It includes the rituals and ceremonies that the families practiced, which were integral to internal politics. I note the spatial practices of the men, women, and children in these households and interweave the
stories recounted by my interlocutors. I have presented these houses in order of their caste hierarchy. Therefore on completing the segments on each caste’s native practices, I highlight the colonial interventions and the spatial transformations they brought about in these homes.

In the conclusion, I gather all the crucial turns in terms of spatial living in rural homes between the mid-19th to the mid-20th century. I reflect on the impact of this matrix of socio-cultural, political, and urban forces on the domesticity of these upper caste homes. Further, I reflect on today’s Kerala, which engages with neoliberal aspirations after a brief clash with communist militancy in the 1960s. I explain the condition of these historical agrarian homesteads as they stand today and offer a viewpoint on how the natives are moving towards re-appropriating these homes.

Brief note on the house plan of a traditional courtyard house:

The traditional Kerala upper-caste houses — Nambuthiri illams and Nayar tarawads followed a similar house layout. Despite the fundamental similarities in these layouts, spatial interpretation varied between the caste groups. Below are some of the essential identifiers of what constitutes a typical Naalukettu (single courtyard house) and Ettukettu (double courtyard house), as will be seen in the sites that this study focuses on.

The four wings of the house were centered on the central courtyard. Each wing was named after the cardinal direction they faced. They are:

Kizhakkini (eastern wing),

Thekkini (southern wing),

Padinjaatti (west wing)
Vadakkini (north wing)

In general, the Vadakinni wing had a raised floor, although in some cases all three wings had their floors raised from the central courtyard level. The Thekkini (south wing) and Padinjatinni (west wing) would usually be a double storied structure as these wings provided the rooms and halls for sleeping arrangements for the family. The entrance gateway, also known as the Padipura was mostly placed on the western boundary in line with the Thekkini wing. Most houses had a verandah running all around the house. An inner verandah encompassed the courtyard and provided a transition space between the central atrium and the four wings.

Much of the activities within the main house entailed those related to the functioning of the family that inhabited it. From dining halls that served meals to multiple kitchens and halls for sleeping and ceremonies the usage of the wings depended on the caste norms and values. In general the Vadakinni was a crucial part of the house as it was here that most ceremonies were conducted.

Below are some of the key elements of a typical Nambuthiri illam47:

1. Natasaala & Poomukham - Place to receive persons of all castes who have no 'Theendal'
2. 'Padinjattithara' (The western wing of quadrangular type of house) - Place to receive respected persons and serve them meals.
3. 'Deenamuri' (Sick Room) - Room for sick male members.
4. 'Vadukkini' (The northern part) - Place to do rituals like 'Oupaasanam', 'Sraadham', etc.
5. 'Meladukkala' - Day-to-day dinner hall for Namboothiris.
6. Room used by ladies at the time of menses.

47 Compiled by the Nambuthiri Trust of Calicut.
7. 'Kalavara' (Store room) - Room to store Rice, Coconut Oil, Coconuts, etc.

8. 'Paathrakkalavara' (Vessel store room) - Room to store vessels which are not in daily use.

9. 'Puthanara' (New chamber) - Room to store pickles and keep luggage of Antharjanams.

10. 'Vadakke Akam' - Labour Room

11. 'Vadakke Kett' - Lunch hall for Namboothiris for noon meals.

12. 'Cheriya Meladukkala' or 'Thundanadukkala' - Dinner hall for Antharjanams.

13. 'Sreelaakam' - Worship Room

14. 'Morakam' - Kitchen store room to keep buttermilk, etc.

15. 'Adukkala' - Kitchen

16. 'Kizhakke Kett' ('Vadakketh') - Dinner hall for Antharjanams.

17. 'Kizhakke Kett' ('Thekketh') - Dinner hall for Nambuthiris on special occasions.

18. 'Oottupura' - Place to prepare feast on special occasions.

19. 'Nadumittam' - Inner courtyard or quadrangle.

While most Nayar tarawads too followed a similar layout concepts such as the small and big kitchen was not strictly followed within Nayar communities. Moreover, the Pathayapura building (granary) that was situated outside the main house served as a place for Nayar men to sleep at night.
Part One: Nambuthiri Illams

Site One: Olappamanna Mana: Touring the Nambuthiri’s Illam

This chapter explores the Nambuthiri illams of Kerala by drawing out the multifarious aspects of spatial organization that go beyond the aesthetics and materiality of an architectural edifice. Illam, meaning home of the Nambuthiri, was also often known by other names such as Mana or Madhom, although the distinction remains unclear. Irrespective of their taglines, Nambuthiris constructed their houses as courtyard dwellings where four wings were arranged facing a central courtyard, with each wing named based on its cardinal direction — East, West, North and South. A single courtyard house was known in the native tongue as a ‘naalukettu’ — naalu meaning four and kettu meaning hall/wing. As the wealth and stature of these families rose in society, many Nambuthiri families increased the number of courtyards leading to an ettukettu (8 winged), pandrendukettu (12 winged) and even a padinaarukettu (16 winged) house. Olappamanna Mana, the house that is described in this chapter was initially a naalukettu and eventually expanded into an ettukettu.

Vaastu Shastra or the science of dwelling was the Sanskrit manual on architecture upon which these homes were built. The texts provided information on the alignment of the house on the plot and included instructions on room locations, sizes and specific functions. As much as these doctrines were central to the functional zoning aspects and the overall aesthetics and proportion of the illam, I contend, so too were socially constructed boundaries and norms, borne out of the caste-based codes, religious, economic and political forces. Through the spatial

---

analysis of this first *illam*, I examine the social space produced in the *Nambuthiri* domestic sphere through the lens of gender. Using gender as their axis of internal regulation, *Nambuthiri illams* were organized around notions of male and female spaces. Typically, the north eastern and north western wings were prescribed to the women. With clear stipulations on their movement within the house, the women tended to the kitchen and back of house areas. In particular *Nambuthiri* women were forbidden from accessing the front wings and men’s lounges where chances of being seen by outsiders or guests were high. This clearly demarcated gendered spatiality of the *illam* offers a rich site to examine the relationship between space and gender.

Yet, both caste norms which defined the gendered movements within the house and Vaastu Shastra aspects which established the houses’ spatial organization were centered on a set of rituals that the family practiced. This ritualistic framework that included life-cycle ceremonies that celebrated a person’s significant life phases, festivals originating from mythology and those related to the harvest season, combined helped package and define the family’s relationship and ways of living.

First I focus on the current spatial practices upheld within these homes and then draw on the oral histories of the *illam’s* oldest generation, born at the cusp of India’s independence to reconstruct the past spatial history— the everyday practices of the *illam*. My inquiry has been informed by the work of geographer Doreen Massey, who claims that “one must look at space as a dimension that we create through our relations which are full of power and as a dimension which presents us with the multiplicity of the world.”49 This study takes Massey’s promptings on space as one which is social, loaded with power relations. Massey notes that “it is only on the refusal to align all spaces into one single story of development that we could reimagine the world.

in a different way, presenting us with different political questions, and opening up our minds.”

My thesis aligns with Massey’s premise as it looks to reading space through its temporal relations, passed on through centuries as rituals and oral traditions. Read in this way, the spatial narratives of these historical houses are offered a fresh perspective — a reimagined world of multiplicity. What is more, it helps decipher the complex relationship between architecture and social space that hinged on religious beliefs and ritualistic practices thus defining how the Nambuthiris lived.

As we, the film crew and I prepared for our field trip to the once renowned Olappamanna illam that belonged to an aristocratic Nambuthiri family I decided to parse the internet which had many articles on this homestead’s legacy including a portal designed by the family.

‘Welcome to Olappamanna Mana: An experience that evokes the grandeur of centuries old Namboothiri aristocracy. Experience life as it were in affluent yet simpler times.’ So read the website of this ‘roughly estimated to be three hundred year old heritage home.’ As neoliberalism, with its ambitions of development and the internet era permeate into the rural pockets of Kerala, such advertisements are now commonplace. Repositioning itself to align with the changing times of air travel, hotel room bookings and the State government’s renewed interest in promoting Kerala tourism, the webpage is designed to inform potential tourists of a boutique experience of the ancient Nambuthiri illam — houses with four wings centered on an open courtyard that prescribed specific spaces for its men and women. The website not only offers easy booking facilities with just a click, but also a colorful photo gallery of the house and reservation options of three room types: double room, family room and large room. Guests, it states, can see the

---

**Kalam Ezhuthi Pattu**[^51], at the main house, performed on pre-scheduled dates, for free. The Kunthi river (named after the matriarch in the Indian epic, *Mahabharata*), the Silent Valley, the Malampuzha and Kanjirapuzha dams are some of the nearby destinations that guests can enjoy during their stay. The website also offers an elaborate list of local festivals that might be of interest, such as the Chinakathoor Pooram, Pariyanampatta Pooram and the Kanthallur Utsavam. A particular event known as the Olappamanna Thalappoli, a festival related to the family deity also finds a spot on the web portal. The photo of an elephant with a man atop holding the deity idol — led by a group of men draped in expensive gold bordered white *mundu* and beating drums — accompanied by an *Ottan thullal*[^52] artist holding a sickle in the corner grabs my attention. It is not often that one gets to see the family deity so openly. Such public displays of a Nambuthiri family’s sacred artefacts are uncommon.

It was a cold rainy day when the film crew and I began documenting the Olappamanna Mana, located in Vellinezhi, in a town called Cherpulassery in Palakkad district. Built on twenty acres of land amidst coconut trees, palms and shrubs stands the majestic *illam* that once fostered not only Vedic studies for the Brahmin community, but also fine arts, music and literature. The main house that once housed the head Nambuthiri male and his wife/s operates as a heritage exhibition and the few ancillary buildings around it that once accommodated the families of the younger Nambuthiri brothers and their Nayar wives now function as a homestay to the many tourists who want (what is known as) the authentic Kerala experience.

Speculated to be conceived around the 8th century C.E with the arrival of Indo-Aryans into the Kerala region, houses belonging to the Nambuthiri caste maintained a strict regimen of

[^51]: The kalam is a unique drawing also called "dhulee chithram" or powder drawing. The artist uses the floor as his canvas. Kalamezhuthu pattu is performed as part of the rituals to worship and propitiate gods like Kaali, Ayyappan or Vettakkorumakan.
[^52]: A traditional dance form
caste boundaries based on the pure-impure axis (shudham-ashudham) forming the foundation of their religious practices. In order to clarify the rules stipulated within a typical Nambuthiri house, I scheduled an interview with the Vedic architect, and the youngest member of the Kaanipayur Nambuthiri family, known to be experts in Vaastu Shastra. According to Hindu mythology, each Nambuthiri family was blessed with a particular tantric tradition by Lord Parasuraman, as a result of which the Kaanipayur family became renowned as Vedic architects from the medieval period onwards. As Krishnan Nambuthiri explained to me, the zoning of the house dictated by Vaastu principles incorporated designs for different types of accessibility to the Brahmin house by different castes. He therefore recommended that I look up the only detailed case study book on the subject authored by Finnish scholar Henry Schildt, vetted by the Kaanipayur family for further information.

Kaanipayur explained how a set of rites and rituals marked the creation of a home. For every house built, it required the auspicious blessing of a Nambuthiri Priest who dictated details from the start hour of construction to the locations of the wings and the rooms including dimensions. The beginning of site work included a Vaastu Pooja or Vaastu ritual. In fact, there was no real architect during this period. Instead the people responsible for the development of the house were priests and lower-caste people who belonged to occupational groups such as carpenters, stone-carriers and so on. The principles on which the house was built had its mythological orgins too, due to which it was necessary to implement the house layout with detailed and careful planning to synchronize it with these mythical beliefs. For instance, the house layout was stipulated on the ancient architectural science or Vaastu. According to ancient sources known as Sastric literature that included texts such the Puranas, Tantras and Agamas, the house originated from a mythical man. Known as the Vastu Purusha or the foundation man, he
was pinned to the earth facing downwards by ‘Brahma’ the creator of the Universe and his forty four Gods with his head to the North East and legs in the South West direction.

Anthropologist Valentine Daniel’s *Fluid Designs* (1984) offers a glimpse into a similar concept developed in a Tamil village, in the neighboring state of Tamil Nadu. Through ethnographic studies conducted in the village he considers the multifaceted function of the sign and its role in the creation of culture. He observed that the houses can be understood simultaneously as humans and non-humans. Valentine argued that the houses are first established according to the Satric rules and ritually conceived by the foundation ritual after which the personalities of the house develops over a span of time. He concludes by noting that the collective reputation of the house including what would happen to the family and its members would then give a meaning to it. Daniel’s analysis on the houses in a Tamil village, help in establishing similar connections with the Kerala homes, as they too were built on similar principles of Sastric rules and the foundation ritual. In fact, a close reading of the Vaastu Purusha Mandala can provide us a portal entry into the emergence of the illam house as a symbolic culmination of religion, mythology and astral bodies.

The ‘Vastu Purusha Mandala’ — a metaphysical square divided into a grid of 81 equal parts provided the mathematical and diagrammatic basis for the house layout. That is to say, the house plan was ethereal. It incorporated the positions of astral bodies, deities and attributed significance in relation to the functions of the layout. These symbolic deities take up different positions on this planar diagram — each representing various aspects of life. The purpose of the different household activities was aligned with the meaning assigned to each planar grid. For instance activities related to creation such as marriage or prenatal ceremonies would be

---

conducted in the central courtyard believed to be the navel of this symbolic man, as well as the location of the Lord Brahma, revered as the Creator himself. The kitchen, located in the north eastern corner of house aligned with the mouth of the man thus denoting consumption. In this way space of the house aligned with a set of mythological beliefs and symbolic meaning that gave it both a human and non-human facet which Daniel talks about.\(^5^4\) In this way, the house could be understood as a symbolic culmination of religion, mythology and astral bodies together with its inhabitants who maintain it.

Upon understanding the principles on which Olappamanna itself had been conceived, we ventured into the neatly landscaped property in which the main house and smaller buildings were housed. Preserved amidst neatly landscaped foliage, the main house today stands enigmatically as an exhibit piece for tourists. Foregoing caste-based norms that underscored the Nambuthiri illam’s social rules until the 1940s, outsiders (read: tourists) irrespective of caste are now permitted to enter the building and tour the main house after the daily Brahmanical ceremonies known as pujas are conducted by the family priests between seven and nine in the morning. As the film crew and I waited outside for the completion of the morning puja we were offered a glimpse of the past — the cosmological world of rituals and spatial practice that sustained the Nambuthiri way of life. As we awaited further instructions, we stood at a distance from the sanctity of a house that performed a deity-appeasing ceremony that lasted for several hours.

While waiting, I was reminded of how the authors of the book, Bourdieu in Algeria: Colonial Politics, Ethnographic Practices, Theoretical Developments, (2009), Paul Silverstein and Jane Goodman review the Kabyle House in the light of Bourdieu's later theoretical work. Noting Bourdieu's Kabyle House as one of the most often cited ethnographies

\(^{54}\) Schildt, Henri. The Traditional Kerala Manor. (Institut Francais de Pondiceri, 2012).
of domestic space, Silverstein writes, ‘such a “romanticizing nostalgia” led him to regard ritual practices and oral sayings as “survivals” of an earlier era, as present windows to a lost past. Even more explicitly he views Kabylia as a survival of an original, pan-Mediterranean society preserving the symbolic oppositions and legal codes of ancient Greece and nineteenth century France: “Kabylia preserved in a more durable manner — because there were rituals that kept them alive— many things that had been common across the Mediterranean universals (des invariants).’

In my study, it is these moments — instances of ‘romanticizing nostalgia’ that unveil the multiplicity of the social dimension of space. Although now positioned within a neoliberal framework of privatization and market policies, forced to the join the new world through the commodification of their house, pressing it towards the world as a touristy artefact vis a vis cultural tourism, the continuity of the spatial rituals remain central to these Nambuthiri illams. Drawing on Silverstein’s observations on Kabylia, the Olappamanna illam’s rituals seem to keep it durable, while also providing it the nostalgic flavor that is often an attractive selling point for global tourism.

Built in the 1750s, Olappamanna illam was a constellation of buildings assembled together on a twenty-acre parcel of agrarian land — the land itself called the parambu — a term that continues to be used both locally and in legal documents to illustrate the property lines of houses in modern Kerala. The main house was organized around two courtyards with an upper story of bedrooms along the western wing stands as an enigma. We note that the building certainly requires some amount of renovation, as it seems weathered down. We are introduced by our local Nambuthiri coordinator to the Manager of the property, Sri. Sankaranarayanan. A

retired teacher and a Kerala history buff, Sankaranarayanan joined the property in 2006 when it began its venture as a tourist homestay. Born in 1955, the year before Kerala was officially declared an independent state in newly independent India, Sankaranarayanan offers us some valuable inputs to the illam’s history and its current state of affairs. The puja is officially over now, and he ventures inside with us, giving us a tour of the place. Aligned along the cardinal directions, Nambuthiri illam wings are named after the direction to which they are positioned. For example, the wing facing the east or kizhaku, is named Kizhakinni. The west or thekku facing wing is the Thekkini, the north or vadakku facing wing is the Vadakinni and lastly the south or padinjatu facing wing is known as the Padinjatinni. We note that this illam does not have a padipura (gate house). We are informed that this structure was demolished by the army chieftain of the Samoothiripad, also known as the ruling Zamorins of the nearby city of Calicut. The Zamorin (Samoothiripad) Royal family ruled the northern city of Calicut for close to six centuries between the 6th and 18th century AD, and a personal conflict with the illam members led to this particular destruction.

With the main entrance erased from Olappamanna’s property, it is the remaining buildings carefully laid out that calls our attention. The property is peppered with the smaller buildings that once housed the younger Brahmin brothers and their Nayars wives, the granary also known as the Pathayapura, a few shrines and the bath houses. Understanding the relationship of these edifices to the main house is critical in unraveling the meaning of the illam. This is because similar to the Vaastu principles that bring together the religious and mythological facets of the house, so too did other aspects such as caste-cased social norms and activities. Therefore, social beliefs and ways of living, together with the materiality of the house and land help in underscoring the meaning of the illam. In his discourse on African architecture, French
archaeologist and ethnologist, Jean Paul Lebeuf, noted that “African architecture represents a kind of text or language system whose meaning can be understood through its orientation, form, materials, construction process and details.” Borrowing from Lebeuf’s observation, considering the common undercurrents of spatial language between these indigenous societies, I begin to explore the *illam* and its architectural anatomy, to bring to focus the social spaces that culminated within this microcosm. Deconstructing the anatomy of the *illam* in this way helps to elucidate not only the functions prescribed to them, but also the everyday spatial practices that emerged as a result. As noted in the introduction, scholarly works on the agrarian house are subsumed as isolated articles of analyses—as *just* an architectural edifice of the past, a medium to clarify *Vastu Shastra* principles, or simply a cosmological world that once housed gendered narratives. By studying the agrarian homesteads in their work as isolated relics, scholars overlook the complex and temporal nature of its domesticity, and the ways in which these ‘relics’ have re-appropriated into imaginaries that refuse to be erased. The result is a domestic site of plurality, which captures multiple temporal dimensions, producing a domestic site that cannot be subsumed into a standardized definition of domesticity.

Today, the word *illam* refers to the “property” owned by a Nambuthiri family. However, in the medieval period, in addition to property, it also indicated a patrilineal descent group consisting of all the descendants in the male line. According to Nambuthiri customs, the eldest son of the family married within the community, thereby ensuring a poor-blooded lineage. The remaining junior male members had conjugal liaisons, or what were then known as *Sambandham*, with other upper-caste women, usually from the Nayar caste or their equivalent.

---


Since the Nayars followed the Marumakkathayam laws or the matrilineal system, wherein descent was through the mother’s line, the Nambuthiris ensured that only their eldest son’s pure-blood children became the sole hires of the illam. In this sense, the Nambuthiri illam’s lineage wholly depended on the eldest son and his children. daughters, if unmarried retained membership of the illam, however after marriage they became affiliated with their husband’s illam. Although junior male members of an illam carried on conjugal relations with other women, they nevertheless were entitled to live within the family property and enjoy benefits such as food, shelter and other expenses that the family provided. The illam, just like the upper-caste Nayar tarawad, was considered impartible. Male members, their Nambuthiri wives and unmarried girls all had an equal interest in the property: they lived together and continued their daily lives through a cycle of rituals and with much religious fervor.

At Olappamanna illam, which is today a homestay for tourists, the architectural magnificence of the past still remains intact. The illam’s lime plastered laterite walls nestled under a heavy gabled roof assembled in coconut wooden rafters and Mangalore pattern clay tiles. Simple stone pillars with richly carved wooden capitals, polished wooden floors and heavily carved timer doors and windows emanate its once rich and glorious past.

The domestic architecture of the upper-caste communities of Nambuthiris and Nayars was fundamentally similar in its layout. However, the illam differed from the tarawad (of the Nayars) in certain features, which were dictated by the Nambuthiri kinship organization. With only the elder Nambuthiri son claiming proprietor-ship of the property, bedrooms were fewer in number as compared to a Nayar tarawad, which boasted a burgeoning family population. The

---

58 Ibid
remaining junior men—who would come to be known as the “visiting husbands” of Nayar women—would visit their wives in their tarawad. However, at times it has been found that their Nayar consorts and children were also brought to live within the illam’s property in their outhouses. Despite living in the same landed agrarian household as the Nambuthiris, the Nayar consorts were forbidden from entering the illam’s main house. Sankaranayarayan pointed to three such outhouses that exist still today. However, the main family which consists of an elderly Nambuthiri widow, Sridevi and her son have chosen to move into one of the outhouse as the main house is now a tourist destination. Today, visitors can walk through the inner chambers and view some of the ceremonies organized to showcase a typical Nambuthiri ritual, making the estate a key income generator for the family.

Specific power dynamics are at play here. Massey calls space a dimension brimming with power60, an aspect that becomes apparent here. For one, the illam rules forbade the Nayar consorts of the junior Nambuthiri men to enter the main house. Yet, we were informed they could enter the women's kitchen behind. Moreover, Nambuthiri illams all across the region had strict rules about specific lower caste groups. For instance, Barbers and Midwives could enter certain parts of the house. Still, Goldsmith and Washermen, the communities who practiced professions of a polluting nature (those which were not affiliated with religion in particular), could only enter the bathhouse area.61 Traveling tradespeople such as the Cettis who wanted to sell their goods to the women were allowed to enter the house's yard. In contrast, large groups of lower caste Tiyyans and Kammalar who worked as carpenters, masons, and potters were only


61 Schildt, Henri. The Traditional Kerala Manor. (Institut Francais de Pondiceri, 2012), 100
permitted up to the western entrance porch. The illam was a stage with its lead actors and show producers — the Nambuthiri men who occupied the main areas. Power receded towards the outer margins of the house, aligned with its ritual significance as well. The central courtyard — the critical power container of the house, was controlled by the Brahmin men. At the margins of the house, the powerful and the vulnerable collapsed as spaces of service and negotiation.

These homes — a matrix of rituals and ceremonies dictated both by their caste norms and religious beliefs — allocated much of their space to worship, daily religious practices and “sacrifices.” Accordingly, spaces of worship included a separate room inside the main house where a spread of deities was displayed: idols crafted in stone and brass and dyed in different colors. The wide inner corridors around the central courtyard, set up in the men’s wing of the illam were also used for devout purposes. The Nambuthiri women or Antharjanams, including the wife of the eldest Nambuthiri son, his mother, his unmarried sisters and his daughters, were all relegated to the second section of the illam. This section too had a courtyard, but a smaller one, with four wings organized around it. Not only did caste norms require that women live in a separate and smaller part of the house with fewer “ritual” spaces, they also prescribed that they dress in what later came to be infamously known as the “purdah” system. Dressed from head to toe in long white sheets of cloth and holding a cadjan umbrella when outside of the house to prevent being seen by outsiders, Nambuthiri women were perhaps the least visible group of the house.

The spatial assembly of the house is incomplete without addressing the daily rituals of the Nambuthiri. From the break of dawn, which was a key moment for the conduct of prayers, until sunset, which was rife with ceremonies, the daily life of both men and women contained various

62 Ibid
aspects that framed their devout life and how they lived inside their homes. Therefore, in this section, the spatial organization of the house and the inhabitants’ practices, as defined by religious beliefs and ceremonies, will be narrated together: one is not mutually exclusive from the other.

For instance, a set of bathing rituals would start off the day for both men and women. With their lives centered on the concept of purity, bathing their physical bodies was crucial as they believed a pure body provided the right medium to perform the remaining days’ rites. In her memoir *Antharjanam: Memoirs of a Nambuthiri Woman* (2011), Devaki Nilayamgode provides a glimpse of how an Antharjanam would begin her day. In addition to religious prayers and kitchen labor, ritual baths were a crucial part of the women’s daily routine as self-purification was a key aspect of *sudham*. Apart from being segregated spatially, the Antharjanams and Nambuthiris also observed a certain distance from people of other castes, especially the lower castes who attended to housekeeping and related activities within the *illam*. Nevertheless, the Antharjanams were escorted by the *irikkanamas* or inferior Nayar servants who would lead them daily to the bathing tank within the *illam* compound.

Ritual baths associated with purification and defilement occurred in the bathing house or water tank in the North Eastern side of the *illam* compound near the kitchen. The *irikkanamma* carried an oil lamp to light the way to the tank before sunrise, always maintaining a safe distance from the Antharjanams, as prescribed by custom. Different cleansing materials were specified for each aspect of the ritual bath. Women would start off with brushing their teeth

---

63 More information on the purification rituals can be found on the website founded by the Nambuthiri Trust in Calicut in addition to historic texts and works by Henri Schildt.
with *unikkeri*, an activated charcoal made of rice husk and then chewed betel leaves sitting by the water tank — betel being symbolic of their status while also a key part of rituals. Specific days were allocated for different types of baths according to Nilayamgode, however the practices and the days varied between Nambuthiri families across Kerala. In Nilayamgode’s family, the *Pakaravoor illam*, Tuesdays and Thursdays were scheduled for oil baths, with the *irikkanama* providing an oil massage: they crushed medicinal leaves to produce a kind of herbal shampoo and scrubbed their backs with a rough textured *vaaka*. Other rituals included applying a paste of castor seeds and turmeric on the foreheads of the women and, at the end of their baths, reciting shlokas as prayer while standing in the water for an hour— a practice that required discipline and patience. With materials like turmeric and herbs to cleanse their bodies— and prayers for the cleansing of their souls— ritual baths stood as the most important opening act of the Antharjanam’s day, befitting the Nambuthiri concept of purity and defilement.65

We are introduced to Smt. Sridevi Vasudevan, the widow of Olapamanna Damodaran, the nephew of the famous poet who became well known by his family name *Olappamanna*. A humble and composed woman that assisted in the founding of the *Olappamanna* homestay, Sridevi settles down to explain the layout of the *illam* and the everyday spatial acts that she remembers as a young bride who married into the family.

Sridevi explained the house to us in reverse. As we prepared to make notes on the *pumukham*, the shaded entrance portico at the South East corner of the house and the main entry point for the male members of the community, she surprised us by leading us to the North West corner instead, where the female kitchen is located, also known as the *Vadakekettu*. For this Nambuthiri woman who was born at the margins of British rule in India, the *illam’s* starting

65 Ibid
point was the women’s small kitchen. Having experienced life as an Antharjanam, she had more access to the women’s section of the illam. Used to observing the adults of her family as a child and living in an era where Nambuthiri women were forbidden to enter the male-dominated areas of the house, it seemed only natural to her to explain the house from her own vantage point. Tracing the entry point from the rear side, Sridevi worked her way into the second, smaller naalukettu of the eight winged house — the women’s section. She gestured to the bigger Naalukettu or the men’s section, admitting that her knowledge of those spaces was limited. In our conversation with Sridevi on the practices adopted by the Nambuthiri women during the 19th and 20th century, she informed us of the many rituals that women took part in from day to day. The “shudham” or purity aspects of living were deeply ingrained in their daily acts. As narrated by the writer Nilayamngode, Sridevi too informed us that the women started their day with a two hour cleansing ritual in the bathing tank using herbs and detoxing medicinal plants followed by prayers. Only on completing their body purification routine were they permitted back into their homes.

The women’s kitchen was also considered a sacred space. On one side were the cooking hearth and a dry area to pound rice brought in from the fields. On the other side was a small sanctuary of idols of the Gods that they worshipped. There was also another small kitchen next to the women’s main kitchen, which had access to a well from inside the house. This kitchen, known as the cheriya adukala, was small in comparison to the larger men’s kitchen where food was prepared for the male members of the house. Food preparation in the larger kitchen or valiya adukala was tended to by lower class male Brahmin cooks, imported from the neighboring state of Tamil Nadu. With both the Vadakekettu and cheriya adukala facing the smaller courtyard, the women spent most of their time either cooking or performing mini-rituals in the kitchen. But
they also found time to unwind and relax in the Vadakekettu, which seemed to function as a multipurpose hall for culinary activities, having meals, offering prayers and relaxing. What remains today of the kitchen are the slabs of stone counters and some ashes from the hearth. Horizontally wide stretches of timber windows with wooden slats framed at an angle permit the entry of light and air, but also ensure that the insides are not visible to the outside world.

Sridevi pointed to a small dark room across the women’s kitchen that seemed to be no longer in use. She explained to us that this used to be the widow’s room as well as the menstruation room. Both widows and women who were menstruating were considered to be impure according to Nambuthiri norms. Therefore, by caste law, they remained secluded until they emerged “pure” once again. We opened the door and inspected the room. Barely 2m x 2m, the room had a small window with minimal ventilation. The floor was cemented and she explained that the women would sleep on the floor without bedding and were provided unsalted food to eat during their stay in the room. While menstruating women were allowed to come out once their cycle was complete, widows remained there for months before they were let out.

From my conversations with this aging Nambuthiri woman, it became clear that the community of Brahmin women navigated their space with a personal intimacy pivoting on ingrained cultural and caste beliefs. Their daily practices of eating; sleeping, bathing and cooking were uniquely crafted to integrate their cultural values, which was based on a particular belief in a woman’s position in her house and society at large — one that could not be parsed through a feminist lens. These spatial practices were immersed in ritualistic fervor. For example, in the case of widows, the very act of sleeping on the cold floor without the comfort of a bed and eating unsalted food were acts of grief and sacrifice. It had a touch of sentiment and it was a form of paying respect to those who passed away. This act, it became clear, cannot be perceived as a
“plight” but rather as a gesture willingly put forth by the widow herself — an homage to her caste, family and her deceased spouse. Sridevi also proceeded to describe the Nambuthiri wedding rituals. She informed us that the bride was made to perform ceremonies in the men’s courtyard — the only time when the women of the house were permitted to enter this men’s domain.

While the women’s activities were limited to the ladies’ wing, enmeshed in caste codes, prayers and notions of purity and impurity, the Nambuthiri men had a busier schedule of rites for to adhere to. As Sociologist M.S.A Rao puts it in his book Social Change in Malabar (1957), “the life of the Nambuthiris was crowded with rites and ceremonies.” The Nambuthiris followed four stages of life known as asrama, and observed them according to the rules of certain Grhyasutras.66,67 In his study, The Traditional Kerala Manor (2012) architectural scholar and ethnographer Henri Schildt notes:

Among the Nambuthiris, the life-cycle rituals were known as the sixteen compulsory duties (sodasakriya) to be performed ideally by a Nambuthiri householder in his life, though only a few of them would have a chance to perform them all. They are classified into two main categories: those performed as rites of passage for oneself, and others to be performed for the ancestors (purvakriya). Most of these sixteen rituals are accompanied by fire offerings (homa) at the domestic fire (aupasana).68

67 As noted by Dr. Schildt from Iyer (1909- 1912:196): the Nambuthiris observe the Grhya- and Dharmasutras of Sankhayana- Asvalayana, Jaimini, Baudhayana and others, including the Smritis of Manu and Narada.
In fact, sixteen samskaras or ceremonies, all fixed and ordained by caste norms were mandatory for male members to undergo. In her research on the Nayars of Malabar, anthropologist Moore defined the house as a container of life-cycles and a ritually significant house and land unit. Although she was referring to the Nayar household, the same concept is equally applicable to the Nambuthiri’s house. What is more, these ceremonies were at times labeled to include the house parts. For example, the vaathil purapadu that stood for stepping out of the door was an event in which the newborn child is taken for its first outing. The house door here stands as an initiator of a ritual. Such an instance where the house itself becomes a marker of a life event indicates the strong bond between the space and its inhabitant.

The rites of passage of every member marked their position and significance in the household. These phases were celebrated with specific rituals and rites that ensured the purity of the Brahmin as well as established their relationship with the house. These sixteen rites were also known as “household rites” or Grihya rites. From birth to puberty, Nambuthiri men would perform each rite, which would, in turn, make them eligible to perform the “Sroutha” rites such as Yaagams or vedic fire sacrificial rituals. The word “Sroutha,” rooted in Hindu scriptures, is used to describe a ritualistic person or practice. The set of sixteen rites followed by Kerala Nambuthiris were also known as “Shodasakriyakal.” Every day living was circumscribed by different aspects of the Shodasakriyakal. For instance, prior to a man’s first sexual intercourse, they would perform a rite called the “Sekom.” Ceremonies known as Pumsavanom and Seemantham were conducted after conception for the women, whereas Jathakarman rites were
performed after the child’s birth. Thus, pre-conception to birth began with a devout connection to God, which helped establish a person’s rights to the family and the illam.\(^6^9\)

With a slow demise of the Nambuthiri traditions, much of the information on such rites has been passed on through oral histories with references to ancient Vedic texts. For instance, it is believed that “sekom” or symbolic insemination is marked by Vedic chanting. Mantrams, also known as Vedic chanting or spiritual formulae accompany each of these rites.\(^7^0\) Whether the *Pumsavanom* or the *Seemanthom*, both included a set of mantras which would be recited by the man and his wife.

While the Nambuthiris emphasized reciting Vedic chants in their sacred Pooja rooms, Nayars had a more celebratory style when it came to marking the rites of passage. Nevertheless, while both communities had pre-conception rituals that have been erased over time, the child naming ceremony still continues in much the same fashion to this day. The christening ceremony known as “naamakaranam” is once again performed within the precincts of the sacred room on the twelfth day after birth. By whispering holy slogans such as “You are Krishna Sarma” or “You are Savitri da” and then replacing the godly names of Krishna and Savitri with the chosen name for the child, the Nambuthiri set the child at par with the Gods and Goddesses.\(^7^1\)

While many of these rather private and serene ceremonies occurred inside the house within the sacred room, the first outing of the child was also considered equally significant. With the Nambuthiris having amassed much landed wealth from the 8\(^{th}\) century onwards, particularly

\(^{6^9}\) Accessed the website by the Namboothiri Trust, https://www.namboothiri.com/articles/shodasakriyakal.htm
\(^{7^0}\) Ibid
\(^{7^1}\) Accessed the website by the Namboothiri Trust, https://www.namboothiri.com/articles/shodasakriyakal.htm
though converting temple lands into their own names, the illams often stood in acres of agrarian land. Every movement of these family members was built on some deeper spiritual meaning.

*Vaathil Purapadu*, which meant “moving out of the door,” was a rite performed to mark the child’s first outing. Together with the *Choroonu* ceremony, or the first solid food meal, it represented the entry of the child into the real world. In her research on the Nayar-kinship structure and agrarian relation, Moore often notes how the land on which the house was built connected to the family through a set of rituals. Drawing on this concept, the Nambuthiris too brought aspects of their land into their kinship organization. The *Vaathil purapadu* and *Choroonu* celebrations were indeed their way of bringing forth the new family member to connect with the land and its produce. The rice procured from their paddy fields would be fed to the child as its first solid intake, and stepping out of the main door to the outdoors signified a way to symbolically make that connection with the land.72

Moving from the inner chambers of the *Olappamanna*’s women’s wing to the men’s wing, which contained the main central courtyard, Sridevi entertains us with old stories of marriages being held in this part of the house. As a few Nambuthiri priests walk to the *Thekkini* room, where the famous *Kalamezhuthi Pattu* mentioned on their website takes place, she regales us with matrimonial customs and narratives of her own marriage back when she was around sixteen years of age. She confesses that her marriage was a shortened version of the four day wedding characteristic of Brahmin customs, because by then social activism aimed at changing the rigid Nambuthiri ways of living had caught up in Kerala.

72 Ibid
Nambuthiri weddings were more humble in the way they were celebrated, unlike Nayar weddings, which were infused with pomp and show. In fact, these weddings were conducted in two different houses and brought together, unlike Nayar weddings where both bride and groom were married off in one place. The title given for the union in the case of the groom was “veli,” whereas for the bride it was “penkoda,” meaning “sending off the girl.” The bride would be referred to as the “kudi” throughout the ceremony and the final segment would be known as “placing of the bride” or _kudivepu_. Such references signified that the bride, whose final home would be her husband’s, required a series of rituals and devout prayers to establish her new space within her husband’s family.

The _Ayaniyoonu_ precedes the marriage. It was a process of having a traditional bath and lunch at an auspicious hour. Lunch usually consisted of the produce from the fields of the house and was laid out on a plantain leaf for the young woman and her sisters, who would enjoy what would be her last meal at her house. Sridevi unpacked some of her ayaniyoonu stories emphasizing the ritual aspects of that morning’s bath, which was also accompanied by singing and prayers. The groom would also have his own version of the _Ayaaniyoonu_ at his residence.

The four-day marriage was rich with mantras being chanted and offerings made to God. Again, the bride would be covered as per Vedic texts, in an unbleached cloth covering her from head to toe, making her almost invisible to the eye. This “veiled bride” concept was practiced rigorously in Kerala until the 1960s, after which it began to decline. The prayers offered to the Gods were many, and each God fulfilled a different request. While the couple would pray to Gods such as the God of Rain, God of Wind, and the Protector of the Earth among many others, it was the latter that was considered to be the most significant for Antharjanams. Nambuthiris believed that the bride was under the protection of _Soman_ — the Protector of Earth, _Gandharvan_.
and Agni during infancy, childhood and as a youth respectively, and that Viswasa, yet another God, protects her virginity.\textsuperscript{73} Therefore, it was necessary for the groom to thank these specific Gods for protecting his wife before she would proceed to his house and come under his guardianship.\textsuperscript{74}

In Nayar custom, the \textit{taalikettu} ceremony,\textsuperscript{75} or the tying of the wedlock around the bride’s neck, was performed by the groom. However, in the Nambuthiri system, this part of the ritual fell to the bride’s father. After a particular ritual known as the \textit{Udakapoormam} is completed, the bride is confirmed as a wife. The face-viewing ceremony, or the \textit{Mukhadarsham} ritual, takes place soon after this, when the groom moves her veil to get a glimpse of her face. The last two segments of the union include the groom welcoming the bride into the house by holding her hand, which is known as \textit{Paanigrahanam}, and finally ends with a rice-popping ceremony, or the \textit{Malarhomam}. “Malar” (popped rice) is ceremoniously served into fire for pleasing and then praying to the bride’s family deity to detach her from her father’s "Gothram" and attach her to groom’s "Gothram", but not to detach her from her deity.\textsuperscript{76} At the end of Malarhomam the bridegroom performs a process called "\textit{Ammichavittikkal}". This is meant to advise the bride, after helping her to step on the \textit{Ammi} — a grinding granite slab used in the kitchen to encourage her to be strong like this instrument. \textit{Ammi} symbolizes strength, firmness, physical fitness and integrity. These two processes are repeated. When Malarhomam begins, "Veli Othu" also begins.\textsuperscript{77} While the \textit{Veli Othu} is informed by a group of Nambuthiri men who

\textsuperscript{73} More information on this can be found in the website Namboothiri.com, created by a Trust of Kerala Brahmin community.

\textsuperscript{74} Accessed the website by the Namboothiri Trust, https://www.namboothiri.com/articles/shodasakriyakal.htm

\textsuperscript{75} More details on the \textit{taalikettu} marriage are explained in the Nayar section. It was considered a mock wedding prior to practicing polygamy.

\textsuperscript{76} Accessed the website by the Namboothiri Trust, https://www.namboothiri.com/articles/shodasakriyakal.htm

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid
surround the bride and chant aloud in chorus, it is also intended to enlighten her regarding the upcoming challenges that she might have to face in matrimony.\textsuperscript{78}

*Kudiveppu* marks the entry of the bride into the groom’s house, her final residence, at which point onwards she is considered a permanent member of her husband’s family. This is one of the few times that *Antharjanams* of the *illam* have an opportunity to visit the men’s quarters. The ceremony takes place in the central courtyard. The participation of women and children is notable in this event, which is one of the very few that they are allowed to partake in. The newly married couple is welcomed into the courtyard by the Antharjanams, where the eldest woman of the family will offer sweets called “appams” to the deity. Children often disrupt the ceremony by hijacking the sweet appams before they can be served to the deity. This is followed by a “Kaikottikali” group dance where the women encircle the couple and dance and sing by clapping their hands to the rhythm of the music. The *Oupaasanam* ceremony marks the end of the four day matrimonial events. This ritual includes a fire ceremony known as the *homam*, where a small pit with an embankment of bricks is prepared in the *Vadakinni* wing of the house. The fire from one of the previous ceremonies is then used to light this *homam*, after which it is needs to remain unextinguished until the death of either the groom or the bride. The "Sruvam" (long wooden spoon made of Plaasu) used for their first *Oupaasanam* has to be kept for later use, during the husband’s cremation.\textsuperscript{79} This act is repeated twice a day, till the fourth day.

On all four days, the wife sits on a woolen carpet laid on a design drawn using rice powder.\textsuperscript{80} During *Homam*, she is symbolically connected ("Thutarnirikkal") to the husband using "Darbha" (a type of grass). She bathes only in the morning of day four, while the husband

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid
\textsuperscript{79} Accessed the website by the Namboothiri Trust, https://www.namboothiri.com/articles/shodasakriyakal.htm
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid
bathes regularly and performs daily rituals. For Saamavedi Namboothiris, Oupaasanam is on the fourth day just before Sekam, or the first sexual intercourse. Until then, the fire is kept alive. For them, the first day ends with Randaam Homam, after which the bride sits on an ordinary cloth and not on a woolen sheet. But during the marriage ceremony, after "Agnimukham", both Saamavedi bride and groom sit on a woolen sheet to continue performing the marriage ceremony until Randam Homam.

Sridevi had recapped many of the ceremonies in detail, yet what was once a four day event, carefully planned in every manner, had by the 1980s become rare and less specific. Although today Olappamanna Mana has transformed itself into a gallery and homestay, Sridevi informs us that new brides of the family are still brought back to the men’s courtyard where they perform the age-old traditions as necessary.

As she described, the current spatial practices have evolved over time in the illam, and we noted that many of them—such as isolating the widows—have been removed. Women were also permitted to enter all the spaces in the house. However, certain vestiges of the past still remain. Menstruating women are still considered impure, and although today they do not have to isolate themselves in a small dark room, they still need to remain indoors and are not permitted in ritualistic spaces. They are still, however, not permitted to enter the kitchens or touch the food.

The Nambuthiri community navigated their domestic spaces through a spiritual lens. By deriving their interpretations from the Vedic texts and mythological tales, they crafted a life that was based on chanting mantras and offering prayers to the Gods while also ensuring that they

---

81 A specific sect of Nambuthiris. Site Two of this thesis deals with this sect.
82 Accessed the website by the Namboothiri Trust, https://www.namboothiri.com/articles/shodasakriyakal.htm
remained pure in body and spirit. This divine way of thinking was extended to both the internal and external spaces of their homes. Whether it was by ensuring that the Nayar consorts of the junior members did not enter their homes, or by conducting day long homams, the house to them was embedded in their body and their practices. That is to say, an impure person such as a Nayar entering their home was emblematic of their own body’s defilement. Such was the intricate connection between body and the house that they held. The life cycle of family members, whether it was the birth of a child or a marriage, was not considered a festivity but rather a solemn time to infuse them with holy chants and perpetuate such sacred moments. For these Brahmins, the house was a medium, and a part of them that would aid in containing these ritualistic moments while also elevating them in society’s eyes.

What is more, the house’s boundaries, such as the main door and its power-centric areas like the courtyard, played a crucial part in labeling the events and helping reinforce the linkage between the house and its people. Whether it was the vaathil purarapadu (the child’s first outing) or the kudiveppu (placing the bride in her husband’s home), the physical parameters of the material artifact defined the roles of these performers. Despite such principles and norms centered on space and ritual, the Brahmin men at times took not all acts with such seriousness.

Although Nambuthiri men were perceived to be strict adherers to religion, they too enjoyed lighter moments. While Sridevi could not recollect specific moments, I turned to Nilayamgode’s memoirs to grasp how the men entertained themselves. Nilayamgode recollects moments of enjoyment between the men in various parts of the Pakaravoor illam. Her observation that, ‘the building always echoed with loud conversations and laughter’, implied that Brahmin men lived unchecked. She notes how men lay about engaging in idle chatter or reading scholastic books in the pumukham or the front porch or vestibule of the illam — a space that
could not be accessed by the Antharjanams. Actively participating in leisure activities and indulging in studies, the Nambuthiri men also enjoyed lounging in the thekkini, the southern wing, as well as the kilakinni, the eastern wing — both of which were shut off from the Antharjanams. Nilayamgode’s writing reflects the spatial limitations that the Antharjanams faced not just within their own illam but through illams all across Kerala, demonstrative of the ways in which the emergence of spatial rules produced a restrictive life alongside limited mobility for the Antharjanams. Further, a close reading of Nilayamgode’s memoir shows that her natal illam, as in most aristocratic homes, engaged estate managers. These managers occupied one of the porticos, adjoining the office room where accounts were kept and rents collected. The largest portico that stood close to the kitchen premises, she notes, was solely meant for the male members to rest both before and after a meal. The pathayappura, which was a regular haunt for male Brahmins, also opened straight into this portico. In Olappamanna too, Sridevi pointed out the once existing porch known as Purattalam was now converted to an office space.

Padipuras formed an integral part of illams. Interpreted as the gateway to an illam, these entrance gate structures were built along the western boundary wall, in line with the thekkini verandah. Although the aesthetics and architectural model of the padipura has been altered since its inception in the 8th century C.E, most certainly evolving in its spatial utility — as we see in present-day illams — the metaphorical symbolism of ‘status’ that it alludes to remains intact. The legendary Malayali proverb, veetinekal valiya padipura (the gate house is bigger than the house) suggests the padipura functioned as an elitist symbol, an outward expression emblematic of the reputation and standing of the Nambuthiri family in society. Preordained by Vaastu

---

Shastra in its orientation, the *padipura* is a large gateway structure with an upper story that is a spacious hall — a well-lit and ventilated space constructed in wood and supported on masonry walls. The hall, enclosed within a wooden façade of slatted windows that run along its length on both the front and the back side, historically functioned as a male-centric area. The angular positioning of the horizontal wooden slats were, in fact, a protective measure to keep the interior space invisible to outsiders while offering it as a watch post during the night. The slats positioned at an angle kept away the harsh winds and monsoon showers and enabled ample airflow and light into this socio-cultural space for *Nambuthiri* men. Conceived as a relaxation space for the menfolk as well as a watch house, the *padipura* was a site of gendered spatial practice, clearly dominated by men, forbidden to women, and symbolically telling of its inhabitants’ societal stature. The *Olappamanna illam*’s refusal to rebuild the once-destroyed *padipura* can be interpreted in many ways. It can possibly mean that its very erasure by a powerful ruler more clearly articulated its renowned standing in society, or perhaps the *illam* wished to display this erasure as a site of memory, reflective of the turbulent period. In either case, we did not receive any response to it from the family.

For Antharjanams, at puberty, their life trajectory changed completely. From playing in the woods outside the temples to running around in male dominated spaces in plantain loin clothes, the ‘adult woman’ at the age of nine or so then started to observe seclusion or *ghosha* (purdah system). To live in a fully covered state, especially while walking outside the house or during temple visits, the Antharjanams used a cloak also known as *putappu* and a cadjan umbrella known as *kuta* to keep them secluded from the rest of the world. In addition to the fabrics and accessories that inhibited them, the Antharjanams’ domesticity was equally circumscribed by rituals and domestic labor. An article that appeared in 1907 in the women’s
magazine *Lakshmibhaya*, noted the labor conditions of the Antharjanams within their own domestic spaces:

Look at the homesteads of the Nambuthiris.....in many of these, which require one or two para (a local measure of weight) of rice and adequate quantities of side dishes to go with...the entire burden of the cooking is borne by two or three Antharjanams all by themselves. … lift up huge brass vessels brimming with hot cooked rice….with their delicate arms and coolly tilting them to drain off the rice gruel, in full view of their heartless men.\(^{84}\)

Working inside their kitchen to cook large amounts of food for the many guests, including thirty to forty visiting scholars at a time, and family members, the Antharjanams’ responsibility was to ensure that they did not run out of food. Moreover, Brahmin rules prescribed that the Nambuthiri clan was not permitted to eat food prepared by any other caste except their own. Seeking help from outsiders being out of the question, the Antharjanams took to food production and kitchen maintenance leaving them hardly any time for relaxation.\(^{85}\) During the reformist movement in the early twentieth century, although this ritualized nature of domesticity had become habitual for the Antharjanams, the article forced an evolving Kerala society to question these relentless practices, perceiving them as a serious impediment to the spread of modern education among the Antharjanams. Responding to the queries of the Nambuthiri Female Education Commission of 1927 instituted by the YKS, reformer Madampu Narayanan Namboodiri, remarked:


“….they [Antharjanams] start working in the kitchen by the age of eight…when a few years pass by other tasks are loaded on…what is called Nedikkal (making offerings)…..from early morning to 10 o’clock there is nothing to do but nedikkal and namaskaram (prostrating in prayer) towards east, south…”86

When we inquired about the working conditions of the Antharjanams in the Olappamanna illam, Sridevi dismissed such notions entirely. According to her, the wealth and status of the family afforded them ample servants and therefore the Antharjanams were not pressured into any heavy duty work in the kitchen. She noted, however that they prepared their own food. Sankaranarayan reluctantly pointed out that Olappamanna was only an exception, as there were many Nmabuthiri illams, where the women indeed had to attend to much of the house work.

Henri Schildt, prominent scholar of traditional Kerala manor homes notes,

“For women, the major realms of reign were the kitchen, family dining and the North Eastern part of the house, with the exception of the sacred spaces (vatakkinini and puja muri). The Labour Room located at the north western corner of the house is considered to be a very private space due to the rules of purity.’ …… ‘apart from the spaces mentioned, oral narratives inform that the women were permitted to spend time around the courtyard or even enter the porch- vestibule, but probably applied to the moments when no rituals were performed by the males around the courtyard. In the case of unmarried females, large collective bedrooms were built on the first floor of the North Malabar Houses.” 87


87 Schildt, Henri. The Traditional Kerala Manor. (All India Press, Pondicherry, 2012) : p. 103
Although historians, reformers and writers in the early twentieth century have interpreted the mundane lives of the Antharjanams as ones of confinement circumscribed by harsh labour, Nilayamgode’s memoirs recall small intimacies that occurred in spaces within the illams that convey similar narratives to those reported by Schildt through his interlocutors. For example, the association of the courtyard with the chewing of betel leaves as a ritual was not only treated as a status symbol amongst aristocratic Nambuthiri families, but also highlighted moments of entertainment when the Antharjanams of a household sat together and enjoyed some time of relaxation for themselves — although this routine was practiced only in the absence of the menfolk. Performing the ritual of chewing betel leaves three times a day was believed to be emblematic of social status for aristocratic families. Nilayamgode’s narratives about women sitting around the nadumittam, or courtyard, and enjoying themselves illustrates the minute intimacies that the courtyard afforded with its openness and ample light — the little comfort experienced by them amidst the challenging labor and repressive lives that the Antharjanams otherwise led.

Sankaranarayanan recalls the illam’s past with the legion of scholars, writers and art connoisseurs that this house produced. He narrates to us, in a nutshell, the stories of the historically-known people of the illam — people who he says made a difference to Kerala’s cultural society. He talks about those who participated in the cultural evolution of art forms such as ‘kathakali’ — an ancient performative form — part mime and part drama, that still persists in the current Keralite cultural circles. Alongside the many names he briefs us on, such as the famous poet O M Subramaniyam Nambuthiripad born in 1923 and O M C Narayanan Nambuthiripad, the famous Sanskrit scholar born in 1910 who translated the Rig Veda into Malayalam — one name stands out because it belongs to a woman.
Born in 1934, Leela Nambuthripad was an *Antharjanam* (the female counterpart to the male Nambuthiri) and also known as the Enid Blyton of Kerala. A Kathakali scholar and academic, Leela wrote children’s books under the pen name Sumangala. *Nambuthiri* caste norms informed the spatial practices and the ritual norms of the Antharjanams since the ascension of the Indo-Aryans into Kerala. The word *Antharjanam* in fact equates to ‘people of the interior’. Malayali\(^88\) historian and feminist J Devika notes, “Gender was undoubtedly one of the major axes of internal regulation among the Malayali Brahmins”. She further elaborates, “All women past puberty had to observe elaborate seclusion, and they moved out of their homes only with the cloak and the large cadjan umbrella. Combining ritualized domesticity with taxing domestic labour, the *Antharjanam’s* life is one of angst and exhaustion.”\(^89\) Devika’s comments are essential for understanding the underpinnings of an *Antharjanam’s* life, as they explain not only the spatial boundaries which were imposed on them but also highlight the social confines that were endorsed through material artefacts such as the cloak and cadjan umbrella. In light of these general assumptions made about the *Antharjanams*, I was surprised to discover that Sumangala, the writer, was an *Antharjanam* herself.

Despite following a rigid caste-based culture with rituals defining their every step, by the mid twentieth century, Olappamanna Mana had emerged as a space that advocated for a progressive and egalitarian community. Whether it was by promoting the art form of *Kathakali* or encouraging the family’s women to pursue their writing ambitions, they stood as the progenitors of social advancement. Yet, those ambitions did not undermine the value that the Mana’s inhabitants prescribed to their everyday life. While Antharjanams like Sumangala or even Nilayamgode took to writing and activism respectively, women like Sridevi stayed back.

---

\(^{88}\) Malayali refers to the natives of Kerala who speak the native language Malayalam.  
and continued to follow the religious path paved by their ancestors inside the Mana. With time, practices such as “Ghosha” (the infamous purdah system), child marriage and forbidding widows to remarry were erased, and many of the rituals were retained in these houses. Without a prescribed set of spiritual norms to assist them, the house would have been an empty shell to its inhabitants.

Today, many temporal realities of the past norms and present neoliberal aspirations meet at this Mana and remain embedded in it. Yet, the Kalamezhuthipattu and the morning mantras, the offerings to the deities, and the cleansing of the house with holy water give it its value. Looking back at the stories regaled by the interlocutors, the house may appear to have transformed primarily on its functionality. Presently, traders and lower caste have equal access to the place as much as any Brahmin, thereby altering the power balance. Still, vestiges of what was once a stage for Brahmin theatrics remain — like the central courtyard where the family’s weddings and the kudiveppu are performed. The main door that once defined the child’s relationship with the outside world has reshaped itself to welcome the commoners. Yet, at the same time, it beholds the value of the past by simultaneously allowing the new bride to enter the home, thereby defining her relationship with the house. Such a collage of notions seems to have enveloped the idea of the house now, and the house has mutated into accommodating the current beliefs and practices of its people and society at large.
Site Two: Thekkeparambu Illam:

A few miles down the road from Olappamanna illam, stands a humble and relatively smaller Naalukettu that belongs to the Thekkumparambu family. Set in less than an acre of barren land with a few cows grazing in the vicinity, this illam has been preserved in much the same way as when it was built in the 1800s. A double storied dwelling unit, it too had a small central courtyard and four wings organized around it. While Olappamanna is renowned for its austerity and status amidst the Kerala Brahmins, the Thekkeparambu Mana was known for the Somayaaji or Nambuthiri Priest who lived here back in the 1800s.

_Somayaaji_ is a title bestowed upon a Nambuthiri on achieving a higher level of scholarly education and on those who could perform the powerful _Somayaji Srauta_ ritual. This illam stood out because they were one of the few who maintained the “fire ritual” throughout the 1900s until about the 1960s, when the “unextinguishable” fire was finally put out — a fire that burnt continuously for close to twenty-five years. Centered on this fire’s longevity, life in this illam was circumscribed around not only rituals but also the family, who had to take every step necessary to ensure that the fire would not extinguish — as they believed it would bring them bad luck and disrupt world peace. The family, who now consist of the eldest daughter-in-law of the late Somayaaji and her children, recalled how their ancestors and they themselves navigated life during the 1900s to the 1970s.

While the standard rooms and wings such as the Vadakkini and Thekkini were located around the courtyard, the mother pointed to the area where the _homam_ pit was once maintained. Just like the _Oupasanam_ ritual, during which the newly married couple would light a fire from

---

90 This ritual is mentioned in detail in site one.
the marriage fire-pit, so did the Somayaaji priest light one from the yaagam-pit. This pit was located in the Yaagashala, where the Somayaaji and his fellow priests would light a fire.

Yaagam or fire sacrifice is performed in special thatched sheds called Yaagasala. This unit consists of many halls that are named after rituals from Vedic texts. For instance, it consists mainly of a Mahaavedi (great hall) in which there is the Dasapadam for Homams (eastern end), a slightly raised platform called Havirdhaanam (on the west side of Dasapadam), a Sadass to the east of the west Saala (on the west side of Havirdhaanam), two Upasaalaas (small sub-sheds) called Maarjaaleeyam on the south side and Agneedhiyam on the north (on the south & north sides of Havirdhaanam, respectively). The Agnihothra Saala, also called Praagwaamsam or west Saala (on the west side of Sadass), is attached to it, and along the west boundary is the Pathneesaala (western end). There are many other arrangements in a Yaagasaala for specific rituals, most of which are constructed earlier on an auspicious day, but formally done during the Yaagam.

Upon completing the fire sacrifice in the Yaagashala, the Somayaaji would then carry this fire and place it in another pit in the Vadakkini, after which he and his wife would watch over it daily. The daughter, who accompanied the mother during our site visit, explained that the fire is usually put out only upon the demise of either the Somayaaji or his wife, who had the title of “Pathinaadi,” According to the Nambuthirí’s beliefs, this fire, especially one that was lit by a Somayaaji, helped perpetuate world peace and therefore needed to be overseen on a daily basis. In fact, we were informed the Somayaaji and his wife had never stepped out of the house together as a couple in their life, as one of them had to remain in the house to oversee the fire.

---

92 Ibid
The Thekkeparambu family were legitimized as priests — a title that established them as higher than a Nambuthiri. Yet, as compared to the Olappamanna illam, they had not amassed as much land. Although the family hired lower caste men to cultivate some of the paddy they owned, much of their income was dependent on the services provided by the Somayaaji at rituals and ceremonies, particularly at temples. In fact, the Guruvayur temple, a significant temple located in the nearby town of Trichur, was one of the key benefactors that provided him with a salary on the auspicious day of Dwadashi after Ekadashi\textsuperscript{93}. In Hindu Dharma, Ekadashi holds great importance. It is the favorite day of Lord Krishna and devotees observe "upvas" or fast, to be closer to him. Ekādaśī is also considered a day to cleanse the body, aid repair and rejuvenation, and is usually observed by a partial or complete fast.

As we moved about the house, the family explained the concept of the pathayapura in humbler homes like theirs. Usually a double storied structure used for storing grains procured from their fields, as well as a men’s lounge in wealthy Nambuthiri homes, this building was absent here. Instead, they opened a room that resembled a large wooden box. Clad with timber along the ceiling, walls and ground, this room, also known as the “mach,” housed the grains within the home.

Apart from the three bedrooms on the first floor, a small kitchen and rooms for ceremonies on the ground floor, the household of five family members lived a simple life based on traditional Nambuthiri customs. The last time the Somayaaji’s fire was extinguished was when he passed away. Since then, the family has stopped the fire ritual but maintained the pit in his memory. Instead, they light a lamp to symbolize the significance of those rituals which had sustained family life through the years.

\textsuperscript{93} Ekadashi is the eleventh lunar day of each of the two lunar phases
This short site visit to Thekkeparambu Illam highlighted the existence of two classes of Nambuthiris. The aristocratic landlords or *jenmis* like the Olappamannas had large portions of land in their possession, from which they amassed vast amounts of wealth by hiring cultivators. In this way, the Mana also had established itself in a higher economic position. Yet, the Somayaaji’s house, which his grandson, Omanakuttan informed us was “only a miniature form of a Naalukettu,” too, had many similarities with Olappamanna. For one, irrespective of the class situation, both families were driven by a desire to live a pure and sacred life — one that elevates them socially.

Moreover, practicing rituals and ceremonies were deeply intertwined with their lives; the house was itself a ritual for them. Both the homes were alike in their layout; barring the scale of each, the rooms, the wings, and the verandahs all had one sole function — to contain their rituals. This enmeshment of spirituality and space underlined their way of living, and it was through these ritualistic definitions that the inhabitants themselves acquired their identities as men and women.

In comparing the Olappamanna Mana to the Thekkeparambu illam, surely the differences in their economic status were evident. But these spaces, irrespective of class compelled the people, both inhabitants and outsiders alike to perform in specific ways. The house was scripted through layers of boundaries and areas. The front porch is an area assumed to receive guests in western societies. Yet here it stands as a warning signal to society, reminding them on their own lack of privileges. Despite having a single courtyard, unlike Olappamanna Mana which had separate wings for men and women, the house accommodated the gendered division by adhering to rituals and crafting their own ideas of house boundaries. The place where the yaagam fire was
created was strictly forbidden for the women. Such impositions based on religion were embedded into the house thereby shaping it as a container of beliefs.

The control of the women of these houses was spatially driven, yet the symbolism of the space permeated into the gendered roles they took on. For instance, in the Thekkeparambu illam, the kitchen was a women-centric area and clearly helped heap on and shapes their secondary role as servers in the home. Yet as Brahmin men could only consume meals prepared by their brethren, it symbolically elevated their women in relation to the lower caste servants. As dominion, symbolism, and roles collide in these spaces, they reveal the shifting shades of space in conjunction with their location and beliefs. Illams are an apt example of this, and these story fragments and practices come together bound by ceremonies to craft the Nambuthiri’s home.
Section Two: The Nayar Tarawad

Site Three: Madapullikalam House

On an evening in the 1870s, as Kavalappara Nayar, a man well known for his affiliations with the Kochi Royal family, took his last breath, his family asked his wife to leave the house. Stepping into a thoni, the narrow wooden canoe often used as a mode of transportation through the rivers and backwaters of Kerala, the widow, escorted by her eldest daughter and son-in-law, journeyed across the Bharatapuzha River to reach the village of Thiruvilwamala. As she stepped out of the canoe, her necklace, beaded with gold coins, broke loose and scattered across the white sand on the river bank. She collected most of the coins and stashed them away before they walked to the Naalukettu house, called Madapullikalam, which had been built for her in anticipation of her widowhood. This story of a widowed Nayar woman compelled to leave her house in the dead of night was an unusual case in the history of the Nayar caste.

Historically, Nayar families, matrilineal in structure, hailed their women as inheritors of the family's house who held the final word on day-to-day domestic affairs. They inhabited large courtyard-winged houses nestled amidst acres of agrarian land where they raised their children, managed domestic chores, and tended to the peasants who worked the land. Unlike the Nambuthiri families, where an Antharjanam could marry only once, Nayar women enjoyed the benefits of a polygamous life. That is to say, Nayar polygamy sanctioned multiple partners, each of whom was legally partnered with them and, if necessary, divorced on request. Termed as ‘visiting husbands,’ these men were generally of the Nayar caste, but often belonged to the higher Nambuthiri caste. They would only make “conjugal visits” to their partner’s house. With
most spaces within the house marked as the woman’s territory, the Nayar household was undoubtedly a woman-oriented space.

Eventually, the widow who arrived in the *thoni* passed away, leaving the house to her daughter, who then passed it onto her daughter — a theme that underlines the matrilineal system of inheritance, known as *Marumakkathayam*. Five generations on, the Madapullikalam house stands on five acres of land and is currently owned and managed by the present matriarch of the family, Smt. Thangam Rajendran.

In the fall of 2021, I decided to conduct a field trip to this house, built around the 1800s and preserved and maintained through female-family lines in much of the matriarchal fashion since then. On the streets and in the village of Thiruvalwamala, where the Madapullikalam house is located, the family has acquired the labels of being good Samaritans and benevolent. The clan has garnered the community’s blessings for years. Not only did they sponsor a local dispensary since the early 1900s that distributed free medical care for the villagers, but they also installed a *thanmeer pandal*\(^94\) at the street corner — where the house-help distributes clay pots of water and buttermilk to the villagers, including cavernous stone buckets of water for nearby grazing cattle. These social practices illustrated the status, generosity, and power that Nayar clans upheld within Kerala society historically.

The film crew and I turned the corner, where the *thanmeer pandal* once stood, and entered a driveway paved with alternating zig-zag patterns of grey and red cement blocks. Flanked on both sides of the four-meter wide driveway was a low brick wall with crusty patches of cream-white paint, now weathered down to a dark mossy green — a theme widely rampant in Kerala.

\(^94\) A temporary shelter constructed by the roadside that provides free water to passers-by.
due to its heavy monsoon showers. Beyond the time-scarred low hung walls was a neatly landscaped garden blooming with buffalo grass and tall, lush tropical trees bearing juicy mangoes, cashew, coconuts, and jackfruit. Nearly a hundred meters from the entrance gate, the driveway ended at the threshold of the two-storied portico, designed in an eclectic mix of British colonial bungalow style featuring elliptical arches supported on wide fluted columns standing side by side with an open hall above sheltered by a Kerala style pitched roof. Mangalore pattern clay roof tiles atop the wooden rafters and two tall trimmed trees that seem to have been imported produced an aura of a traditional grandeur mixed in a colonial flavor. On our arrival, Thangam, a well-composed, matronly figure, appeared on the entrance verandah to greet us. Draped in a creamy white embroidered sari, Thangam, aged 85, revealed that she was a graduate of the renowned Saint Theresa’s college in the distant Ernakulam town. Speaking immaculate English and fluent Malayalam, she gave us a tour of her house before we set out to explore the five acres of land filled with small temples, rubber trees, coconut palms, and bathing ponds.

In this section I survey the Nayar agrarian homestead, also known as the Nayar tarawad or veedu. By using the one hundred and fifty-year-old Madapullikalam house as a case study, I focus on the spatial organization of Nayar homes through the lens of gender. By exploring the layout of the house and examining the spatial divisions in the ensemble of buildings, temples, and other structures within the parambu95, I develop a better understanding of how spaces and gender interacted in the colonial period in Kerala. For this, I draw on etiquettes enacted in various domestic spaces, ceremonies and rituals therein performed, Vaastu principles applied to house design, and caste norms employed in these spaces. Moreover, while this kind of spatial and cultural analysis allows me to reveal how people of the upper-caste Nayar community lived

95 Parambu, the property in which the house stands is explained in site I.
with gender as the axis of regulation, I use archival records of British land tenancy acts and marriage records to provide insight on how changes in social and administrative laws impacted the spatial choreography within these homes over time. By interweaving these explorations with Kerala’s history and traditions, I illustrate how and why upper-caste people lived in such distinctive ways and what made them change domestic spatial patterns over time.

Madapullikalam’s Anatomy

Today the word tarawad is loosely used; in present-day Kerala, Nambuthiris, Nayars, and a copious number of lower castes refer to their families as the tarawad. There is a vagueness which allows the word to encompass both house and family, much like house and home overlap in meaning in the English language. During my interactions with Malayalees, I found natives referring to their family as tarawad. “Njangalude tarawatil…,” they would start by saying—meaning, in our tarawad. This dichotomy could mean one of two things—in our family or within our home. It is up to the audience to decipher whether the speaker meant the physical building or the group of inhabitants that occupy it. Either way, the word tarawad is a weighted word in Kerala history, for it connotes societal status and honor. It also implies that the house was a Naalukettu, a symbol of stature. Historically, Nayars referred to their house and family combined as tarawad, but at times, as a way of separating the two, they would allude to their domestic space as veedu. Like Nambuthiri illams, the Nayar house was a courtyard dwelling organized with four wings, all of which bore the same names—Vadakkini, Thekkini, Padinjarini, and Kizhakinni. The Nayar house design approach drew on the same orientation principles as the Nambuthiris. But the usage of these spaces was very different, as it was based on caste norms. For example, in the Madapullikalam house, the people

---

96 These wings are explained in detail in the beginning of this section in the Olappamanna site section.
performed death rites in the Vadakinni wing alongside dining activities, unlike in Olappamanna illam, where the inhabitants used the Vadakkini wing solely for dining purposes.

The Madapullikalam house had some extensions since its conception. The family added the rear side (northern) verandah and kitchen to accommodate their growing family. Apart from these minor additions, much of the house has remained the same. Like Nambuthiri illams, Nayar homesteads were an assemblage of multiple axillary buildings clustered together, creating a self-sustaining ecology. Just as we did not find a padipura in the Olappamanna illam, we discovered that Madapullikalam, too, was missing its entrance structure. Upon inquiry, Thangam informed us that the padipura, which served as a watch post and a men’s lounge, was demolished when the family purchased a motor car in the 1970s. The steps to the padipura and the width of the entrance gate restricted car access. What is more, by the 1970s there was no point in maintaining a separate men’s lounge as gendered space had evolved with the times. These spaces either disappeared entirely or were repurposed into guest bedrooms or store room.

A typical Nayar family’s inhabitation process revealed its familial ties, the corporate nature of the family unit, which highlighted the hierarchy of inheritance and house management, central food production, and the home treasury elements as well as its conjugal practices.97 Their homes boasted of rich tapestries of timber carvings, polished stone flooring, arched hallways, timber columns with ornate capitals, and latticed wooden ceilings—all combined to reflect Nayar aristocracy. In other words, the family life of a Nayar was a multi-layered lifestyle that blended in these various social identities. The kinship structure, which included a matriarchal joint family

97 Melinda Moore, Joanne Mencher, Balakrishna Menon et al furnish more details on the Nayar family structure in their works.
led by women, reflected a women-oriented space with bedrooms, kitchen, and halls being accessible to women.

Moreover, this produced gendered segregation equally. With women taking over the main house, except for the karnavan\(^98\), bachelor males—sons, brothers, and nephews of the ancestress lived in axillary buildings within the parambu. Caste norms prohibited women from entering male-only zones, yet men were allowed to access the main house during mealtime or discuss matters with the karnavan. Although not often strictly followed, these choices were the preferred way of living. While South Asian architects and historians took little interest in the social meaning of agrarian homesteads, the few studies produced on the social aspects of these clusters, if examined closely, will come in handy to understand anthropologist Melinda Moore’s definition of the tarawad as a “ritually significant house and land unit.”\(^99\)

In his paper, *The Impact Of Kinship Systems on the Generation of House-Types* (1990), Professor of Architecture Raj Mohan Shetty noted:

>c]orporate ownership of property in that structure provided physical evidence of the social bond between members of the kin-group. The tarawad system, as traditionally practiced, had a number of specific implications for the structuring of residential space. Key among these, for reasons of separation between individual household domains, was a

\(^{98}\) A *Karnavan* was the representative of the family, the public face. He would manage the properties for the ancestress and keep the treasury under check. Most Nayar houses had an office room built for the *Karnavan*, where he would spend his time looking into the family’s accounts and discussing financial matters with tenants or attending to local disputes.

distinction between public, semipublic and private space. Because rituals traditionally contained a communal component, each tarawad house also contained a ritual core.\textsuperscript{100}

It is vital to elaborate on the terms “kinship” and “descent” in the context of the Nayars to understand the distinctions between public, semipublic and private space that Shetty makes. Kinship and descent manifested in the organization of building clusters within the parambu as well as the formulation of spatial organization inside the main house. In the book \textit{Matrilineal Kinship} (1961), anthropologists David Schneider and Kathleen Gough noted that kinship is defined as a number of statuses and their interrelationships according to a variety of rules and principles that distinguishes kinspeople from non-kin.\textsuperscript{101,102} Descent, conversely, refers to the socially stipulated rule by which a consanguineal\textsuperscript{103} family unit is constituted. Schneider further noted that, “a descent group makes their own decisions with the power to mobilize resources and capacities.”\textsuperscript{104,105} Anthropologist Christopher Fuller, whose extensive work on India and the caste system is referenced globally, calls the Nayar tarawad a classic example of a lineage or a clan which owns property, assembles for legal, administrative, ceremonial or other purposes, and which has a head, an instance of a descent group.\textsuperscript{106}


\textsuperscript{101} Schneider and Gough, \textit{Matrilineal Kinship}. (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1961)

\textsuperscript{102} Menon, Balakrishnan. Matriliny and Domestic Morphology: A Study of the Nair Tarawads of Malabar. McGill University, Montreal. 1998: 26

\textsuperscript{103} Kinship characterized by the sharing of common ancestors. (Source: Encyclopedia Brittanica)

\textsuperscript{104} Schneider and Gough, \textit{Matrilineal Kinship}. (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1961)

\textsuperscript{105} Menon, Balakrishnan. Matriliny and Domestic Morphology: A Study of the Nair Tarawads of Malabar. McGill University, Montreal. 1998: 26

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid
Much of what has been discerned by these eminent anthropologists over the years is evident in Madapullikalam’s social and physical landscape. The spatial configuration of the Madapullikalam tarawad was assembled to accommodate such a descent group with its matrilineal segment four to six generations deep. In fact, when the households expanded, it would break into smaller homes and build similar clusters in proximity to the main tarawad. These smaller households that maintained the same notions of matriliny and descent were called tawaris. Anthropologist Joan Mencher notes in her paper *Changing Familial Roles in South Malabar Nayars* (1962):

…..Sometimes the households of a lineage might occupy gardens on a continuous stretch of dry land in the high-caste residential area village. Alternatively the houses of a lineage might become scattered throughout high-caste residential areas of the several villages of the neighborhood.¹⁰⁷

Mencher’s observations stand true for Madapullikalam’s tawaris too. Brought together under the same brand of lineage, we observed smaller households, tawaris, in much the same spatial style spread across Madapullikalam’s vicinity. A kilometer or two away stood the Pandarakalam tarawad and the Ponnedath Achattil tarawad, both related to the Madapallikalam family. Like Madapallikalam, these household clusters would eventually grow into larger families and find themselves moving away to build more tawaris. However, all tawaris would maintain allegiance to the main house for generations through a series of annual events, festivals, and rituals that they set up to support kinship. Prominent among these is the ancestor-worship

---

ceremony, where the family members congregated in the main ancestral house to perform rites and pay homage to their ancestors.

In addition to the descent structure manifesting in dispersed familial clusters, the kinship makeup also prescribed a gendered spatial layout inside the house. Caste norms, social values pertaining to gender customs, and Vaastu principles shaped the spatial aspects of domestic zoning, and also determined how its inhabitants enacted spatial practices. Shetty’s interpretation of the distinctions within the tarawad’s social sphere and Moore’s definition of the tarawad as a ritually significant house and land unit is evident in a typical Nayar tarawad’s spatial structuring.

Thangam offered us a grand tour of the main house as the lower caste cook, Kunji Malu, prepared us traditional milk tea. She explained that the thekkini, or the South wing, always housed bedrooms for married couples and a more extensive hallway that facilitated sleeping arrangements for unmarried women and children. We surveyed the first bedroom for its "two-door" element—an open secret in Nayar society and a structural confirmation of a family that practiced polygamy. We found none. In its place, there stood a richly carved timber mullioned window. It is a well-known fact that Nayar bedrooms had two doors. The first door was solely for the women's access from within the house, while the second door allowed ‘visiting husbands’ to enter. This arrangement facilitated Sambandham\textsuperscript{108}, or conjugal visits for the Nayar women, with maximum privacy for both parties involved. Prior to my visit to Madapullikalam, I had a telephone call with Architectural Historian Ashalatha Thampurati, who prompted me to look for the two doors. Ashalatha explained that in her nearly thirty years of extensive research on the subject, there seemed to be no architectural explanation for the location of this exit door except

\textsuperscript{108} Act IV of the Malabar Marriage Act, 1896, defined Sambandham as "an alliance between a man and a woman, by reason of which they, in accordance with the custom of the community to which they belong, or to which either of them belongs, cohabit or intend to cohabit as husband and wife."
that it might have been the entry point for male visitors. Given the shame and indignity which
was associated with polygamy as a result of British influence in later years, it was also difficult
to verify the exact usage of this door. “You do not find such exit doors in the Nambuthiri illams
where privacy and the invisibility of Nambuthiri women from the male gaze were important,”
Ashalatha pointed out.

Interestingly, until the early twentieth century, Nayar women were encouraged to
associate with men of a higher caste by both Nayar society and the British equally—before
initiatives to abolish Sambandham in the mid-1900s. An article in the Government Report of the
Malabar Marriage Commission published in 1894 directed special attention to the “customs
connected with Hindu marriage in Malabar,”

109 noting that the custom which permits the man to
cohabit with a woman lower in the social scale than himself prohibits the woman from exercising
the same liberty. Dr. Gundert, a renowned German Indologist who authored the first Malayalam
grammar book Malayalabhaasha Vyakaranam (1859), calls its Anulomam, which means going
with the hair or grain and Pratilomam or going against the hair. According to this usage, a Nayar
woman, consorting with a man of a higher caste, follows the hair, purifies the blood, and raises
the progeny in a social dimension.110 With these caste based and legal endorsements, Nayar
women’s conjugal relationships both flourished and were romanticized in equal measure.

Kamala Das was a Nayar woman popularly known by her pen name Madhavikutty and
born to the prominent Nalapatt Nayar family. Known to be one of the few early twentieth-
century women writers of Kerala, Kamala had been an outspoken agent of liberated female
sexuality through her poems, short stories, and explicit autobiography that caught the state by

109 Fawcett, Nâyars of Malabar, Madras Govt. Musuem, Govt. Press (1901): 225
110 ibid.
storm in the post-independence period. Her novels offer a glimpse into the Nayar woman’s sexuality. The romanticism of the Nayar woman’s sexual liberty is most pronounced in her writings, providing clues to the depth to which the natives ingrained these values in their daily lives. Compared to the likes of Sylvia Plath and Marguerite Duras\textsuperscript{111} for its raw frankness, Kamala’s poetry and later her autobiography offer a glimpse into the amorous nature of Nayar woman’s sexual escapades. In her book of poetry, \textit{The Descendents}, she urges women to:

\begin{quote}
Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of
Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,
The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your
Endless female hungers.\textsuperscript{112}
\end{quote}

Kamala’s writings based on the themes of freedom and love often fondly recall the times she spent in her mother’s natal \textit{tarawad} in Malabar. Her obsession with the sexual disposition of upper-middle-class women is apparent, especially in her autobiography \textit{My Story} (1973). In it, she laments the changing times after having moved to city life in post-independent India—a situation that long caused her to yearn for her \textit{tarawad} whileanguishing in the loneliness created by the distance from her kin and the emphasis on monogamy, in the bustling city of Calcutta. For Kamala, the \textit{tarawad} was a space of familiarity bound by kinship and one that hinged on the

\textsuperscript{111}Priya, Lakshmi. \textit{Kamala Das, the Fearless Poet Who Never Shied Away from Expressing Herself} .https://www.thebetterindia.com. February 1\textsuperscript{st}, 2018
\textsuperscript{112}Excerpt from the book of Poems, \textit{The Descendants}, by Kamala Das.
woman’s sexual liberty — an aspect that she can no longer access or experience in the city where joint family structures and polygamy no longer exist.

Timber sourced from her house's large teak and coconut groves embellished the Nayar woman's boudoir. The room’s coffered ceiling dotted with carved timber moldings and brass studs, the windows and doors with ornate architraves and hanging ring-shaped brass handles, and the kerosene lamp by her bedside enriched the space with a romantic ambiance. The outside door in her bedroom was the symbolic gateway to sexual liberation, and a measure of privacy, as she cohabited with her visiting husband on their conjugal evenings. Oral traditions emphasize the significance of the visiting husband's travel accessories during these visits. According to ancient narratives, these men often laid out a brass pot known as a kindi, umbrella, or timber slippers at the door threshold to signal the room's occupancy. Over the years, this imagery of a slipper or the kindi outside a woman's room has turned into a meme in Kerala — one that represents illicit affairs.

Generally, the thekkini wing of a tarawad housed the boudoirs for married women, while larger halls facilitated sleeping arrangements of unmarried women, children, and older women. In the Madapullikalam tarawad, the series of bedrooms arranged in the thekkini physically manifest social norms. With separate bedrooms for married couples on the ground floor and the first floor, and an enormous hall on the first floor for unmarried women, the tarawad maintained clear demarcations of gendered space. Of course, the absence of the mysterious second door in the Madapullikalam house indicates that not every Nayar family practiced a system of temporary relationships. Although predicated on caste norms, this was a lifestyle choice adopted through one’s personal will.
Madapullikalam’s external axillary buildings, most of which are by now either entirely demolished or in utter dilapidation, were organized around the main house and connected to its functioning in different ways. For example, the granary, or *pathayapura*, was a structure where harvested grains from the vast stretches of paddy fields around the *tarawad* were stored. The *pathayapura* also served as a dwelling unit for men. Although they were not as intricately designed as the *naalukettu*, *pathayapuras* were multipurpose dwellings with storage facilities on the ground floor. In addition, they served as a sleeping cum lounging space for young and older men. Although Madapullikalam’s *pathayapura* was long gone, memories poured out of Thangam in the form of stories of longing. As the aroma of the unique Malabar lentil soup began to permeate the house, I noticed Kunji Malu’s husband, also a help, bring in a cane basket filled to the brim with *moringa* drumsticks from the drumstick tree, and its tender pods through the back entrance. This star ingredient packed with vitamins is an absolute essential in the Malabar diet, and women find curious ways to add it to their primarily vegetarian dishes.

As the scent of spices and herbs mingled in the air, suggesting that lunch was almost ready, Thangam regaled me with stories of men and the gastronomical pursuits that would bring them into the women’s home. She recalled warm Malabar mealtime stories when men would pour in for afternoon lunches — a time when both men and women of these large joint families would assemble in the *vadakinni* wing — a culinary meeting space of sorts. Malabar kitchens in Nayar homes with their produce sourced from the fertile soils of their agricultural land were marked by intersections of caste, gender, and hierarchies through the medieval ages until the early 1900s. The matriarch of the large joint family would preside over the *adukala* (kitchen), overseeing the daily menu and keeping an eye on daily culinary activities. Surrounded by a retinue of servants and helpers, both men and women from lower castes and a few of her own
womenfolk, the matriarch would dole out instructions on which vegetable, root, or plantain from the field would make it into the day’s cuisine — her stamp of approval being of utmost importance. In the vadakkini, meals were set out, again in a hierarchical fashion. In most homes, as Thangam pointed out, despite the critical role of the matriarch, the meal times showed a different ordering, with men given first preference to have their meals, followed by women and children.

Even with the maintenance of such mealtime hierarchies, the vadakinni, during the lunch hour, proved to be an integrating space, with women serving piping hot rice sourced from their paddy field and the myriad of Malabari dishes brought together with ginger, garlic, tamarind, fennel, and coriander — the basic spices available in plenty in their fields. At mealtimes, large plantain leaves, freshly cut from the fields, were spread on the ground, arranged in line with the vadakinni verandah or, in some cases, along the dining hall wall. As men would walk in and take their position on the floor, sitting cross-legged awaiting the food to be served, the help and a few Nayar women would appear from the kitchen. Carrying small mud pots or steel vessels brimming with erisheri, thayir, and thoran, they would lay out scoops of the gravies, stews, and rice onto the leaves. Much like servers in hotels, the womenfolk and their lower caste help waited to serve the men for as long as the latter wished.

While bearing significant resemblance to the Nambuthiri customs of following gender order during meals, sitting cross-legged on the timber floor, and eating from a plantain leaf — the similarities stopped here. Because Nayar communities did not strictly adhere to a separation

---

113 A coconut based pumpkin curry. Pumpkins grew profusely in the hot Kerala climate. It was considered a staple diet amongst Malabar natives.
114 Curd made from the milk of cows, reared within the property.
115 A dry vegetable dish combined with grated coconut. Families would use different vegetables every week for the same preparation.
between gender and caste during mealtimes, women and their lower caste help integrated seamlessly into the vadakkini’s dining space. However, as much as gendered space enabled Nayar womenfolk to take the reins over the main house, it equally relegated them to the archetypal gender roles such as nurturing men that both society and the caste system demanded of women. Even so, in comparison to their Antharjanam sisterhood, their movements within the main house weren’t as restrictive. Perhaps, this arrangement of combining a matriarchal system with gender normative roles motivated Nayar women to live in solidarity, besides the economic benefits of inheritance that they clearly enjoyed. In addition to maintaining both caste-based and gender oriented stipulations, the tarawad was also a site where women’s kinship was structured around mutual respect, child rearing, and entertainment.

Since the 1990s, scholarship has made efforts to understand the anthropological relationship of Nayar practices to the built environment. These have centered on analyzing kinship practices, ritualistic aspects, and life cycle of the household members. As Mencher notes,

Women were expected to tend to small children (both their own and other women, though singling out their own emotionally), to cook in the kitchen if the family was not wealthy enough to afford a professional to wash their own and their children's clothes. [sic] Women who did not have to do work outside the home could spend a few resting and reading Sanskrit scriptures, and the remainder of their time gossiping with women of their own.116

As Mencher has observed, the tarawad’s female-dominated spaces offered them the flexibility to design their daily lives on personal matters and domestic chores. The matriarchal framework did not exempt the remaining women of the joint family — daughters, sisters, nieces

and granddaughters of the matriarch from domestic duties. Yet, unlike the Antharjanams, these spaces were occupied with fewer physical and social boundaries. Mencher further writes,

[T]he relationship between women in the taravad was cooperative, and all activities of daily life pertaining to hold or child care were shared. There were not set rules for this sharing; it took place in an easy-going manner, one woman doing more work than the next. The relationship between younger and older women, marked by respect, was relatively freer than relationships between older and younger men; a young woman could complain or show annoyance to women when she felt it. Even in the traditional large taravad, relations between women were never as rigidly structured as were the relations between men, or between men and children.117

In Mencher’s estimation, the taravad’s main house unified Nayar women, with its spaces enabling them to perform their motherly duties in a relatively less structured and perhaps more fluid collaboration. Even so, the main house, with its domestic chores, was not the only space within the taravad to which women’s spatial practices extended. Social and caste norms embedded in religious beliefs equally dictated the Nayar woman’s activities within the confines of her property that admitted her to the ritualistic realm of the house.

Nayar domesticity, based on a strong kinship structure, was established on various types of rituals — those of a religious nature and those connected with celebrating the inhabitants’ life cycle. That is to say, Nayars followed elaborate ritual processes in which paying obeisance to the Gods formed one way in which gendered roles were defined. In addition, by marking the

---

members’ life cycles through other forms of ritualistic acts these hierarchies and relationships within the family were further emphasized. There were also rituals associated with the fields around their house and the laborers who worked on them. These helped in sustaining caste boundaries that existed between the higher and the lower castes. In her research paper *The Built Environment and Spatial Form* (1990) sociocultural anthropologist and architect Denise Lawrence writes about the relationship between social organization and dwelling, noting that:

A number of ethnographic studies examine how aspects of the larger social system affect dwelling form through household processes. In focusing on kinship, on the developmental cycle, and on economic and gender relations, these studies seek to explain household relationships with the built environment as embedded in larger social processes that cut across individual domestic units.118

Indeed, this observation is equally relevant to Nayar household relationships rooted in kinship, the woman’s life cycle as well as economic and gender relations. In particular, the ritualistic categorizations of the Nayar family foregrounded in Moore’s paper *A New Look at the Nayar Taravad* (1985) provide a lens through which gendered spatial practices can be better understood. In her ethnographic work on Kerala in the 1990s, Moore notes that almost “all Kerala ritual, references this house-and-land unit (*tarawad*), and almost all social relationships (in the traditional system at least) were established and maintained by rituals that referenced it.”119

---


Moore’s study provides an understanding of how ritualistic aspects form a realm that binds the material organization of the house with its social organization. For example, within the cluster of buildings such as the main courtyard house, the *pathayapura* or granary, the *padipura* or entrance gateway and bath house, there were shrines and temples. These smaller structures, often dedicated to the family’s stipulated deity or multiple deities, facilitated family members in performing rituals, rites and ceremonies. Further, annual festivals celebrating field harvests served as junctures shrouded in rituals. In addition to religious shrines and festivals—markers of ritual that bind the kinship structure to the house—was the concept of the life cycle. Ultimately the house operated as a space that contained the life-cycle of its inhabitants — from birth to death. In fact, every ritually-significant event of a person’s life, from conception to ancestorhood, was supposed to take place within the confines of his or her *tarawad*—the *tarawad* was to provide him or her with a proper life-cycle. Thus, the *tarawad* was a site which also forged the life identities of its inhabitants as they were marked by rituals. What is more, Nayars believed that not performing the prescribed rites in the correct manner would have a debilitating effect on a person’s life, such as not receiving salvation after death — their biggest fear.

Religion, Caste and elaborate forms of worship marked by rituals and processions were also part of the Nayar family’s daily domestic choreography. While certain practices of worship took place daily within the *parambu*, others were annually conducted. However, Nayar rituals were practiced differently by men and women. In his anthropological report *Nayars of Malabar*, which reviews the ritual practices of the Nayars from the late 1890s, Fawcett foregrounds ample examples that reveal the presence of Nayar men in rituals that were conducted publicly —

---

121 Property, explained in earlier chapter
mainly in collaboration with local temples. However, Nayar women don’t find a place in such scholarly narratives. It is evident that Nayar women addressed a more private form of worship that required them to stay within the bounds of their own property. Interestingly, the lower castes were part of these events either as spectators or performers since the “pollution rule”\(^{122}\) applied even during celebratory times.

As we set out to explore Madapullikalam’s temples and shrines; Thangam pointed to the shrine of the *Mookambika Devi*, the Goddess whose idol the family installed during the construction of the *tarawad* more than one hundred and fifty years ago, aligned with its conception. Shrines dedicated to “Goddesses” were a more common sight in Nayar *tarawads*, unlike in Nambuthiri homes where the “BrahmaRakshas”, the male God emblematic of the Brahmin-demon concept and authorizer of construction activities presided. The presence of female deities was critical in upholding the kinship relations of the Nayar *tarawad*. In addition to such shrines, Nayars also included “Serpent-worship” as part of their daily rituals. Upon close examination of the various shrines and miniature temples located in the Nayar family’s property, it becomes evident that the notion of gendered space embellished with notions of purity and reverence marked the spaces of deities. For instance, female Goddesses were allocated specific spaces dedicated to their nurturing and worship as much as male Gods were. Carrying brass platters filled with *bhasma*\(^{123}\) powder, garlands of seasonal flowers sourced from the blooming trees in their groves, and miniature clay lamps lit with a *thiri*\(^{124}\) soaked in ghee along with generous amounts of sandalwood paste; the family would chant mantras out loud in front of the Goddess’s idol. The families ensured that they adorn the deity’s idol with silks, freshly prepared

\(^{122}\) Pollution rule is followed by higher castes to keep away lower castes. Refer earlier section: page
\(^{123}\) The sacred powdery ash obtained from burnt dried wood of certain special plants and trees and at times from dried cow dung.
\(^{124}\) Candle wicks made of cotton, usually immersed in ghee or oil to light the holy lamp.
garlands and jewelry emblematic of their own wealth and status in the community. It was mandatory that every Nayar tarawad build a basil tree platform (tulasi thara) in their courtyard or by the entrance of their house where the evening brass lamp could be lit and placed upon. It was the duty of the matriarch or one of the many women kin to light the evening lamp, so to secure the house from any bad ills or omens that might befall the family. Often deities were kept inside houses, installed in their western or southwestern areas in the manner of temple deities, instead of in a free-standing temple. But similar to Nambuthiri households, menstruating women were to abstain from the vicinity of the deities and sacred areas in addition to remaining in their prescribed areas.

Rather than reading the Nayar’s matriarchal house as a woman-oriented space, it can be better understood as a spatial avenue where the gendered roles were allocated based on specific religious or caste beliefs. Even as the main house remained a woman’s domain with the men relegated to external spaces, daily rituals and ceremonies rendered the women to preserve their domestic connection, disengaged from the public. After all, as the tarawad with its fields, laborers, and ancillary buildings that assisted in daily sustenance was a self-thriving ecology, it implied that the womenfolk could choreograph their domesticity from within its boundaries. Although described as the matriarchs and inheritors of the property, the roles they performed, therefore, remained within the bounds of patriarchal expectations.

While the onus of offering prayers to the domestic deity within the house and the parambu largely fell on the women’s shoulders; they were in no way a match to the large scale annual festivals which involved the menfolk and their lower caste laborers from the fields. Such

---

yearly festivals celebrated for the agricultural produce and New Year’s (Vishu) special events were a spectacle informed through rituals that created further connections between the tarawad and its kinship. Festivals such as Vishu and Onam were celebrated, synchronized with the harvest seasons. Though focused on the produce from the field and the grains harvested, they also aided in creating a bond between external land, the house and its family. Moore categorizes this relationship as a set of rituals that spatially connect the house with its land:

A second important category of ritual in Kerala, the calendrical cycle of festivals which includes Vishu (New Year, around mid-April) and Onam (the major harvest festival, in August-September), concerns itself with the abundance of the house's grain. These rituals create the connexion between the two components of the house-and-land unit—(1) its rice-growing land and (2) the drier compound land which contains its house and any outbuildings (including temples and shrines). This connection that Moore draws allows us to further explore the festive processes involved and highlight their spatial practices as well as the staging of gender and caste roles.

While in his accounts, Fawcett interprets Vishu, considered to be the Astronomical New Year, by elaborating on spatial enactments and artefacts used, Moore parses the events with relation to the house. Both accounts, which range from the 1890s to the 1980s, highlight spatial uses, hierarchies and their relationship to the tarawad intricately. Although treated as a New Year, in mid-April annually, Vishu, unlike the western New Year, was not particularly aligned with the concept of a succeeding temporality, a timeline or a date. Vishu was in fact a marker of the beginning of the harvest cycle. However, to grasp the underlying meaning a fresh year represented for the Nayars and by extension Hindu mythology, it is crucial to illustrate the

---

connection between the auspicious character that Nayars associated with their daily artefacts and prosperity; two critical elements that enriched Nayar lives and their beliefs — reflected in the Vishu ceremony.

Drawing from the writings of a native Nayar in the 1850s, Fawcett writes:

According to Nair…certain objects which possess inherent inauspicious character…will render him who notices it, first fare badly in life for the whole year, and their obnoxious effects will be removed only on him seeing holy things such as cows, gold, and such…whereas wholesome and favorable consequences can be produced by the sight of auspicious objects…with this view almost every family religiously takes care to prepare the most sight-worthy objects on the New Year morning.¹²⁷

In the Nayar household it was therefore common to find “sacred” artefacts — a Grandha, an old book made of Palmyra leaves, a gold ornament, a newly washed cloth, yellow flowers from the Konna tree, a measure of rice from their paddy fields, and a looking glass, all of which were systematically arranged in a bell-metal vessel. This body of “holy” objects, arranged anterior to the house deity’s shrine was set ready for a viewing on the morning of the Vishu day — a process known as Kani. With shiny lamps lit and the aromatic mix of incense, ghee, flowers the kani was also a visual feast with rice, silks and gold combined. Although not accounted for in Fawcett’s records, Thangam informed us that the presence of fresh vegetables and fruit gathered from the fields was part of the visual assemblage — yet another sign of prosperity and auspiciousness also linking the ceremony to the harvest. Generally, after preparing the kani on

the previous night, the family members would, at the break of dawn, wake up with the older kin, blindfold younger members and walk them to this sacred space — only to unfold their eyes with the intention that their fist “sight” be that of all things auspicious, as they sat in a row — a marker of a bountiful year ahead. Succeeding the kani-kaanal (the act of seeing the kani), Fawcett notes that celebrations began in the tarawad marked by the bursting of fire crackers and the preparation of a grand meal. The kani assemblage however, he points out, was taken to poorer homes within the community, so that the underprivileged could also benefit from its auspicious message.

While Fawcett elaborates on the details of the Vishu ceremony and its ritualistic elements, Moore clarifies the relationship of the concept of Vishu as an “initiating” ritual bringing together external land practices, such as harvesting, and interior house practices, which involves creating an auspicious environment for the “Goddess.” Vishu, which also symbolizes the beginning of the agricultural cycle, was closely followed by the ritual of first ploughing (cal idal), which initiated the planting of the larger of the two year’s two rice crops.128 Prior to the harvesting, the cleaning and purifying of the house was fundamental to ensuring a bountiful produce. Nayar women cleaned the house of the inauspicious influence of the elder sister of the Bhagavati (Cettebhagavathi) to assure that it would only be pervaded by the manifestation of the former. With the external land practices tied symbolically through rituals to the spatial practices within the house, such enactments would bind the women of the house and the ‘house Goddess or deity’ to maintain a relationship with the harvest and the land. The house purification was followed within the same month by the 'house-filling' (illamnira), in which the first sheaf is brought into

the house with ritual used for welcoming a guest and worshipped as a deity in the sacredly significant inner courtyard (nadumittam). Although accounts fail to indicate whether the house-filling duties befell the man or the woman, it is a well-known fact in Kerala that such activities, especially those related to the ceremonial labor, often fell upon the women.

The notion of rituals around gender and space extended to the Gods and mythological figures in the Nayar tarawad as much as it encompassed the inhabitants’ lives. With the deities of Gods and Goddesses possessing their own shrines and divine boundaries, the tarawad made no exemption, even for divinity. The mythological figure Maveli, the large-framed pot-bellied King who is believed to visit Kerala once a year upon completion of the harvesting season between September and January, is central to the ritualistic theme of the Nayar tarawad. His idol is implanted in the inner courtyard during the festival of Onam, when grains are brought into the house. Maveli’s idol and the offerings made to it preceded the Onam celebrations that took place in the household. For the Nayar family, this mythological figure, who was once a King, served as a medium to give meaning to their harvests while connecting their land to their homes. Although celebrated as a state festival today, and thus unaffiliated to any religious groups, the ritualistic aspects of this festival was once closely tied to homemaking and the crafting of a connection between the home and its fields, thereby highlighting its a self-sufficient ecology.

Today Onam is the official state festival of Kerala, celebrated unanimously across all sections of society. Drawing from different mythological tales, ancient textual sources and oral traditions, Keralites in the 21st century celebrate Onam over ten days, during which time cultural games, group dances and temple visits combined with elaborate vegetarian feasts, including special dishes made from different produce, are enjoyed. There are multiple accounts of this

129 Ibid
story, but the most prominent one is of how King Maveli, a Brahmin himself, was killed by Lord Vishnu on the requests of the King’s enemies. Medieval poetry such as *Maturraikanci*, memoirs from Sanskrit poets and European travelers, and temple inscriptions indicate the elaborate programs included in the festival and donations made to temples to commemorate it.

While cultural activities such as games, flower displays, gift giving and dances formed essential parts of the festival, Onam’s main event was the elaborate foods displayed and consumed on the tenth day. The feast known as “sadya” was a marker of cultural and social identity. From the preparation of the different dishes of gravies and chutneys by the women, to the hierarchal fashion in which these items, made from fresh harvest of grains and vegetables, were laid out on the plantain leaf, Onam served as a celebratory space to emphasize the family’s identity and societal affiliations. The diversity and the number of dishes (over twenty five) prepared further signaled the extravagant and royal affair that was Onam—fitting to impress a mythological King. The people believed that he would come down from the heavens to inspect them. In fact, prior to serving the family members with the diverse culinary preparations of the day, a small symbolic feast was set up in front of the idol of Maveli himself, as an honorary gesture. This idol, also known as *Onathappan* was a clay pyramid structure with four faces and a flat top. While it predominantly symbolized Maveli, devotees also would assume it to be Lord Vishnu. In both instances, appeasing this deity was a ritual that marked the beginning of feasting in these households.

Although initiated and practiced by temples, Onam is believed to have permeated into homes, eventually becoming a “domestic” festival conducted at a social level. Today, Onam is celebrated in Kerala society with families hosting *Onam sadyas* and inviting guests from other religions into their homes. References of the temple’s participation in Onam can be found in
multiple temple inscriptions. For instance, the inscriptions recovered from the Thrikkakara temple refer to the arrangements made for the Onam celebrations which lasted for twenty eight days—attended by all the *Naduvazhis* of Kerala. Another inscription notes, “The land donated by Chendan Changaran for the celebration of Avani Onam. Changaran further donates five hundred measures of rice and other ingredients needed. This may be cooked and distributed in consultation with the local assembly.” These offerings and donations illustrate the reverence people associated with Onam—a festival that focuses on the year’s harvest and thus celebrates its prosperity. Although variations of Onam were practiced, even in Medieval Kerala, it is evident that upper-caste celebrations trumped all others in terms of their elaborate detailing, especially in food and decorations. With definite stipulations on the presentation of food, and the variety of dishes appropriate for the festival, such displays communicated social status, caste identity and wealth, together shaping the identity of the household members.

Nambuthiris and Nayars are said to have celebrated Onam on a grand scale and to have observed all rituals. However, other castes observed the festival through different and more humble rituals. They attributed a different meaning to the festive days—this was, perhaps, more to do with the existing caste framework, which did not afford them the necessary wealth or status to conduct ceremonies in an elaborate manner. The cultural activities based on mythology and inspired by old tales of the Gods further enhanced Onam celebrations. Among these were the flower decorations, dances and games. Fawcett, in his records notes,
Having set out at dawn to gather blossoms, the little children return with their beautiful spoils by morning; and then daily decorations begin. The chief decoration consists of a carpet made out of gathered blossoms, the smaller ones being used in their entirety, while the larger flowers [are] pinched up into little pieces to serve the decorator’s purpose. This flower carpet is made in the center of the clean strip of yard in front of the neat house. Often it is a beautiful work of art accomplished with a delicate touch and a highly artistic sense of tone and blending.\textsuperscript{135}

Fawcett’s recollection of such cultural activities during Onam signals a complexity between gender and space. These programs and performances were not a homogenous site where gender roles were clearly demarcated. There was a shifting power relation in the programs outlined during the festival that best encapsulates the complexity of gender performances in these homes. For example, cultural exhibitions such as flower decoration fell mostly in upon the family’s women and children. Conversely cultural games were reserved for men, performed, at times, in public spaces such as temple grounds or streets. The most often played games had a tinge of martial spirit, true to the Nayar male identity. Fawcett recalls a game known as eiththu, played by the Nayars in the southern parts of Kurumbranad. He writes:

On a semi-circular stop-butt, about two feet in the highest part, the center, and sloping to the ground at each side….the players stand twenty five to thirty yards before the concave side of it, one side of the players to the right, the other to the left. Each player is armed with a little bow made of bamboo….and arrows made of coconut palm leaf. They shoot these arrows indiscriminately at the target placed on the center of the stop-butt, striving to secure all the arrows and to deprive the other side of theirs.\textsuperscript{136}

\textsuperscript{136} Fawcett, Nâyars of Malabar, Madras Govt. Museum, Govt. Press (1901): 294
Apart from men’s games and decorations prepared by women, certain performative dances were also part of Onam culture. In his records, Fawcett notes that the Thiruvathira festival was a separate celebratory ceremony. However, Onam too had elements of the Thiruvathira festival, its dance being one of them. This female-exclusive dance drew its origins from mythology. According to an ancient Hindu tale recorded in the Puranas,137 Kamadevan, cupid, or the God of Love, was burnt to death in the fire of the third eye of Lord Shiva—one of the three main Gods of the Divine Trinity. Since his death, cupid stays alive in a spiritual form exerting a powerful influence on the lower passions of human nature. The women keep alive the memory of this tragedy through their dance performances on the birthday of Lord Shiva usually staged within their own homes. The preparations begin a week before the day of the actual festival, with the Nayar women waking up early in the morning, and collectively taking a bath in the family pond. They take a dip in the tank, after which they sing together with one of the better singers taking the lead. The rhythmic songs were chiefly pertaining to remembering the Cupid, and were accompanied by clapping their hands in the water. Fawcett notes that, the palm of the left hand is closed and kept immediately underneath the water surface and the palm of the other hand is forcibly brought down in a slanting direction and struck against its surface. This, he states, is so that the water is completely ruffled and splashed in all directions, producing a loud deep noise. This process is continuously played out, together with singing. He further writes on this traditional and ritual-bound practice,

One stanza is now over along with the sound and then the leader stops awhile for the others to follow her in her wake. This being likewise over, she caps her first stanza, with another at the same time beating on the water and so on until the

137 Ancient Hindu texts.
conclusion of the song. Then all of them make a long pause and then begin another.
The process goes on until the peep of dawn when they rub themselves dry and come home to dress themselves in the neatest and grandest possible attire.\textsuperscript{138}

The practices that accompanied the festival determined women’s spatial experiences.
Every movement was connected to a ritual, which required women to perform their day-to-day activities in a specific space. Their identity was intricately tied to mythology and a spiritual form of existence. Fawcett writes that these processes had their own significance. He notes,

The [swinging process] typifies the attempt which these maidens make in order to hang themselves on these instruments and destroy their lives in consequence of the lamented demise of their sexual deity, Kamadevan. It is but natural that depth of sorrow will lead men to extreme courses of action. The beating on the water symbolizes their beating of chests in expression of their deep-felt sorrow caused by their Cupid’s death. Such in brief is the description of a Nayar festival which plays a conspicuous part in the social history of Malabar.\textsuperscript{139}

By crafting their own interpretations of these tragic stories from mythological events, the Nayars found a way to combine them into their own lives, giving meaning to their festive practices. Such events underpinned the ways in which life was organized within the house.
Furthermore, how the women decorated and presented themselves to the outside world during these ceremonies was equally significant. For instance, they would darken their eyelashes with a sticky preparation of soot mixed with oil or ghee. They would also adorn themselves with red or black marks on their foreheads — a religious signifier of devotees. In addition, to redden their

\textsuperscript{138} Fawcett, \textit{N\={a}yars of Malabar}, Madras Govt. Musuem, Govt. Press (1901): 300

\textsuperscript{139} Fawcett, \textit{N\={a}yars of Malabar}, Madras Govt. Musuem, Govt. Press (1901): 301
lips, they would chew betel. In all of these decorations, women were able to create personifications of the female deities to whom they prayed. On the festival day, on completing their morning bath, women would look forward to a savory lunch with their family. *Thiruvathira* day lunches were sumptuously loaded with vegetables and plantain procured from the fields. From ripe plantain to the customary preparation of arrow-root powder purified and mixed with jaggery or sugar and ample amounts of coconut, these lunches stood as a culinary testament to the rich cultural landscape of Nayar traditions.

On completing the ritualistic bath and lunch, Nayar women would set off to perform the *Thirvuthira* dance. Draped in traditional cotton saris, their hair decked with fragrant garlands of jasmine flowers and adorned in gold jewelry, they would commemorate the festival with the group dance. These women would perform through the night, around a brass lamp in a circle, and singing some of the folklore songs while clapping their hands in time. The *Thiruvathira* dance was usually held within the family compound, and unlike the Antharjanams, for whom no male spectator was allowed in the vicinity, rules were different for Nayar women. In Nayar families, it was mandatory for the visiting husbands to be present in the wives’ house before the evening dance commenced, and failure to do so sometimes led to a formal separation from the wife. These performative functions highlight that rituals and ceremonies drawn from ancient scriptures and embedded in caste norms, which helped shape the orchestration of gender in these homes.

Whether it is the New Year festival *Vishu*, the harvest festival *Onam* or the festival mourning the death of Cupid, the Nayars allowed family members to partake in activities through a ritualistic framework. These festive ceremonies outlined gender performance by prescribing different roles to men, women and children. They also created a cultural intimacy
between members of the house and the land that the family identified as sacred, as they depended on it for their daily sustenance. These festivities were a part of the house, however, they were performed in different spaces. For example, the Onathappan’s idol was installed in the inner courtyard. But another segment of the festival, the sadya or regal feast would be consumed on the long breezy verandahs. The visual spectacles like dances were performed either inside the courtyard or outside in the compound. The structure of the home was such that different parts of it were used for different ritual practices. As a result, we can view the house as an infrastructure for ritual. Not only did this allow families to show off their status through their house, it enabled them to entrench their gender identities within the spaces of it.

According to Moore the tarawad is a house and land unit that defines relationships. To demonstrate this point, while she emphasizes a set of large scale festivities such as Vishu and Onam that spatially connect the house and its land, Moore also analyzes minor rituals tied in with the grain related cycles that foreground hierarchies established through caste and land tenure systems. That is, in order for the tarawad to sustain its values of hierarchy in relation to other communities, such as the lower castes, a certain set of rituals were implemented. Such broader ritualistic schemes expressed themselves through acts of visual spectacles, removing ritual waste by lower castes and gift exchange. One such ritual involved taking away left over paddy from the niraccu veppu\textsuperscript{140} that is set in front of a lit lamp during a life cycle event such as birth, death, ear-piercing, or attainment of puberty for girls. This was only done by members of castes whose service involved bodily substance-e. g., the Mannans who wash clothes soiled by menstruation, the Tattans (goldsmiths) who pierce ears, the Vilakkattala Nayars who serve as

\textsuperscript{140} Exact meaning to be translated. Generally, a “Nira” is a large wooden barrel filled to the brim with rice grains placed at the ceremonial location. “Veppu” is the act of filling or “placing” the grains.
barbers and midwives, and the Veluthedan Nayars who wash ordinary clothes.\textsuperscript{141} For the inhabitants of the tarawad, acts of waste removal and cleansing away of bodily substances carried out by specific lower castes that were vetted by Caste norms were crucial in the maintenance of spatial purity. The Nayar house was a critical medium that allowed for the choreography of purifying rituals and preserving kinship relations — all tied to their agrarian land practices. There were also other means by which the tarawad's servers and tenants who worked on the fields crafted a relationship with the Nayar house. For example, a ritual known as “kazcha” was an honoring prestation given by inferior to superior, that is reciprocated with a counter-prestation that is also not ritually polluted — usually a new set of clothes and/ or some paddy that has not been set before a lamp at any ritual.\textsuperscript{142} The Cerumans, a lower caste who were confined to outdoor agricultural labor related to the house through the kazcha prestation.\textsuperscript{143} Based on their acquired caste-based skills, these members would offer items to the upper caste household, under whom they worked. For instance, while the field workers such as Cerumans would bring a vegetable or two, those affiliated to the artisan community would bring samples of their craft. These would be offered to the upper-caste household in return for gifts like new clothes or paddy. Moore notes that kazcha was practiced during the bigger harvest festivals such as Vishu and Onam, and was not part of the life-cycle events of the members of the upper-caste family members.


\textsuperscript{143} Ibid
Such minor rituals helped reinforce the hierarchical status within the house and the land on which it was built. Built into such rituals was also pollution rule rooted in the caste system that helped highlight this stratification. The pollution rule, established through the caste norms emphasized specific measures of separation between upper-castes and different lower castes. That meant, certain lower groups could approach or interact with a high-caste member from a particular distance and this also varied between castes. There rituals such as kazcha were performed keeping this distance in mind thereby helping define and maintain these group’s identity and social levels.

**The House and the Nayar’s life-cycle:**

In both the Nambuthiri and Nayar castes, a person’s life cycle occurred in one place, namely their family home—be it their natal house or the one they entered upon marriage. The latter was true for Antharjanams, who, at a young age, moved out of their family home as they entered into marriage with their chosen husband. From this point onward, an Antharjanam woman’s house was her husband’s house. The person’s life cycle was destined to be experienced in their house, amongst the large number of relatives, which included family elders and children, who were also entitled to the same experience. Notions of moving away from home, seeking a new job or migrating, were foreign concepts to this upper caste and the people of Kerala in general. In fact, the joint family system underlined the domestic atmosphere in Kerala. One factor that contributed to this notion of a joint family could have been the family’s belief that the “house” was impartible. The notion of a family home was deeply embedded in a family’s identity. That

---

144 For more details, in her work, *A New Look at the Nayar Tarawad*, Melinda Moore has provided details on the house as a container of life-cycle.
is to say, the family would live on for generations in the same property, inheriting it from their elders and never fragmenting it into smaller properties. In fact, the agrarian lifestyle where families were solely dependent on the land for their sustenance underscored the notion that the house was impartible. This can be argued by the fact that the absence of urbanization, including technological advancement in farming and the lack of a market economy compelled the family to remain a unified entity. In addition, the influence of temples in maintaining a ritual-based life and deep seated fears of wrongdoing or incurring the Gods’ wrath (including fear of not attaining salvation) might have also necessitated a togetherness, both for the family and the property. With kinship seamlessly integrated in the house and between generations, the house then was both a spectator and container of a person’s life history. In fact, even after death, Nayars like the Nambuthiris believed that ancestors lived on in spirit in the house. This concept manifested as ancestor-worship, performed annually by the family through ceremonies and prayers to keep their memories alive, their souls intact and to receive their blessings in return.

The rites of passage or life cycles were marked by certain rituals. In fact, it was necessary for the family to observe these milestones or rites of passage and conduct ceremonies as a means to procure blessings from the Gods above during each of these phases. Just as the Nambuthiris followed four stages of life known as asrama, and observed them according to the rules of certain Grhyasutras, the Nayars too had similar life-cycle norms. The Nayars drew on similar principles, like the Nambuthiris and deployed them in their practice of commemorating life events. Some of the ethnographic studies by Fawcett during the 1860s in Kerala feature details on some of these key events in the Nayar household.

---

145 The Nambuthiris life-cycle rites are explained in site one of this thesis.
146 Schildt, Henri. *The Traditional Kerala Manor* (Institut Francais de Pondiceri, 2012), 125
147 As noted by Dr. Schildt from Iyer (1909-1912:196): the Nambuthiris observe the Grhya- amd Dharmasutras of Sankhayana- Asvalayana, Jaimini, Baudhayana and others, including the Smritis of Manu and Narada.
Prenatal ceremonies connected with pregnancy and the birth of a child marked the first set of rituals of a Nayar’s life-cycle. Fawcett’s interlocutor U. Balakrishnan Nair quotes:

A Nayar woman has to observe certain ceremonies during pregnancy. First, during and after the seventh month of pregnancy, she (at least, among the well-to-do classes) bathes, and worships in the temple every morning; and eats before her morning meal, a small quantity of butter over which holy mantrams\(^\text{148}\) have been said by the temple priest or by Nambuthiris. This is generally done till delivery.\(^\text{149}\)

Another ceremony related to pre-natal pregnancy is the *puli-kuti* or the drinking of tamarind juice. An indispensable ceremony performed across all classes of Nayars, this ceremony required a time to be fixed by the community’s astrologer. The astrologer’s role in the rituals was crucial as they fixed the auspicious time for such performances, especially as Hinduism itself hinged on the sacred nature of time. The tamarind drinking act would begin by planting of a twig of the *ampasham* tree, on the morning of the day of the ceremony, in the principal courtyard (*nadu-muttom*) of the *tarawad*.\(^\text{150}\) At the appointed time, also known as *muhurtam*, which denotes “sacred time,” the pregnant woman after having bathed and properly attired, is led to the northern wing or the *Vadakkini*, where she is seated facing eastwards. The *Ammayi* or the uncle’s wife, a significant partner in the ceremony, then moves into the courtyard and plucks a few leaves of the planted twig. She squeezes a few drops of its juice into a cup and hands it over to the brother of the pregnant woman. Caste norms mandated that the brother who holds the cup wear a gold ring on the right finger. With a *pissan kathi* or a country knife in his left hand, the

\(^{148}\) A Mantram is a sacred utterance, a numinous sound, a syllable, word or a group of words in Sanskrit believed by practitioners to have to have religious, magical or spiritual powers.

\(^{149}\) Fawcett, *Nâyars of Malabar* (Madras Govt. Musuem, Govt. Press, 1901), 242

\(^{150}\) F,Fawcett. *Nâyars of Malabar* (Madras Govt. Musuem, Govt. Press,1901), 242
brother holds the cup over the open mouth of the soon-to-be mother. He pours the tamarind juice over the knife, and the woman is expected to swallow the juice dribble that falls into her mouth off the knife. On swallowing it, she is then asked to pick one of several packets of grain laid out before her. These grains help in predicting the sex of the unborn child. This final stage of the ritual is followed by a sumptuous feast, with family and relatives all joining in to celebrate and honor the unborn child.

This pre-natal spatial practice involving both men and women binds the family members, the house (through its courtyard) and its surrounding fields with the unborn child, by marking it with unique symbols and enactments stemming from religious doctrines and caste rules. Pre-natal care in this context—staging and exhibiting care, prescribed temple visits for the pregnant mother and consuming food bestowed with holy mantras—illuminates the ways in which ritual wove gender into the physical structure of the home. Ritual created a connection between women, the space they lived in, and, most importantly, contributed to the crafting of a future relationship to the house for the unborn child, who would soon join as a living member of the complex and ritually bound family unit. Such arrangements helped strengthen the family member’s identity within the kinship structure inside the house. They also helped define their status as a whole in society among the upper class. Moreover, this demonstrated the family’s reverence and affiliation to the powerful temple institution—an added benefit within the caste system.

The Nayar woman’s identity and her position within the kinship structure after giving birth was reinvigorated through a separate set of rituals. In Nayar communities, the pollution rule, a key organizer of caste hierarchies, equally affected pregnant woman. Post-delivery, the mother was considered to be impure for fifteen days. “Pollution” was observed for those fifteen
days, during which she was required to wear clothes washed and presented to her by lower-caste *Vannatti* women. A purificatory ceremony was held after the completion of the fifteen days. This ritual entailed a man of the *Atikkurissi* clan sprinkling a liquid mixture of oil and the five products of the cow (*pancha gavya*) with gingelly seeds on the woman. She then took a plunge-bath and sat on the ground, near the bath pond or river. Accompanied by a few women of the family, they then poured water over the woman as she held a copper vessel in her hands. On completing this pouring of water over her twenty-one times, the woman took one final dip in the pond and was declared pure.  

Fawcett notes that the purification ceremony was also applicable to the new born child. He writes,

> It may be noticed that before the mother proceeds to purify herself, the new-born babe has also to undergo some rite of purification. The babe is placed on the naked floor and its father or uncle sprinkles a few drops of cold water on it and takes it in his hands. The superstitious believe that the temperament of the child is determined by that of the person who thus sprinkles the water.

Fawcett further notes, that in the case of Nayars, all members of the family observed pollution after the birth of a baby, during which time they were prohibited from entering temples and holy places.

> Such ceremonies, whether in the form of purification or elaborate rituals help in marking the special events of a person’s life and signifies the caste into which they are born. While some of these rituals took place within the house or in the bathing pond they were nevertheless

---

151 F. Fawcett. *Nâyars of Malabar* (Madras Govt. Musuem, Govt. Press, 1901), 243

152 Ibid
considered to be accompanied by the presence of the Gods and Goddesses. The golden or brass lamp when lit symbolized the Almighty’s omnipresence during the event.

In addition to the events mentioned above, other rituals included the first star birthday of the child, followed by the first meal ceremony, and at later stages also included the puberty rituals, marriage and death related events. Unlike today’s understanding of birthdays which is celebrated on the date of birth, Malayalees followed a system of birthday represented by the “star” or nakshatram under which the child was born. In Indian astronomy, there are twenty seven nakshtras or lunar mansions. These, found in the ancient Vedic text known as Vedanga Jyotisha is said to predate the Hellenistic astronomy on Vedic tradition. Each nakshatra covered 13 degrees and twenty minutes of the ecliptic each and the 27 nakshatras, each with 4 padas, give 108, which is the number of beads in a japa mala, indicating all the elements (ansh) of Vishnu.153

The first birthday, celebrated on the twenty eighth day signified honoring the child with a name that would connect him to the family. On this day the Karnavan of the family, after giving the child some milk and sugar along with slices of plantain, he would then proceed to whisper the decided name three times into the ear of the child — a practice still common amongst the Nayar community to this day. Once again, like all events end, this birthday too would be completed with a lavish feast with family and relatives, with all expenses incurred by the child’s father.

If the naming ceremony was commemorated by the Karnavan, the Chorunu or first meal of rice, was delegated either by him or the child’s father. This ceremonial marker of a child’s transition into eating solid food in the sixth month was significant as it was intended to

not only transform the child’s food patterns but to introduce the child to “rice” as its first edible food — one that was procured from the family’s paddy fields. With the astrologer having fixed an auspicious day and hour for this occasion the family would begin preparing on the day by bathing and adorning the child with ornaments gifted by the father. This jewelry is first laid out on a plank and showcased. The women then spread a plantain leaf in front of the plank alongside a brass lamp with its ghee soaked wick. On the leaf they would place small portions of cooked rice which has been offered to the temple deity and blessed in return. Along with this “blessed” rice, they would place some tamarind, chilies, salt and sugar. Usually, a duplicate of this meal is prepared and offered to Lord Ganesha as a symbolic gesture. On having the condiments ready and the lamp lit, the Karvanar or the father would approach the setting and sit on a wooden plank facing the child lying before him. He would proceed to first dab a touch of tamarind, salt and spice on the child’s mouth, followed by some rice finishing it with a dab of sugar. The rice-giving ceremony established the relationship between the child and rice — the most significant produce from the family’s land.

Through the life of a Nayar, these rites of passage were solemnized with sacred artefacts such as the lamp with its ghee soaked wick, flowers from the blooming tropical plants, sandalwood paste (also an offering from temples), fruity incense and regal feasts. The household deity and the pantheon of Gods the family prayed to and revered were believed to be present in these ceremonious moments, helping the family members’ transition through each phase. The death of the member brought about finality to this cycle that the person carried forth with a sense of spirituality and respect within the caste framework. The dying person was thought to embark on a journey from which they would not return. Usually as they took their last breath, the family would ensure to begin a series of practices and rituals to respectfully help them to pass over.
They would begin by pouring few drops of water from a tiny cup made of the *tulsi* leaf, holding a gold ring over his mouth — with the idea that the water would touch the dying person’s mouth through the gold.\(^{154}\) The *tulsi* leaf is a center of household religious devotion particularly among women and is referred to as the “women’s deity” and “a symbol of wifehood and motherhood.” It is also called “the central sectarian symbol of Hinduism” and Vaishnavites (those who prayed to Lord Vishnu) consider it the manifestation of God in the plant kingdom.”\(^{155}^{156}\) For the Nayars, the *tulsi* plant also pacified evil spirits.\(^{157}\) Using the *tulsi* as a small cup to hold the last drops of water therefore ensured that the death would be straightforward without undue harms from dark forces. Long plantain leaves, freshly cut from the fields are soon after brought into the *Vadakinni* wing of the house, where, upon passing, the dead body is placed.\(^{158}\) A lamp is lit in the *Vadakinni* throughout and the area is made ready for visitors and relatives to come by and bid their farewell. People in Kerala believed that the corpse needed to be burnt on a pyre immediately after death, as this is conducive to the happiness of the departed spirit.\(^{159}\) Therefore no time is spared to make all arrangements necessary for the funeral. The final farewell begins by moving the corpse to the *nadumittom* or the central courtyard of the house where the body is laid over plantain leaves. It is then washed and anointed with sandalwood paste and ashes and neatly clothed. Alongside the usual artefacts such as the oil lamp and plantain leaves, a ceremony known as *Potavekkuka* was believed to be a respectful way of bidding farewell. Following the


\(^{159}\) Fawcett, *Nâyars of Malabar*, Madras Govt. Musuem, Govt. Press (1901): 245
kinship’s hierarchy, senior members place new cotton cloths (*koti mundu*) over the corpse after which the sons-in-law and daughter-in-law do the same. Together these cloths are used to tie up the corpse in order to carry it to the cremation ground. Before the corpse is relocated, one last ceremony known as the *Para Virakkuka* is observed. A “para” is a drum into which dry grains such as paddy was filled and eventually helped in the standardizing paddy measures. Noting the unique steps taken in this part of the ceremony, Fawcett writes in his ethnographic accounts,

> All adult male members of the *tarawad* take part in [para virakkuka] under the direction of a man of the Atikkurissi clan (who occupies the position of the director of the ceremonies during the next fifteen days, receiving as his prerequisite all the rice and other offerings made to the deceased spirit). It consists of filling up three para measures with paddy, and one edangali (1/10 of a para) with raw rice. These offerings of paddy and rice are placed very near the corpse, together with a burning lamp of the kind commonly used in Malabar called nela villaku. If the tarawad is rich enough to afford one, a silk cloth is placed over the corpse before removal for cremation.160

The cremation usually occurs within the tarawad’s compound. First a small pit, the size of a corpse is dug and across this three stumps of plantain tree is laid as the foundation. The wood chopped from the family garden’s mango tree is used a fuel for the funeral fire. As the corpse is relocated onto the ready pyre, the next in line karnavan tears a piece of cloth from those laid over the corpse, ties it around his waist and tucks an iron key into this waist band. This marks his new found identity as the chief cremator of the ceremony. With its head to the south, the corpse is

---

then lifted and placed on top of the pyre and the chief officiator adds fuel and layers it with camphor, sandalwood and ghee to begin the lighting of the pyre.

While the ceremony was layered with placing the corpse in different parts of the house and adorning it with cloth gifted by the members, there were also certain rules with regards to gender participation. For instance, it was mandatory for all adult male juniors to the deceased to be present when the pyre is lit. It was compulsory that the male nephew or the younger brother to the deceased light the pyre. In fact, it was forbidden for women to partake in the lighting. If the deceased had a son, he would also have to join with the nephew to do this. Once the pyre is completely burning, the officiator carries a clay pot filled with water and circles it thrice, tilting it so that water leaks from it. At the end of the three rounds he throws the pot onto the ground fragmenting it into pieces. Fawcett notes that a small image of the deceased is made out of raw rice and to this image a few grains of rice and gingelly seeds are offered. This last series of rituals marked the end of the cremation, after which the family members proceed to bathe themselves as a way to re-purify.

For the next fifteen days, minor ceremonies are observed by the family members. Fawcett’s records show that a large part of them are led by men rather than women. For example, the seshakriya — making offerings to the deceased spirit is conducted by the men of the tarawad. After collectively bathing in the family pond, these male members including the chief officiator of the previous day would gather in the central courtyard. Artefacts such as the strip of the band-waist used during cremation, the iron key, half-boiled rice, gingelly seeds, a few leaves of the cherulla plant, some curd, a small measure of paddy and raw rice all together placed in the north-eastern part of the courtyard along with a lit lamp. The deceased is represented by a palmyra leaf which is knotted on one end. The notion of “sankalpam” or imagination through symbolisms was
a critical part of these rituals. Certain artefact, the palmyra in this case would help them to
visualize the subject of the ritual and by posing it as the deceased helped them conduct the
proceedings. From his ethnographic accounts, Fawcett explains how the knotted palmyra leaf
was imagined as the deceased. He notes,

> The belief concerning this piece of palmyra leaf is explained thus: There are in the
> human body ten humours: — Vayus, Pranan, Apanan, Samanan, Udanan,
> Vyanan, Nagan, Kurman, Krikalan, Devadattan, Dhananjayan. These are called
> Dasavayu or the “ten airs.” When cremation was done for the first time, all these
> excepting the last, were destroyed by the fire. The last one flew up and settled on
> a palmyra leaf. Its existence was discovered by some Brahmin sages who, by
> means of mantrams (magic), forced it down to a piece of palmyra leaf on the
> earth. So it was thought, by making offerings to this (Dhananjayan) leaf for seven
days, the spirit of the deceased will be mollified, should he have any anger to vent
> on the living members of the *tarawad*.\(^{161}\)

Such narratives those passed on orally from Brahmin sages have shaped a large part of caste
based beliefs. The upper crust of Nayars, especially fearing that their deceased members may not
attain salvation often conducted these rituals with careful planning. Having bathed and cleansed
their bodies, the group of male kin would return with the *karuka pullu* (a type of grass that grew
abundantly in tropical climate) and kneel in front of the palmyra. Making rings out of the grass
and having placed it on their ring finger the men would then make offerings of water,
sandalwood paste and *cherilla* leaves to the symbolic artefact of their dead ancestor. The half-
boiled rice made into balls known as pindams is placed by each man in front of the palmyra leaf.

After a series of more elaborate rituals which include pouring a mixture of gingelly seeds and curd and so on, the ceremony is considered to be the first of a series.

It was the duty of the women and girls of the family to remove the pindams by placing them in a bell-metal vessel in which the rice was initially boiled. A senior woman member would then place the vessel on her head and lead the way to a river or a tank where these would be thrown away. On completing the disposal of the rice balls, the women too move on to cleanse themselves in the bathing pond. While this continues for seven days, no ceremony is observed between the seventh and the fourteenth day. The family members are considered to remain in pollution during this time. The fourteenth day, also known as Sanchayanam, would be the last day of this half month ceremonial event, when the calcined remains and ashes of the deceased is gathered from the site of cremation and saved in an earthen pot. The male members of the family would then carry it to a holy river where the pot would be deposited into the water body. The Nayars believed that such detailed execution of the rules prescribed through ancient texts and oral traditions would help bring peace to the spirit of the dead and most importantly, the pacified spirit would refrain from harming the tarawad members such as causing miscarriage to the Nayar women or possessing the men through evil spirits.

The events mentioned above are a few in a series of milestones that the Nayar community engaged in. Despite being a caste that was well known for their martial arts and strong affiliation with the ruling kingdom and chieftains, Nayars had mimicked many of the life patterns of their superiors, the Nambuthiris. But in spite of replicating these ceremonies, they also centered the rituals on their own caste norms and principles aligned with the matrilineal system. Therefore,
where one would dismiss the presence of an Antharjanam in a Nambuthiri’s event, a Nayar woman would find herself participating in it in the presence of other male family members. The relationship between gender and space inside a Nayar household remained complex and blurred. This was because the power relations shifted depending on the event. Clearly defined space with boundaries for men and women were not easily found in the Nayar domestic landscape. Instead, it was the ritual that ordered who could claim a certain space. The events themselves would shift within different parts of the house. The vadakinni was one such space which facilitated many ceremonial celebrations and moments of grieving such as the death of a kin. However, it was the house courtyard, open to sky that allowed a vast number of spatial practices rooted in beliefs and customs that dated to the early century. Yet, a common theme underlining all events was that the women would be often overshadowed by the men especially in events that required marking a life cycle. Despite the matrilineal system on which the house kinship structure centered, and a matriarch to bolster the notion, women were still rendered to aspects of serving and cleaning up after. They were often the facilitators while the men remained the front face of these events.

The Nayar Woman’s life

In his novel *The Empire of the Nairs: An Utopian Romance*, British author James Lawrence writes on the Nayar matrilineal society:

Let every female live perfectly uncontrolled by any man, and enjoying every freedom which the males only have hitherto enjoyed; let her choose her and change her lover as she please, and of whatever rank he may be. At her decease, let her possessions be divided among her children. Let the inheritance of her
daughters descend in like manner to their offspring, and the inheritance of her sons fall, at their decease, to their sisters, and their sisters' children.\textsuperscript{162}

Lawrence compares the Eurocentric set of values of European women that informs their 'monastic chastity'\textsuperscript{163} to the Nayars’ principles and codes that naturally promote chastity in their women. He argues the former is akin to the starvation and annihilation of mankind, while the latter is a form of temperance, producing healthy people. Lawrence observes that every temptation needs to be removed to counter the fear of giving birth to an illegitimate child in the European paradigm. He argues that true chastity can therefore only thrive 'in a country where the birth of every child would be to the father a matter of indifference and to the mother a source of emolument and honor.'\textsuperscript{164} He further implied that the truancy in marriage also inspires people to follow their true passion of investigating and discovering the natural world around them in a way that perhaps even contributes to scientific knowledge.

The Nayar women's lives brought into focus their sexuality and their kinship affiliations. Works such as 'Nayars of the Malabars' published in 1915 by F. Fawcett, superintendent of Government Railway Police, Madras, and local correspondent of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain, provide a glimpse into the lives of the Nayar woman. The book, composed of anthropological evidence from body measurements, dress codes, and choice of jewelry to elaborations on marriage, divorce, and sexual partners, describes the Nayar woman's daily regimen. The connection between sexuality and family structure captures a large part of the study because Nayar homes were organized spatially to accommodate conjugal arrangements

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{162} Lawrence, James.\textit{ The Empire of the Nairs: An Utopian Romance, }xvii
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{163} Lawrence, James.\textit{ The Empire of the Nairs: An Utopian Romance, }xxxiv
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{164} Lawrence, James. The Empire of the Nairs: An Utopian Romance. P xxxiv
\end{flushright}
and gendered divisions. Drawing on anthropological data in the 'Nayars of Malabar', Vol. III (1915); this chapter reconstructs and models the life of an average Nayar woman of considerable means. As opposed to the patrilineal system of the Nambuthiris, the Nayars followed the matrilineal system. Matrilineal or 'Marumakkatayam' means descent or inheritance of property traced through the female. In a traditional Nayar tarawad, one finds all matrilineally associated kin, both male and female, descended from a common female ancestress.\footnote{https://www.academia.edu/19564591/The_Nayars_of_South_Malabar} The tarawad was a site for Nayar female socio-domestic operations. It thus offers a lens through which to examine the position of a Nayar woman within her own home. A typical Nayar tarawad was a complex kinship network bound by female bonds. It consisted of the ancestress, her children, her daughter's and granddaughters' children, descendants through her sisters, and her relations through her dead female ancestors, including her brothers.\footnote{Ibid} A Nayar tarawad provided for and transcended the traditional patriarchal framework. However, property management remained in the hands of the oldest living male kin of the ancestress, usually the oldest brother. Thus, we can argue that women's liberation was limited to the sphere of sexuality. Were the spatial practices of Nayar women substantially different from that of the Antharjanams, or were they simply upper-caste women constrained within their domestic parameters? The answer lies in the tarawad, which offered multiple advantages: it afforded the economic maintenance of each family member and sheltered them and cared for their necessities such as food, soap, oil to bathe, and clothes through the tarawad treasury.

Drawing on many case studies, Professor of Anthropology Joan P. Mencher in her chapter 'The Nayars of South Malabar' (1965) clarifies some of the spatial practices followed by

\footnote{https://www.academia.edu/19564591/The_Nayars_of_South_Malabar}
\footnote{Ibid}
Nayar clans. Anthropological notes provided by F Fawcett validate this in the 'Nayars of Malabar' manual. According to Mencher, the Nayar *tarawad* in South Malabar generally had one kitchen. The Antharjanam's and the Nayar's spatial practices in the kitchen were similar in certain respects. Hierarchies in the family members' eating habits were common among both groups. In both the Nambuthiri and Nayar households, the men preferred to have their meals first, followed by the children, and finally, the women. But the commonality ends there. Interestingly, gender roles were reversed in cooking if the *tarawad* was wealthy. Wealthy families employed men from higher castes as cooks. The Antharjanams and the Nayars also tended to keep lower caste servants out of their kitchens, possibly maintaining a similar belief system concerning the 'pollution' rule. Married Nayar men tended to live in their natal *tarawad* during the day. They would visit their wives who lived in their separate *tarawads* (a short walking distance), usually after their evening meal. Within each *tarawad*, despite the liberal attitude surrounding sexuality, men and women slept separately. The men slept in a large corridor or hall, usually above the granary.

**Marriage Customs:**

In the Indian cultural context, from the medieval period until now, marriage customs, especially intermingled with the caste system, present many possible interpretations and symbolic significance. Nayar women, even possessing the agency to make independent sexual decisions, were considered the keepers of purity and upper casteism. Nayar caste norms expected women to uphold the symbolic and elitist status of her kinship and *tarawad* by symbolically maintaining her 'purity.' Nayar women practiced two types of marriages at two different phases of their lives. The first, known as the 'taali-kettu,' was a symbolic, mock wedding performed before the girl

---

167 Explained in section 1
reached puberty. The groom would have to be an upper-caste male, either Nayar or Nambuthiri, or a representative authorized to operate in the capacity of the groom. There is no common consensus among scholars and theorists about the real significance of the taali wedding. Anthropologist Kathleen Gough has pointed out that 'the rite ceremonially endowed the girl with the sexual and procreative function.'\(^\text{168}\) The word taali kettu kalyanam means 'marriage by tying the taali,' a taali is a small drop-shaped gold pendant tied to a thread. The taali that was the marriage badge amongst the Dravidian peoples remains a symbol even today.

Usually, the menstruation ceremony succeeded the taali kettu ceremony when the girl attains puberty. The taali kettu ceremony and its related festivities elucidate the long-established belief systems surrounding women in the Nayar tarawad system. Evidence shows that the ceremony was performed only once in ten years to economize due to its expensive nature. In such instances, it was not rare to perform the taali kettu on all the girls of the tarawad conjointly, from the baby in the cradle to the oldest girl child.\(^\text{169}\) The local astrologer decided the auspicious time for the ceremony, both the primary and subsidiary rites. Anthropologist Joanne Mencher notes that 'the more elaborate the ceremony and the attendant festivities, the more it added to the tarawad's prestige.'\(^\text{170}\) The core idea of the taali kettu ceremony was to uphold the sanctity of the girl while sanctioning her membership in the polyandrous system. To endorse the notion, Nayar families sometimes chose a single groom as a symbolic husband for all the girls. Family

\(^{168}\) Mencher, Joan, “Nayars of South Malabar,” accessed online: https://www.academia.edu/19564591/The_Nayars_of_South_Malabar


\(^{170}\) Mencher, Joan, “Nayars of South Malabar,” accessed online: https://www.academia.edu/19564591/The_Nayars_of_South_Malabar, 171
positionality and social status dictated if all the girls married one groom or not. Whether all the girls married a single man or not depended on the region and the Nayar sub-castes: higher sub-castes in the 'Angadi' region encouraged a single man of high status to tie multiple *taalis* during the ceremony instead of other areas where this wasn't possible. A glimpse into the process of the *taali kettu* ceremony further reveals the ritualistic sentiment maintained by the *tarawad* unit. The ceremony, which extended for the length of four days, started with the groom tying the *taali* around the girl's neck at an auspicious hour. On the completion of other formalities, the family escorted the couple inside the house, and paid the groom for bestowing the *taali* on the girl. An elaborate feast called the 'Ayani Unu' succeeded the ceremony. They referred to the groom as 'Manavalan' or 'Pillai.' A separate account states that after the 'Ayani Unu' with family and guests, the family lead the couple to the bedroom. Stories that indicate couples engaged in sexual activity after the ceremony to subvert the validity of the *taali kettu* marriage as a mock wedding. However, the elaborate ceremonial gestures and processes involved attest to the Nayar woman's importance and power in self-determining.

Fawcett's account of the *taali kettu* kalyanam proffers a slightly different version of the process involved in the mock marriage. According to Fawcett, once bestowed with the status of Manavalan, they escort the groom to the girl's house. Nayar families erect a small platform made of bamboo, wood and cloth known as the Pandal for ceremonies. This Pandal is installed outside the house but within the compound. The Manavalan is seated at the center of this Pandal covered with bamboo mats, carpets, white cloth, and his feet washed by the bride's brother. Her brother carries the bride out, encircling her around the Pandal. He then places her on the left side of the

\[171\text{ ibid}\]
Manavalan. The ceremonial and symbolic aspect of the ceremony is further augmented when the girl's father presents a new cloth tied in a kambli\textsuperscript{172} to the couple. Nayars refer to this cloth as the 'Mantrakodi' to this day. Fawcett notes that the wife of the 'karnavan' or the head householder of the bride's tarawad decorates the girl with anklets amongst other jewelry contingents upon if she belongs to an upper caste herself. A purohit, usually a low-class Brahmin called 'Elayatu,' then gives the taali to the Manavalan, who, upon the announcement of the "Muhurtam" or auspicious hour, first places his sword on his lap before tying the taali around the neck of the bride. In turn, the bride holds an arrow and a looking glass in her hand. The family then carries the couple to a decorated room in the inner part of the girl's house, where they will remain "in pollution" for the next three days. On the fourth day, the couple steps into a bathing tank or river to bathe, holding hands, and return to the girl's house, succeeded by a procession.

Tom-toms and elephants usually form part of the procession, and the sprinkling of saffron water is a common practice. Upon returning, they shut all the house doors, and they expect the Manavalan to force open the main entrance, after which he takes his seat in the northern part of the house. The aunt and female friends of the girl then approach the couple and feed them, sweetmeats. The girl then serves food for the Manavalan, which they eat from the same leaf, after which they proceed back to the main Pandal. The bride's father then tears a cloth into two at the Pandal and gives each half to the bride and groom. The severing of this cloth is symbolic of "divorce." The fourth day ends the ceremony with the groom leaving the house with his earnings. At this point, they consider the marriage terminated. The girl, however, would proceed to wear this taali for the rest of her life. Although they practice many customs, cutting the 'mundu' or wedding cloth was perhaps the most illustrative of the divorce.

\textsuperscript{172} A large woolen blanket
Retired Sub-Judge to the Commission M.R.Ry  K.R Krishna Menon's account of the taali kettu kalyanam which was referenced by F. Fawcett analogizes the practice to "what a Devadasi (dancing girl attached to Pagodas) of other countries undergoes before she begins her profession." In a way, the taali kettu kalyanam is a sanction for Nayar woman to begin her journey of sexual liberation. This ceremony proffered the safety of domestic status while allowing the Nayar woman to partake in a polygamous kinship lifestyle, the linchpin of the Nayar caste.

A month after our site visit, I called Thangam on the phone. She did not pick up. A few days later, she called me and apologized. She explained that she was in the midst of the Serpent Pooja, an annual and significant event held at all Nayar homes. Nayars worshipped serpents that lived in the tarawad groves as they believed that they protected the house and their well-being. Stone carved deities in the shape of Serpent Gods are commonplace in the open woods (kaavus) of the tarawad or the southwestern corner of their estate. If the family were to perish in case of the sale of a tarawad, it was regular practice to include the Serpent Gods enclave in the property’s will. The new buyer would purchase the grove and continue with the serpent-related rituals. In fact, Fawcett, in his records, notes that “The serpent plays a conspicuous part in contracts between citizens.” Gods, including those in the spirit of serpents, remain valuable to Nayars to this day. As we shift temporally between the past and present in this study, the tarawad becomes elusive. The concretization of space moves further away. Landed property agreements,


which included deities and the supernatural, allow us to perceive the tarawad as an overlay of
different notions, including the all-encompassing Gods, the man-initiated caste norms, gender
politics, etc. social customs.

All the above stories on marriage, sexual liberties, harvest festivals, and life-cycle events
— dovetail as moments that make up the house. They manifested as the house while also being
contained in the place. These readings of celebrations and mourning were practices written into
the stone, wood, and carvings of the edifice. It is critical to point out that despite a similar layout
followed by two different castes, a Nayar tarawad, if inhabited by any other caste or community,
would be bereft of the meaning they were born. Such was the entanglement of the practices and
the home. I imagine this as one way of looking at a culture that believed in many things, both
tangible and intangible.

Again the Nayar house abounded with power overlays. Take, for instance, the kitchen.
Although the Nayars did not have strict rules about maintaining their purity, in contrast to the
Nambuthiris, they followed a semblance of such stipulations. Therefore lower caste people still
fared low on their social scale and accessed parts of their houses. The kitchen might be one such
area where the spatial authority of the Nayar woman was apparent. The matriarch’s disposition
and relationship with her retinue of servants and cooks dispensed a clear power hierarchy of the
higher castes over the lower. Yet again, this stratification highlighted different parts of the house,
be it the compound or front porch up to which some tradesmen and lower communities could
enter. But again, lines remain blurry here. The boys and men of the family — sons and brothers
— had no natural sleeping arrangement. Relegated to the outhouses or sleeping in the house
corridors, such arrangements revealed their positionality in the women-led house. Despite such
spatial power, the balance would tip in favor of the men when it came to decisions over the
house’s funds, like that of the Karnavan, who was responsible for the family’s upkeep and managing properties.

Power here is interrupted at moments and passed between actors from space to space. It was based on the space and the actor. Packaging them into concepts of house ownership, matriliny, and head of the house seems a futile target to pursue. Kunji Malu’s husband, the house help bringing in the moringa pods, was an example of how variations of such practices exist even today. Bonds between lower and higher have thickened today, yet the practices keep the Nayar tarawad alive.
Site Four: Puravankara Tarawad

In the province of Alladam, under the Kollothunadu regime, a powerful kingdom in northern Malabar, six prominent Nayar and two Nambuthiri families established themselves as the *jenmis* of the region. In this area, by the end of the 15th Century there were three dominant groups: Kolathiris, Samuthiris, and Tiruvalis. However, the kingdom we focus on here, the Kolathiris, was different from the other two because they had their own set of mythological origins. Our area of focus, Alladam, which was within the Kolattiri kingdom, had its own mythical origins.

The Puravankara tarawad, a prominent Nayar family that was established under the Kolathiris forms the fourth site in this study. The focus on this tarawad illustrates how mythological tales and their personification through spatial art forms also helped program the spatial organization of a Nayar tarawad. While historical chronicles on the Kolathiri Kingdom are few in number when compared to the rest of the region, the mythological origins of the Alladam province, as passed on via oral histories, are plenty and hard to ignore. Here the chieftain of the kingdom is equated to a demi-God. He was considered the guardian deity of that land and the people were more akin to his own family, as opposed to mere subjects. Today, however, Alladam is a province, much like any other city or town in India.

Before our site visit, a young architect, a sixth generation member of the Puravankara tarawad and an active member in preserving the ancient identity of Alladam, explained its origins, as passed on through oral traditions as follows:

Today Alladam is a province. However, old folklores state that when the daughter of the ruling Samuthiri married …… the young couple requested the King for a separate area within which their son could reign. The King allocated the area of Alladam, calling it Alladam Swaroopam. Since then the grandson became known
as the “Kshterapalakan” or the Demi-God of the region. The Nayar men who helped in obtaining the land were offered acres of land in Alladam upon which they built their tarawads and remained loyal to the newly coronated Kshetrapalakan. Therefore it was more of a combination of families who paid homage to their deity than a legal province.  

This narrative that calls attention to the origins of Alladam Swaroopam informs the concept of land as “Swaroopam,” which, in native tongue, had two equally relevant meanings. Swaroopam — a word with a dual meaning, it symbolized land controlled by a chieftain (one who is lower in rank than a king) and as well as the joint family of the chieftain. In this sense, the Nayar families, together with the principle controller of the land, were both a legitimized region as well as a familial one. Moreover, the word “Kshetram” in the native tongue stood for “temple.” Thus, a “Kshetrapalakan” indicated a guardian deity of the land. Drawing on these concepts of land as family and the ruler as a guardian deity, Alladam stood as a prime example of the manifestation of material land and immaterial kinship bonds in space. Yet again, as in other parts of Kerala, Alladam Swaroopam was a temple-centric region where land was gifted to the eight chosen families and together they donated produce to the temple, and pledged their loyalty to the Demi-God. The bond between ruler and subjects here was seen more as a spiritual and familial one rather than a legal one.

Located at the northern tip of Kerala, this area was rich in spices and, today, is better known for its growth of ginger and pepper than paddy fields, as in the other regions. Marco Polo, the Venetian merchant, writer and explorer who travelled through Asia in the thirteenth century wrote:

---

175 Puravankara, Shyam. Interviewed by Devi Nayar, July 31, 2021 and March 30-2022, online
the kingdom of Eli (Kolattunad) was tributary to nobody….pepper and ginger grow there and other spices in quantities. The King is rich in treasure, but not very strong in forces. The approach to his kingdom however is so strong that no one can attack him, so he is afraid of nobody.\footnote{Menon. KP Padmanabhan. \textit{History of Kerala}. Vol I. p. 192}

Marco Polo’s description of the kingdom’s political independence and agrarian landscape highlights a unique aspect of this region, indicating that it stood apart geographically from the rest of what is known today as Keralam. Unlike the kingdoms in the central and southern regions, Kolattunad hinged on a different kind of cultural narrative that set it apart from the remaining sites of this study. For instance, unlike Onam and Vishu — two annual celebrations that unified the land and house and organized its spatial and kinship structure—were less relevant here. In fact, these two ritually laden ceremonies were replaced by one annual event, namely the Theyyam. This was a particularly important ceremony because it allowed upper-caste families a measure of social elevation and helped define their ways of living.

Theyyam or Theyyatam is a popular ritual dance of north Kerala, today often found in the traditional Kolathunadu, of the present Cannanore and Kasaragod districts. An indigenous art form that included dance through form and content, edging on theatrics with music and drum beats, Theyyam was appropriated by the Brahmins who settled in Kolothunadu. Believed to be a thousand-year old tradition, ritual, and custom, the audience who visited Theyyam performances assumed it to be a medium of God and a useful mode for seeking the Almighty’s blessings. Kerala has approximately four hundred and fifty six types of Theyyam, all of which are performed by men, except for the Devakoothu Theyyam, which is a women-centric one. Theyyam, as an art form, originally stemmed from mythology and was practiced by tribal
groups. This was the case even before the Brahmins settled in the region. According to Keralolpathi, a Malayalam work on the origins of Kerala authored by a 17th century scholar, Ezhuthachan, the sixth incarnation of Lord Vishnu, called Parashurama, sanctioned certain festivals to the Malayalees.\textsuperscript{177} By assigning the Theyyam art form to certain indigenous tribes such as the Panan, Velan and Vannan, it became emblematic over time to be a “lower caste” dance festival. A rare combination of dance and music that reflects tribal culture, this art form had deep rooted tribal beliefs that later metamorphosed under Brahmanism into more variants.

The different forms of Theyyam included spirit worship, serpent worship, and tree worship\textsuperscript{178}. These different types of worship, once Nambuthiris began appropriating them, began to develop further variations to the already extensive forms of worship. Under the influence of Brahmin myths and legends, a large number of Brahmin Gods and Goddesses had infiltrated existing cults, but, ultimately, were redeveloped into new cults into Theyyam.\textsuperscript{179} Eventually, a fusion of Theyyam began to emerge, especially notable in the Kolothunadu, where the Brahmins with their caste and superiority also patronized the Theyyam Gods and Goddesses.\textsuperscript{180} While the Nambuthiris initiated Theyyam performances that centered on their Gods in temples and in upper caste homes, they also built shrines and kavus (groves) for Theyyam, where non-Brahminical rituals and customs were observed.\textsuperscript{181} Theyyam, thus evolved into a blend of superior and

\textsuperscript{177} Kurup. KKN, ed: K. Kusuman, \textit{A Panorama of Indian Culture}, (Mittal Publications, New Delhi, 1990),126

\textsuperscript{178} There are hundreds of tribal Theyyam forms. Only a few have been named here.

\textsuperscript{179} KKN Kurup notes that Theyyam deities were patronized by Nambuthiris and appropriated into a version useful for them. Noted in Kurup. KKN, ed: K. Kusuman, \textit{A Panorama of Indian Culture}, (Mittal Publications, New Delhi, 1990),127

\textsuperscript{180} Kurup. KKN, ed: K. Kusuman, \textit{A Panorama of Indian Culture}, (Mittal Publications, New Delhi, 1990),128
inferior caste performance art, where dance itself was facilitated by the lower caste communities for the entertainment of the upper castes.

The appropriation of Theyyam as well as the patronization of the art form helped the upper-caste to acquire a wider control over the region, which also included a large number of lower castes and tribal communities. By providing them with their own shrines, while also mimicking their art form by adding them to the temple program and co-opting their style and technique, the Nambuthiris and Nayar community gained delegating powers in the caste hierarchy. Again, using the temple as a medium, the upper caste regulated tribal practices, establishing rules and stipulations on what kinds of performances would be allowed inside temples and outside.

The underlying theme of Theyyam was to connect to the pantheon of Gods that the people believed in, and Theyyam artists were said to hold mystical powers of connection to God while performing. Just like the “Bhagavathi men” in other parts of Kerala, who would relay messages from the Goddesses to the people — a fear-inducing technique that prevented people from sinning — Theyyam performers were believed to have similar powers. These methods were indeed used to connect the people with the Gods and Goddesses, but they also contained another motive — to condition people into subordination through fear and build a stratified agrarian culture that would benefit the landlords.

In his book, *A Panorama of Indian Culture* (1983) author KKN Kurup notes the impact the Theyyam transformations had on the agrarian relations in North Malabar. According to Menon, the institution of Theyyam was used to regulate agrarian relations as part of a feudal system. He writes:
The cultivating tenants on the basis of their castes were organized in particular cult centers. Those centers were controlled by the landlords and the Brahmanical temples who extracted the surplus of agricultural production by way of rent, feudal levies and customary payments. The peasant could not liberate himself from the burden of this feudal-social system as he was indoctrinated to accept it through religion and its concepts.\footnote{Kusuman, \textit{A Panorama of Indian Culture}. P135}

Highlighting instances where people were forced to believe that refusing to comply with agrarian laws and social laws might lead them to ailments resulting from God’s wrath, the lower-caste masses were compelled to remain bonded to a life of labour on the fields and groves. Citing the example of the lower-caste Pulaya community in North Malabar, Kurup writes,

“\[t\]he agricultural laborers like the Pulayas believed that the Theyyam deities would cause them disease, calamity etc. if they did not properly work for their lords and masters. Therefore, even in an ailing condition, they were forced to work hard for increasing agricultural production.”\footnote{Kusuman, \textit{A Panorama of Indian Culture}. P135}

This mental servitude, which was imprinted on to the lower-castes through Theyyam, helped increase surplus labor production, thereby reinforcing a stabilized feudal system within the region.

Even as Theyyam mediated the relationship between landlords and laborers, they were also integrated into household affairs, with the houses’ ritualistic affairs being centered on them. Unlike the mini-shrines that were found in the groves around the tarawad in central and southern
parts of Kerala, here the deity, and at times multiple deities, was “imagined” to be living in the house, impregnated within one auspicious “pillar.”

During our field visit to North Malabar, we found one such pillar, still revered and preserved through rituals and ceremonies in a humble tarawad set deep in the forest land of Alladam. Alongside the pillar was also a hanging brass lamp which the family believed held the spirits together. The Puravankara tarawad, a sixth-generation family of Nayars, successors to Moolecheri Nayar — the man who assisted the young prince to acquire Alladam Swaroopam and eventually become the Kshetrapalakan — stood on an acre of what was once flourishing agrarian land. Having lost more than a hundred acres of their land for personal welfare and some through the Communist Government’s land reform Acts that succeeded British rule, today the house stands as a lone artefact in approximately 1.5 acres of property.

With its double roofed structure, and surrounded by an open verandah on all four sides, this tarawad is small in comparison to the Madapullikalam house. Yet, much of it is still preserved in the form of the original mid-1800s structure. The house was shaped materially with locally sourced laterite, wood and lime plaster. While the spatial layout of the houses in North Malabar was similar to the ones found elsewhere, what stood out was the “Kottilavam” room in the south-west corner, next to the Padinjattini wing that housed the “Theyyam” pillar. In the Puravankara house, the Kottilavam is a special room which is separate from a Pooja or a ritual room. Houses in other regions generally had one room where rituals were conducted, such as daily chanting of mantras and paying homage to deities. Such rooms usually would have a host of idols of Gods and Goddesses, adorned with fresh garlands and with the smell of incense wafting through. A lit lamp would also be placed in front of the sacred idols. The family members would visit the room to offer daily prayers and menstruating women would not enter
this room. In the Puravankara house, alongside the Pooja room was the Kottilavam, which housed artefacts and ceremonial items used for Theyyam. Even though the Pooja room held significant importance in the tarawad, it was the Kottilavam that seemed to carry most ritualistic weight. The young architect, Shyam, informed us that the room was under constant vigilance by the house elders, to ensure that children would not enter it unsupervised. The column or pillar in which all the family deities were believed to live was the most sacred artefact of this building.

The Kottilavam had two entry points — one from within the house, while the second one was an exit door to the rear side of the verandah. Towards the rear side was a wide wooden window supported with horizontal timber slats tilted at an angle. According to Shyam, Theyyam performances were a mandatory annual event in all the upper-caste homes of Alladam. The upper-caste families invited Theyyam artists to perform within the compound of their homes. However, despite the tarawad’s matrilineal theme, the Nayar women were forbidden from publicly engaging with the performance, despite holding much authority within the house. The slatted windows, he highlighted, were for the women to watch the dance from within the house. The tilt of the wooden slats also ensured that the women could not be visible to outsiders. In addition to the room built for Theyyam was the Pooja room next in the Padinjatinni wing. While this room served daily ceremonial purposes, it was also the matriarch’s sleeping room. Dominated all together by women, with only the families’ nephew and Karanavan in tag, separate wings were organized for unmarried women and children.

The polyandrous lifestyle of Nayar women was most visible in Puravankara tarawad, with evidence of the door for visiting husbands still intact. Shyam indicated that although today the practice was altogether inactive due to the abolishment of such laws by the state in the post-independence period, the presence of this door signaled the practice of polyandry within his
family. He reinforced this admission by elaborating on the multiple marriages conducted in the house by his grand aunts and great-grand aunts. During the 1800s and 1900s, the family was said to have at least ten to twelve people living in the same house. However, the absence of a Pathayapura and other related axillary buildings within the compound was perhaps one differentiation between this site and Madapullikalam.

Set up during the time of the Kshetrapalakan, Puravankara tarawad was predominantly a woman-run enterprise. Oral histories passed down through generations don’t often speak about the presence of a “karnavan” as in other tarawads. The everyday activities of the Nayar women of this house, as in all homes, would begin with bathing in a pond and attending daily prayers. The men of the house were relegated to taking care of the land and agricultural production. The land offered to the family on the establishment of the Alladam Swaroopam was considered a gift from God. Although historians have noted the impact of Theyyam on agrarian labor, the stories regaled to us by Shyam do not highlight lower-caste laborers as crucial to their land activities. Nevertheless, Theyyam and its ritualistic aspects remained central to the house. Even though it was performed once a year, the awareness of the column with the deities imprinted on it helped to manage the house, with the deity overseeing the family and protecting the family from calamities. While this art form of worship was integrated into the house, apart from the regular Nayar customs pertaining to the life-cycle was the Pooramkali festival. This festival, unique to northern Malabar, was considered a ritualistic penance and a celebration of love. Ritual practices such as these were crucial to ensuring that young girls found good husbands, which would, in turn, ensure the continuation of their lineage. Again, mythological narratives played a critical role in initiating a ritualistic fervor in people’s daily lives. Centered on the concept of the love God, Pooramkali too had its own set of tales from which stemmed the girls’ spatial practices
during the festival. According to ancient Hindu texts and oral traditions, the God of Love, also known as Kama, tried to awaken the ash-smeared Lord Shiva to the amorous advances of Goddess Parvathi. However, Kama is burnt to ashes by the fire emanating from Lord Shiva’s third eye. In order to bring back a world filled with love — a job that solely depended on the God of Love — Lord Vishnu is believed to have instructed the heavenly Goddess Rambha to create Kama’s figure with flowers and further to sing and dance.

The festival of Pooramkali, which has its roots in this mythical tale, also sought to reinvigorate the young Nayar woman’s identity, with the aim of helping her to grow into a matriarch someday. Kama’s reincarnation through the perseverance of Goddess Rambha is reenacted through celebrations where young women engaged in singing and dancing during the festival period. In fact, the festival began with the recreation of a temporary statue of Kama, a ritual known as Kamane veykal. A nine day festival, it consisted of young girls crafting figures of Kama outside their houses using flowers, cow dung and clay. Each day saw the creation of a new figure by each girl, decorated with flowers and accompanied with singing and dancing. The Puravankara family in fact also had their young girls through centuries, calling out “Kama” by cupping their mouths and coo-ing looking upward into the sky. On the final day, the figures are all gathered together and destroyed, marking the end of the ceremony and thereby ensuring that the women would soon find suitable husbands.

Although Pooramkali was a women-centric event, performed by women inside their homes, north Kerala also saw its appropriation by temples. In complete a one eighty degree trun, Pooramkali in temples is a male-centric event, which starts off with a circular dance by men followed by scholarly debates known as Maruttukkali. Embodying the martial spirit of Nayar

---

184 https://www.sahapedia.org/poorakkali-festival-north-kerala
men, the dance performed by men in temples exudes movements that reflect the martial arts and its vigor. A Pannikar stands in the center of the circle leading the performance through his songs. Known to have multiple segments, this male-centric dance begins with the Pooramala first. Within this part of the celebration, eighteen modes of songs called nirams are sung and danced. Continuing into the night until the dawn, this dance is performed with men continuously joining in and stepping out at various intervals. The scholastic portion of this festival, the Maruttukkali saw scholars from temples across the northern regions participate in discourses in Sanskrit and Malayalam, from Indian philosophy and literature. At later stages, post-independence more significantly, it was noted that the lower castes were more actively participating in these performances.

With a combination of Nayar life-cycle events, Theyyam practices and Pooramkali as part of the ritualistic environment, life in Nayar tarawads transcended the everyday acts of living. That is to say rituals prescribed roles for men and women. The very act of doing a daily chore, praying, adorning oneself with jewelry, or dancing — all encompassed in divine beliefs and mythology helped to create a life that was unique and strengthened the families’ identity and status.

The Nayar sites — Madapullikalam and Puravankara, provided a rich prism through which various customs could be perceived. Yet just as the power play was more dominant inside the house in Madapullikalam, the Puravankara tarawad centered on engaging with the lower castes through the appropriation of the art form of Theyyam. The power dynamic extended to the outer realm more than the inside. Even the Pooramkali festival, where men and women had a specific set of ritualistic practices, seemed like an intersection between a family and a community affair. The temple dances where men from

---

Apanikkar is an honorific title conferred by the community on someone who has proved his erudition.
different families would come and go dutifully, making their presence known seemed to indicate how the
domestic sphere collapsed in the public sphere. The families’ loyalty to the historic Kshetrapalakan was
ever-present in their lives.

The expectations of a typical Nayar family recede inside the tarawad. Rituals embody the space
through the Kottialavam room, which the house focuses on. While these were women-centric areas, the
Kottilavam held reminded the family of gender politics by preventing menstruating women from entering
it. The ventilator-style windows in the Kottialvam that allowed the family to look out yet averted the
outside gaze of the commoner too reinforced the hierarchies in the public sphere.
Colonialism & Aftermath:

Interventions by the British colonial rule became a turning point not only in the political history of Kerala but also in the ways people lived. What was once a caste-based agrarian society that believed in the power of mythology and religion began to transform into a market economy with nuclear families that depended on Government jobs, trading, and commerce. Many Reforms, such as reformulating agrarian tenancy relations and legitimizing Nayar polygamy, led to shifts in the tarawad organization. Moreover, familial changes in the Nambuthiri kinship fabric allowing widows to remarry, shifting educational systems to educate women, and forbidding child marriages led to the transformation of the illam. A matrix of external forces, including political, economic, and social, bolstered many changes in the tarawad and illam, ultimately fracturing old living patterns.

When the British ruled Kerala, they divided the region into three segments. The North and central areas, Malabar and Cochin, were under direct British rule, whereas Travancore in the south was through subsidiary alliances with the Kings. The social and legal changes varied from region to region. Yet, the ripple effect of each rule on the other was undeniable, and began to transform the familial environment that the upper-castes had previously enjoyed. Travancore state, for instance, saw changes on all fronts including social, political, and administrative one, which began to permeate the lived realities of people and their practices. In her book, Matriliny Transformed: Family, Law and Ideology in Twentieth Century Travancore (1999) scholar K. Saradamoni noted that the new law courts established had judges and lawyers who were well acquainted with British and European legal systems. Verdicts in the British Indian courts, which

---

186 K. Saradamoni. Matriliny Transformed (Sage Publications, 1999), pp82
were once settled on the basis of custom and usage, were now debated and decided.\textsuperscript{187} By the early 1900s, a section of Nayar men who had the benefit of western education and western thought — the result of educational schools and colleges established by the British — had begun to feel embarrassed about their institutions, particularly marriage and inheritance, and wished to reform them.\textsuperscript{188} Therefore, along with urban and legal transformations enforced directly by the British, these local upper-caste men began to demand marriage, property and inheritance reforms. For instance, in 1896, they introduced an unofficial bill in the Travancore Legislative to the same end. In his 1896 speech introducing the bill to legalize \textit{Sambandham}—the polygamous relationships of Nayar women—Thanu Pillai, an elite Nayar activist stated:

\begin{quote}
Whether from ignorance or prejudice our critics seem to have no qualms of conscience in levelling against us the reproach: ‘Your wives are concubines and your sons are bastards’…[But in fact the sambandham] union is intended to be permanent and is, in the vast majority of cases, practically so. Though there is no civil right in theory, every father feels it is his duty to make some provision, according to his means, for his wife and children.\textsuperscript{189}
\end{quote}

Thanu Pillai’s speech was emblematic of how western education that emphasized the value and status of a nuclear family model was alluring to those brought up in joint families in Kerala — especially amongst ones where notions of multiple partners were encouraged like in the Nayar tarawads. It also highlighted the crucial role that the recently established British education system and the opportunity provided by the British for a few elites to visit England had on young minds, especially those whose lives were invested in a rigid caste system. In addition,

\textsuperscript{187} K. Saradamoni. \textit{Matrility Transformed} (Sage Publications, 1999), pp82
\textsuperscript{188} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{189} Jeffrey, Robin. \textit{The Decline of Nayar Dominance}. (Holmes and Meier Publishers, Inc. 1976) pp 187
precedence of this bill had already existed in which similar themes were addressed in the Malabar Marumakkathayam Report of 1896.\footnote{References to the 1896 Act is made in the Cochin Nair Regulation Committee Report. Introductory, Page 1.}

Although initially unsuccessful, such efforts eventually led to the passing of the first Nayar Regulation Act in 1912.\footnote{Jeffrey, Robin. “Matriliny, Women, Development-and a Typographical Error.” Pacific Affairs 63, no. 3 (1990): 373–77. \url{http://www.jstor.org/stable/2759525}. Many references to the 1912 Act can also be found in other text books and committee reports.} The transformations that ensued from this introductory bill were many. However, they were also brought into fruition slowly and carefully. While much of the transformations were a direct result of the legal changes made by the British, some were also inspired by the local people who envisioned a transformed society for Kerala — one that reflected a more anglicized and thereby “western” society. During this period, as agitation grew amongst a few, the Travancore Marumakkathayam Committee was set up in 1908 to assess the situation relating to the legal recognition of Sambandham, succession, powers and duties of the “Karnavan,” and partition.\footnote{Panikkar, Kavalam Madhava. Some Aspects of Nayar Life. (Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute.) 48: 254–293.} In fact, as the Committee set out to interview people to gain insight on many aspects that related to women’s lives, it was ironic that most of those interviewed were in fact men.\footnote{K. Saradamoni. Matriliny Transformed (Sage Publications, 1999), pp87} According to a Government of Travancore report, the Tahilsdar of Travancore reported that out of fifty-two women selected, only eleven were willing to be interviewed, and even these only in their homes. In her research, Saradamoni noted that the Committee took the evidence of about 1,100 men who were considered as representatives of all sections of the community. With such an imbalanced approach to assessing matters of matrimony, the Committee’s decisions were equally lopsided. To begin with, the Committee’s decisions played a

\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{Ibid} REFERENCES TO THE 1896 ACT IS MADE IN THE COCHIN NAIR REGULATION COMMITTEE REPORT. INTRODUCTORY, PAGE 1.
\item Jeffrey, Robin. “Matriliny, Women, Development-and a Typographical Error.” Pacific Affairs 63, no. 3 (1990): 373–77. \url{http://www.jstor.org/stable/2759525}. Many references to the 1912 Act can also be found in other text books and committee reports.
\item K. Saradamoni. Matriliny Transformed (Sage Publications, 1999), pp87
\item Ibid
\end{itemize}
significant part in changing the gender dynamic of the Nayar tarawad. The recommendations of the committee included compensating the “wife” not more than Rupees 2000 at the time of divorce, the ending of polyandry and polygamy, and the husband being made the legal guardian of minor wife and children.\textsuperscript{195} The restitution of conjugal rights was also to be vested in the husband.\textsuperscript{196} Even as nuclear family models were beginning to emerge prior to the laws as a result of a demand in urban jobs and a loss of agrarian land, these proposals would begin to induce long term effects in the joint family system and polygamy — two crucial aspects of the tarawad organization. Therefore, while Committees and courts began to take an active role in reevaluating customs and marriages, with pressure from the public (the westernized elite) mounting for a social transformation, changes in relation to changed living patterns had already begun, due to other influences such as urbanization, education, and changes in land laws.

As a result of committee reports produced on matters related to \textit{Sambandham}, succession and partition, the Nayar Regulation Act was established in 1912. Meanwhile, elsewhere in the region, similar changes began to emerge. For instance, The Report of the Nayar Regulation Committee and the draft regulation for the Cochin region highlighted many of similar opinions and regulations that reflected other similar regional reports. In its introductory section the report states:

The steadily growing influence of western ideas and culture and the increasing contact of the Malayalees with people of different castes and creeds in and outside Malabar, facilitated by the introduction of the railways and other means of communication, widened the outlook of the educated among them and awakened in them the spirit of enquiry regarding the suitability of their social system to the

\textsuperscript{195} K. Saradamoni. \textit{Matriliny Transformed} (Sage Publications, 1999), pp88

\textsuperscript{196} Ibid
altered conditions of their community. The defects and imperfections of the Marumakkathayam system of inheritance were brought home especially to the educated Nayars when they lived with their wives and children away from their tarawad homes as Government servants, Vakils and in other capacities. They then realized the practical difficulties of adhering to the customs and rules of conduct which were no doubt found good in former times.197

With the growing opinion that newly imbibed western values require altering previously existing customs the committee members began to conduct surveys and interviews to ascertain the views of Nayar tarawads in Ernakulam. In doing so they received responses from a fair percentage of educated and land-owning classes.198 Further, they received through the Government 17 representations for and 15 against the proposed legislation that included legalizing Sambandham. In addition, three Nayar societies — Yuvajana Samajam, Gosree Vilasam, and Thotipal Karayogam came forward in favor of the legislation.199 Of 34 witnesses, 28 appeared voluntarily before the Committee and gave evidence, while another 6 wrote to them expressing their views.

The committee also invited the opinions of revered men who held significant roles in society.200 Of these Prince Ravi Varmah of the Cochin Royal family and Kavalappara Moopil Nair, were notable. The report notes:

Endorsing every word contained in the remarks of Mr. Paruvakkattil Narayana Menon on the Malabar Marriage and Partition Bill of 1913 to the effect that “the whole bill in my opinion, conceived in a foreign spirit by men who want to ape foreign manners and are aggrieved at the irrational taunts of foreigners. I cannot admit that our system is more immoral than any other system…..I consider that on the whole our system, judged by the

199 ibid
200 ibid
laws of nature or race preservation is more moral than any other system in the world.” The Prince observes that he fails to see how a legal recognition of Sambandham can promote the moral welfare of the community. According to the Prince, “the institution of marriage exists in its simplest, purest and noblest form in Malabar. It is bound by no artificial ties. It has its roots in affection and its permanence depends on mutual good behavior.\textsuperscript{201}

The Prince went on to call such a system a retrogression. While notable figures such as the Prince stood against the legalization of a custom like Sambandham which he believed was natural and aligned with community codes, others like Kavalappara Moopil Nair thought otherwise. The report recorded his statement as follows:

\begin{quote}
whatever may have been the condition of society in the beginning, a new spirit has now pervaded it that the Sambandham is no longer considered the loose tie dissoluble at will, that there is as much sanctity attached to it as any religious form of marriage and that, especially among the enlightened classes, it is synonymous with marriage and by custom there is as much legality vested in it as in the so-called marriages.\textsuperscript{202}
\end{quote}

The arguments and opinions against the formalization of Sambandham did little to change its final outcome. In addition to its “moral ground,” the committee was also founded to look into issues that emerged concerning the economic condition of a woman and her children to claim their legitimate dues in case of her husband’s death or a separation. But Prince Ravi Varmah and the Deputy Collector Rao Sahib K.P Govinda Menon argued that,

\begin{quote}
“as a matter of fact, every wife and every child belong to some tarawad which is bound to maintain them according to its means and it is impossible for any spendthrift or drunkard of a husband or father to drive his wife and children out of
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{201} Report of The Cochin Nair Regulation Committee. Introductory, Page 8
\textsuperscript{202} Ibid
doors to starve in the street, because they have always the sheet-anchor of a tarawad to fall back upon. That is the beauty of a tarawad system.”\textsuperscript{203}

Prominent personalities like the Judge, Honorable Muthuswamy Iyer would counter argue that there was no guarantee that the Karnavan or maternal uncle would adequately protect the interests of his nephews and nieces, calling it an archaic system of management while an eminent layer who had considerable experience in Malabar and Cochin High courts Mr. A. Kallyanakrishna Iyer noted that ‘during his pretty long career at the bar and having dealt with affairs of Marumakkathayam, that it had become an impractical option.’\textsuperscript{204}

After hearing multiple discourses and opinions on the matter the committee came to the conclusion that the \textit{Sambandham} union was fit for legal recognition and that such recognition should receive the sanction of the legislature. However, they did not erase some of the customs associated with Nayar weddings such as the presentation of the cloth, which continued to be recognized as a legal form of matrimonial sanction. The report also proposed abolishing polygamy and polyandry (where applicable) thereby ensuring that a significant part of the Nayar matrilineal organization was fragmented.\textsuperscript{205} Over a period of time, most regulations and laws made it mandatory for the husband to maintain his wife and minor children as well.

By introducing reforms in Nayar marriages or \textit{Sambandham}, Kerala society and more importantly the Nayar community was slowly being co-opted into a nuclear family model. Although initially, legal teams refused to touch upon the once impartible property of tarawad that hinged on its joint family system, with the legalization of \textit{Sambandham}, this too was soon turning into a reality. In his book, \textit{Social Change in Malabar}, sociologist M.S.A Rao notes that

\textsuperscript{203} Report of The Cochin Nair Regulation Committee. Introductory, Page 9-10
\textsuperscript{204} Report of The Cochin Nair Regulation Committee. Introductory, Page 10.
\textsuperscript{205} Details on the new ruling can be found in the Cochin Nair Regulation Committee Report, Page 13
the agitation for partition was deep-rooted. The Travancore Nayar Regulation Act of 1912 was further modified in 1925 with a permissive provision to partition tarawad properties. Rao notes that within five years of the passing of the regulation as many as 32,903 tarawads availed themselves of the opportunity to partition. The Regulation Act Committee justified partition by stating that it was “bound to happen anyway.” They reasoned as follows:

We shall now consider the necessity of changing the present law as regards partition….marumakkathayam is in theory an indissoluble unit and that the self-acquisitions of any member have to lapse to that unit. But according to the existing customary law it lapses to his own thavazhi….The splitting up of the common tarawad into branch tarawads has also become the order of the day, of course with the consent of all the members. In the absence of common consent, the tendency is to live in different houses when the sisters have children and grand-children….the disintegration of marumakkathayam family is bound to take place in the course of evolution of the society.

The Committee further indicated that they foresaw the deterioration of the matrilineal system due to the difficulty for many of finding amicable relationships within each family. Again, opinions on this varied as to whether partition might be the right way to move forward or not. For instance one High Court Lawyer (Vakil) Mr. C Sankara Menon, who stood against partitioning, was noted as stating,

I am the karnavan of my tarawad and I can well appreciate the difficulties of a Karnavan, but as I grow older and as my experience of the condition of society increases, I may say I have had during these 9 years ample opportunities of

208 Census, Travancore (1931). pp 168
209 Report of The Cochin Nair Regulation Committee. Page 33
studying conditions of Nair society in Travancore. …[t]he convictions grow stronger in me that the marumakkathayam system with its incidence of impartibility is quite unsuited to the modern conditions of Nair society and that the only remedy for all the ills which the society is now suffering is the grant of right of individual partition of tarawad properties.\textsuperscript{210}

Advocate Menon and men in his position were opposed to the idea of partition, more than anything because they foresaw it as succumbing to future pitfalls of modern society. Yet even as they lamented partitioning the once highly claimed joint family system, others welcomed the legislative changes. Pointing to the rise in the number of cases filed in courts regarding family disputes related to tarawad maintenance, another interlocutor, Mr. P.A Krishnan Menon, sympathized with the motion noting that, “suits for maintenance, suits to remove Karnavan, and suits to set aside alienation by Karnavan are the results of the absence of a right to enforce partition. No tarawads where there are more than one tavazhies are happy at present.”\textsuperscript{211}

By the early 1900s, people like Krishnan Menon who worked in the court of law had begun to see multiple cases of disputes within Nayar families. As the number of members in the family increased, customary laws permitted them to split into tavazhies, with the smaller families moving to a separate house within the same property while maintaining allegiance to the main tarawad house. Still they were all under the same Karnavan. However with more power vested in the Karnavan and other social changes in marriages, cases against the Karanvans’ misuse of the tarawad’s wealth and power were on the rise. Until the early 1800’s the Karnavan’s role as the eldest member of the tarawad vested in him all property, movable and immovable, belonging to

\textsuperscript{210} Report of The Cochin Nair Regulation Committee. Introductory, Page 31
\textsuperscript{211} Report of The Cochin Nair Regulation Committee. Introductory, Page 33
the tarawad. As per customary law the Karnavan — the revered and sacred guardian of the family, had the right to manage the property and held the power over the distribution of family income, and family expenditures.\textsuperscript{212} If the Karnavan wished to delegate property management powers to any other family member, he would do so only with the consent of all adult members or of the court.\textsuperscript{213} However, the Karnavan also had the right to incur debt on behalf of the tarawad on the security of the family’s property. With such powers bestowed on him through customary laws, records indicate many examples of Karnavans’ abuse of power. The altruistic Karnavan of the medieval period had dissipated into a villainous character with a desire to make his own wife and children wealthy, accruing wealth for his own selfish interests.\textsuperscript{214}

A later judgement was delivered in 1813, where the courts considered the management and collection of rents and income as invariably vested in the senior male with his duty prescribed as providing support and maintenance as far as funds permitted. Some have argued that this judgement further reinforced the powers of the Karnavan, thereby increasing the dissatisfaction with the Karnavans’ misuse of the tarawads’ funds causing deep-seated urgency to support property partitioning.

Meanwhile, other laws were being introduced such as the Hindu Widows’ Re-Marriage Regulation in Travancore and other regions. In line with Act XV of 1856, the aim of the regulation stated, “[w]ith the objective of preventing such social evils, and bettering, by a purely permissive legislation, the lot of many a young widow that the present Bill is drafted.”\textsuperscript{215} The

\textsuperscript{212} Rao.MSA.\textit{Social Change in Malabar}. (Popular Press, 1957) pp131
\textsuperscript{213} ibid
\textsuperscript{214} ibid
\textsuperscript{215} Report of The Cochin Nair Regulation Committee. Introductory
The authors of the revised draft, desired to alter the previous law which ensured the loss of her husband’s estate from her possession if she were to re-marry. It went on to state:

That is to say, according to our Courts, an estate which was once vested in a widow will not be divested by her re-marriage….It may be pointed out that the British Indian Statute is now about 80 years old, and, further, considering the educational status of our country and the enlightenment of our women, it is time that we discarded the very harsh provisions contained in Section 2 of the British Indian Act.²¹⁶

Aimed at improving the lives of the Antharjanams, who were married often at a very young age to elderly Nambuthiri men and widowed soon enough, such regulations were indeed helpful in safeguarding their lives and future.

In the 1940’s the trajectory of the Nambuthiri community’s traditional practices such as child marriage and subjugation of women ceased when movements and activists began to question them. In 1945, E.M.S Nampoothiripad, a noted communist and theorist who later became the Chief Minister of Kerala declared at a reformist convention at Ongallur, “Let’s make the Nambuthiri human again.”²¹⁷ His statement reflected popular interest in change for the ritual-ridden Nambuthiri way of life—conceived to be ‘backward’ and unconforming to the dominant social norms. Organizations such as the Yoga Kshema Sabha (YKS) and the Antharjana Samajam gained momentum when activists began to spread awareness about the lack of education and employment amongst Nambuthiri women and the need to abolish child marriage that was common at the time.

²¹⁶ Ibid
The Yogakshema Movement that started in 1908 had three goals. The first was to encourage the marriage of junior Nambuthiri men within their own community. With the aim of prohibiting the marriage of young Nambuthiri girls to old Nambuthiri men and thereby permitting their marriage to more age-appropriate men, the movement wished to reduce the chances of young girls becoming widows at a young age. The second aim was to set up an educational system where Nambuthiris would be educated in English as well as allow young Antharjanams to study in schools. With rapid modernization and a decline in the power of temples alongside loss of agrarian land, many activists felt the need to replace Sanskrit and its limited applications in a modern era with a more useful language. The third goal, and perhaps the one that faced most resistance from caste members, was to abolish the “purdah” system of the Antharjanams. The movement which aimed at educating the masses of the movement’s intentions was accompanied by public speeches, articles written on the subject and theatre which reached a larger audience. Within eight years, by 1914, Nambuthiri caste members reached an agreement to set up an English education system. By 1930, young Nambuthiri girls began to attend schools and eventually the purdah system was also lifted.

The changes in the matrimonial customs of Nambuthiris had a lasting impact on their inheritance system. With much activism centered on young Nambuthiri men forced to marry within their own community — instead of Nayar women as in the past — their children naturally became “heirs” to the family property. With time, the Madras Nambuthiri Act of 1933 came into effect which allowed claims to partition and property management, thereby also transforming the once impartible illam into a piece of partible real-estate.

---


219 ibid
Shifts in the land structuring and subsequent reforms that came into play too were a result of the impact of colonialism. Land was a critical actor in holding together the agrarian families. In order to fracture the family system, it was equally necessary to transform the land on which they depended. By pushing for shifts in the land tenancy model and providing rights for cultivators the British ensured that the social hierarchies that existed due to land ownership patterns too came crashing down.

Kerala’s customary land tenancy structure changed drastically during the British colonial period. Although it was already weakened by the famous Mysorean invasion prior to British rule, it was the English colonizers who introduced Tenancy Acts and initiated effective contractual agreements between landlords and tenants. Over time, such laws would lead to loss of family property and ownership and play a critical role in affecting domestic agrarian life as well.

The initial interest in restructuring the existing land-labor relationships occurred in light of what the British described as “an agrarian discontent” that was arising amidst the Malayalees. Chapter II of the Malabar Tenancy Committee Report 1928 sheds some light on the reasons for the British to intervene in customary land regulations. According to the Report, land legislation commenced in 1880 when in September of that year a Mappilla murdered a Cheruman. According to the then acting collector of Malabar Mr. McWatters, this murder was primarily due to agrarian discontent which was accepted by the Government of Madras. The socio-political situation in Malabar was considered to be strained when the very next month, the Government received an anonymous petition from a section of concerned communities like Mussalmans, Nayars and Thiyyas in which it was predicted that “a terrible outbreak would occur on account of

---

220 Madras Tenancy Committee Report. 1928. Page 11
the strained relations between landlords and tenants in Malabar.” Following such concerns, the Government appointed the then Collector of Malabar Mr. Logan as the Special Commissioner with a view to investigate the grievances of the tenants of Malabar. The agenda of such an inquiry included understanding the land tenure system and tenant rights as well as the alleged insufficiency of compensation offered by the landlords. In addition, the Commission was required to provide remedies for these grievances, if any were found.

The report submitted by Logan in June 1882 however befuddled the British. Logan had taken efforts to examine deeds and documents as old as 8th and 9th centuries A.D. He found that prior to British rule, there were three classes connected with land namely, Jenmis, Kanakkars and the actual cultivators. According to Logan’s investigations Jenmis (usually the Nambuthiris) were not necessarily land “owners” as presumed by foreigners. Instead they were considered to hold an “office” or sthanam while Kanakkars were the Nayars, assumed to be the “hereditary protectors” of the land. In fact, according to Logan, as per the customary laws during that period, all three classes had an equal share between the produce. While some of the points made in the report where criticized by Sir William Robinson, a British civil servant, he too reinforced that “kanam” denoted ownership. In fact, comparing Kanam rights to English ones, Sir Robinson put it as “ancient, immemorial, indefeasible, and complete hereditary right of property …defended no less earnestly than the best titles to land in England.” Sir Robinson went as far as raising a few points that lauded the Kannakars as a body that exercised great strength and independence. He further noted that, “The Kanakkars did not belong to the category of ‘intermediaries’ and

221 Madras Tenancy Committee Report. 1928.  
222 Madras Tenancy Committee Report. 1928. Page 11  
223 Madras Tenancy Committee Report. 1928.
‘speculators’ to which it has now become the fashion in some quarters to relegate them. They were neither mortgagees nor tenants who tolerated change or ouster.”

The observations of the British civil servants and committee members had highlighted the symbiotic nature of Kerala’s ancient land tenure system. The report goes on to note some of the details of this relationship. It states:

The period of kanam renewal which was the period of average succession before, was reduced to a hard and fast rule of twelve years. At each renewal the jenmi got some special payments and presents which were very welcome to him. It was thus to the interest of the jenmi to grant a renewal and it was never refused. The practice was one of repeated renewal of the deed. The jenmi neither claimed nor exercised the right to evict a kanam tenant on the expiry of any definite period. The expectation of the tenant, which was sanctioned by long usage, to be continued in possession was so strong that he built his plan of life thereon. The practice that still exists in old and honorable jenmi families of allowing the kanam tenants to continue, also supports this view.

While the report expounded the ancient system in much detail, it also pointed to the cause for the sudden shifts that occurred. It noted that a court decision in 1852 by the Sudder court when the judge wrongly declared the kanam tenure as terminable, caused British courts all over to take a similar stand. Criticizing the Sudder ruling, S T Madhava Rao, the Diwan of Travancore, a man who worked on many such committee reports was noted as saying that,

“[T]he ruling shook the foundations of kanam properties which had been held from generation to generation, which had been greatly improved, which had been built upon, and on which thousands of poor and industrious families had formed

---

224 Madras Tenancy Committee Report. 1928.
225 Madras Tenancy Committee Report. 1928. Page 22
their plans of life. The earth, which had for ages been deemed firm, was subjected to a periodical earthquake! The period being twelve years.”

Needless to say, the report gave a glimpse of how the British was weighing the new found situation between large number of evictions that seemed to be happening all over Kerala, in which jenmis took a hard stand against tenants and cultivators. Historians like Kunjan Pillai have observed that there was a difference between what he calls the “old jenmis” and the new. According to him, the symbiotic relationships formed in ancient land tenure system was established because of the altruistic nature of the jenmis who despite being high in the caste ladder had ensured that a well-nurtured produce sharing system based on trust would benefit all. He further demonstrates the generosity of such jenmis through examples of the vast donations they made from their share of the produce to their neighbors and tenants alike.

The “new jenmis” Pillai observed originated mainly due to the invasion of Kerala by Tipu Sultan from the Mysore in the north in 1766. As the Nambuthiris and Nayars fled for their lives during the invasion to escape forced conversion to Islam, many of them sold their land to tenants. It was this new breed of tenants whom Pillai refers to as the new jenmis, who post-invasion, and after the Muslim invaders retreated took over the land tenure system and established rigid norms in their favor. The Mysorean invasion on the other hand also had paved the way for a shift in the power dynamics between the Nayars and the Nambuthiris. By introducing what is called a direct land revenue system in Kerala, Tipu Sultan allowed the Nayars, who were originally mostly tenants (yet landlords as per customary law) to rise to the

---

226 Madras Tenancy Committee Report. 1928. Page 22
229 ibid
jenmi status.\textsuperscript{230} Again, it is not clear if all Nayars took up this post of jenmis, but it nevertheless transformed the hierarchy patterns that Kerala had thus far seen.

Even as the British took a keen interest in addressing the issues that were arising out of the discontent from the newly emerged jenmi-tenant situation, with the establishment of British Colonial rule soon after the Mysore invasion in 1792, they too pursued a policy of maximizing land revenue and creating a feudal class as agents.\textsuperscript{231} As part of this process of estimating the tenure conditions and ways to maximize their profits within that framework, the British had from the time of establishing themselves as colonial administrators delved right into the land affairs. They appointed various committees to issue reports on the matter. Based on such reports they in turn took further legislative actions to reinforce the existing framework while also safeguarding the tenant rights. From thereon, there was no going back to the symbiotic relationship that had sustained land relations in Kerala.

This new jenmi system was also simultaneously emerging as a united and forceful agent. Apart from increasing the tenancy rates every twelve years, they also began collecting additional levies — something that the previous tenants had never encountered. For instance, the Travancore Jenmi-Tenant Regulation of 1896 issued certain levies related to ceremonies and customs such as Aru Kazhcha, Koppu Purannal chamadu etc. which was not part of the tenants’ deal with the jenmi previously.\textsuperscript{232} But a draft bill prepared by Raman Thampi in 1916 indicates that these too began to be included in the contracts, much to the dismay of the new tenants,

\begin{flushleft}
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\end{flushleft}
adding more pressure on them.\textsuperscript{233} By introducing new customs and tenancy rates, the jenmis slowly transformed what was once a mutually reciprocal relation into mere oppression. In fact, dewan Madhava Rao by then had written warning the British of the consequences that such freedom on the part of jenmis might have on the social fabric, if left unchecked. He noted, “The jenmis do nothing to improve their property. If the tenants make any improvements, the jenmis resume the lands or demand higher rents. This was not the case previously. We have experienced the tragic consequences of giving unfettered to the landlords in Bengal. Let that not be repeated here.”\textsuperscript{234}

Despite such warnings, the British favored the jenmis on all accounts. But they also ensured that tenants were safeguarded in the process. Therefore, not much of a “change” occurred during the British period, aside from the introduction of additional Acts and legislative actions. For example, when it became clear that the people were discontent with much of the jenmis’ newly evolved regulations, the Travancore Government, in an attempt to pacify the tenants appointed a Tenancy Commission headed by Justice Kunjiraman Nayar in 1885 and by 1896 the Jenmi-Kudiyan Regulation was adopted. Eventually, with much effort, tenants became the owners of the lands although they still had to pay an annual fee that included a rent to the jenmis.\textsuperscript{235}

Land tenure Acts had serious negative impacts as well as positive outcomes. For one, tenants all over the region began to own land legally. However, by 1850, 80\% of the cultivated land became sirkar land.\textsuperscript{236} The Pattom Proclamation of 1865 is considered to be an important landmark in the history of Travancore in which the Government conferred full ownership rights

\addcontentsline{toc}{section}{References}
\bibitem{p2} ibid
\bibitem{p3} ibid
on tenant cultivators of *sirkar* lands and removed all restrictions on transfer rights. Another major change was to grant of occupancy rights and reliefs to Kanam tenants under the janmis. During the first half of the 20th century, the most important tenancy measure implemented was the Janmi-Kudian. Amendment Act of 1932 conferred absolute proprietary rights on the kudian (tenant-cultivator) with the obligation of yearly payment of janmi dues.

Miscellaneous Voices:

Matrilineal transformations such as abolishing polygamy paved the way for Nayar women to lead a monogamous life. Such a radical change, together with the British’s takes on Victorian values centered on marriage and wifely duties, secondary to the husband, left Nayar society divided in their approval of the new system. Some women wished to mimic their British sisterhood as they found them progressive, yet others bemoaned the death of their old ways.

In this section some of the voices from a few women’s magazines published in the early 1900s are foregrounded. While offering a glimpse into the minds of men and women alike and their opinions, these magazines also helped spread the awareness of the changes in the social realm.

Women’s magazines were a source of the diverse opinions on the newly evolved gender positionality amongst the matrilineal women. While they only reflected individual perspectives on women’s sexuality and identity, they were instrumental in honing the newly developed legislative laws into the minds of the community. The nuclear family system and the well

---

238 ibid
239 ibid
240 ibid
behaved ideal *traditional* woman as a homemaker were two such emerging themes. It is interesting to note that the concept of ‘traditional’ had shifted from the matriarch to the more submissive variety of gender positionality endured by the Brahmin women. Two broad spectrums of opinions were organized in these articles. One supported patriarchal ideologies professing the progress that Kerala society had made on withdrawing itself from the barbaric matrilineal system. They maintained the opinion that an ideal woman, would never succumb to an adulterous life, implying that matriliny and by extension Nayar polyandry was coerced on women. This highlighted the true liberation of women for the patriarchal ideologists who underscored the significance of the reforms. On the other hand, there was a rise in vociferous feminist voices during this period questioning this altered gender positionality and its underlying implications for the self- development and identity of women all over Kerala. Interestingly most journals were still dominated by men. What emerged in these discourses was the common theme of women’s emancipation and its various interpretations. For example, an article in the magazine *Sarada* titled *Women’s Emancipation* elucidated the urgent necessity to clarify the meaning of freedom in the Kerala traditional value system as against the western notion of freedom where individualism was foregrounded. The article warned against Kerala women imitating the customs and manners of the West and advised them to take up proper training in body and mind care, to excel in the Fine Arts and in the kitchen. This type of discourse brimming with advice became common in articles. Men had turned into agents of change, advising on morality and on how women should live their lives. In a counter article a woman author Pachi Amma responding to the criticism by a male author who called western women

243 Ibid
‘slaves of paid work and vagrants’ accurately pointed out that in the case of paid work there were rules regarding wage fixation. She further noted, “In the case of the unpaid work which women here did there was no fixed wage; their remuneration depended upon husband’s capacity to pay or his whims and fancies.”

While the general consensus favored educating women, the opinions advocated educating them in Sanskrit and not English which was ‘far more useful in acquiring jobs.’

While some men such as Rama Panickar, a local, wrote in support of women’s education and blamed the karanavars for not sending girls to school after a certain age, certain other writers such as C. Raman Menon prioritized women’s maternal and child caring qualities glorifying their care taking and domestic abilities. Writer Vadakkumkoor Raja Raja emphasized the significance of women’s role in the domestic realm and criticized their ambitions stating “Those who work with a machine should not aspire to be one.”

Yet another writer A.D. Hari Sharma published his article titled “Eastern Women and Western Education,” a translation from Bengali echoed similar thoughts as the one in Women’s Emacipation further insisting that Eastern women are best suited for the Fine Arts.

As a counter argument, one woman, Rugmini Amma, pointed to the fact that the author had rather conveniently excluded the same prejudices when it came to the Eastern men who were turning into westernized Sahibs. She further endorsed that the Fine Arts could be taken up by women, if they have an aptitude for it.

---

247 Ibid
248 Ibid
249 Ibid
250 Ibid
With contradictory opinions on how to behave, on what to study, and whether to seek employment in the public realm or not, the upper caste women who had better access to an urbanized environment were in a quandary. Although their British sisterhood inspired many, some Nayar women mourned the loss of a way of life that included sexual liberties and spatial authority. Debates on what constituted a true Malayali woman ensued. Was it the subservient lady who would cater to her husband’s desires more in vogue, or was it the economically independent working woman?

In either case, a new way to live became the norm. The Antharjanams, too, had their suspicions. Sridevi, the interlocutor at Olappamanna, was college-educated and had seen the transformations in society firsthand. Yet, throughout the interview, she did not hasten to chastise old age customs and traditions. Despite the movement to educate Namboothiri women, the ultimate question remained: how do they proceed from here? What form and shape would a new role beget? With the illam and tarawad removed from under their feet, a new life awaited them. But how much did indeed disappear?
Conclusion

Until the 19th century, Kerala with its kingdoms, caste hierarchies, temple-centric life, and a rich landscape of cultural and religious systems was a unique land laden with mysticism, mythological stories and a vast pantheon of Gods and Goddesses who overlooked the people’s lives. Whether it was the Portuguese travelers or the British anthropologists who made attempts to understand this idiosyncratic world, most confessed to being awe-struck by their customs and rituals. Although much effort went in to dissect the Malayalee people’s lives, not many succeeded in entirely comprehending its meaning or value.

The illams of the Nambuthiris and tarawads of the Nayars were emblematic of Kerala’s ancient social structure and contained its religious, educational, spiritual and cultural imprints. Yet the different aspects of social life were processed through worship. While it is not easy to pin-point the exact definition of the upper-caste domestic space, it can be understood as an amalgamation of various ritualistic aspects that come together and helped underline it. Multiple aspects, such as the kinship organization, belief systems, caste principles, land relations, agrarian life, and concepts of purity intertwined with spirituality, come together to make life whole in these houses. In fact, it is safe to say that life here was transcendental on a daily basis.

The family’s kinship structures segued to creating a ritualistic life and thereby shape the domestic sphere. Worship often appeared in more humane forms to shape the kinship organization. For instance, the Nayar’s Marumakkathayam system allowed them to hold space for the Matriarch and the Karnavan equally. Even as they headed the family in different ways, their position in the home, whether spatially or symbolically was shaped through respect that the

kinship offered them through ceremonies as well as their life-cycle rituals. Respect itself was considered a form of worship in these families. The Nayar women could claim property rights as part of Marumakkathayam and this structure allowed them to continue their lineage, even if at times over-population within tarawads might have led them to break into tavazhies.

Polygamy was yet another element that shaped the tarawad’s kinship structure. This practice allowed not only sexual liberty to the Nayar women, but also allowed for a cross-cultural union were they to marry a Nambuthiri. Even a conjugal union like Sambandham was premised on rituals and came with its own set of rules and regulations. Whether it was the second door in their bedroom, or the slipper of the visiting husband left outside to signal his presence, a set of unique practices reflected polygamy. Together with Sambandham, the Marumakkathyam through female descendants created a home which hinged on festivities, ceremonies and worship that strengthened the bond between kin.

The emphasis on commemorating the different milestones in the upper-caste life also had a lasting impact on how the people lived. With each rite of passage came a set of festivities, some in the form of deity worship like Vishu, whereas others included much pomp and show like the Nayar weddings. Nayars were inclined toward more elaborate regal feasts and dances where men and women intermingled without consideration for gender specific spaces. Despite such blurred lines during festivals, men and women had different social roles within the house. The matriarch and the women had spatial authority and Nayar men were relegated to the outside parts of the house.

The Nambuthiris followed the Makathayam or the patrilineal descent system. Although they too gave much importance to the rites of passage of their family members, they were more
immersed in a low-key though equally significant set of rituals, styled differently from the Nayar community. In the Brahmin household the joint family system had a highly defined pattern, where gendered segregation was crucial to maintaining the purity axis of their rituals. Again, as illams too were based on the underlying principles of worship and holy sanctity, gender specific roles were outlined through these ceremonies. Yet stark spatial division existed with the men having access to central parts of the house.

Both illams and tarawads, despite having a similar spatial layout, offered a different type of lived experience. This was based on caste of course, but in both the kinship structure remained as a joint family and the property was considered to be impartible. The impartible nature of the house implied that not only was the house an immaterial aspect, it also demonstrated how the family blended into it through the vast array of beliefs and rituals. In fact, the ancestor-worship that both caste groups followed highlighted how even in the after-life members were still connected to the illam and tarawad. Paying homage to members of the family, whether living or dead was a crucial element of the kinship organization of both groups. This is clear in the ways in which they not only ritualized their milestones, but in the elaborate ways both communities prepared the funeral rites and in the annual rituals post death. In fact, in the Nayar caste, all the smaller tavazhies would collect in the main tarawad despite any geographical distance to pay their annual respects to their deceased ancestors and to honor their memory by performing caste based rites.

While forms of worship varied from praying to the deities in temples, to the miniature shrines installed within their property, both communities also worshipped their land and its produce. This is most evident in their celebration of the Vishu and Onam festivals. Such celebrations not only symbolized the home and agrarian relationship but the mere acts of
preparing regal meals using the grains and roots from their fields, presenting vegetables to the lower castes as part of “kazhcha” gifts and using the produce in a myriad of ways for festivities indicated a unique ways of expressing their gratitude and worship.

Perhaps it can be safe to say that the customs came together to become the house. Yet, by the nineteenth century, many aspects of their social life began to shift. Whether it was the loss of their land through the Mysore invasion of 1766 or the multiple efforts by the British to support the new breed of Jenmis who wished to exploit the labor class — together they brought about irrevocable changes in the agrarian land structure. Even so, one could argue that British laws enabled people from all sections to become land-owners.

Despite some of the positive influences that certain laws such as the Tenants’ Rights Acts, and the Widow Remarriage Act foregrounded, the social fabric had begun to tear apart. For instance, the laws forbidding polygamy put an end to a crucial aspect of the matrilineal system in the tarawad. Without it, the women were forced to choose a monogamous life. In such scenarios, the fragmentation of the once spirited joint family system was inevitable. With members leaving, either in search of Government jobs to newly built towns due to loss of land or to fulfill a monogamous married life, the tarawad and the illam began their slow disintegration. The impartible was soon to become partible. Moreover, with the British proving that the burgeoning population of the tarawad was causing domestic discontent and as the misuse of funds by the Karnavan was visible in many families, such fracturing of the families seemed the right option for many.

The influence of western education, urbanization, and increased connectivity with other parts of the world through sea and railways also played a critical role in disseminating
information. Media, in the form of journals and newspapers, many which were influenced by the British, found women writers both arguing for and against such social changes. Activism too had taken up space with organizations like the Yoga Kshema Sabha fighting to liberate Antharjanams.

One question that surfaced during the process of writing this thesis was: if houses served as ritual sites for families, why did the British not order the destruction of the belief system? If rituals were as significant as they had been made out to be, why did the colonial power not attempt to erase ritual? Why did it instead focus on abolishing land laws and marriage customs? There is no easy answer to these. Yet, it is in the profound nature of dwelling in this land, infused with mystic powers, where the answer might be. I could argue that by fracturing certain relationships in the Malayalee’s lives, the British succeeded in cutting off critical arms that held these age old customs together. While that might be the case, it also raises the question of whether, despite the impartible house becoming partible and a joint family disintegrating into a nuclear one, was the house truly erased? Even though many of the crucial parts of what made the illam or the tarawad, such as polygamy or the Antharjanam’s Ghosham, have long disappeared, the belief systems still remain intact. In fact, the arguments showcased in the journals of the nineteenth century echoed similar sentiments. While many aligned with feminist ideas, there were still a few that were reluctant to adopt change.

In the days since India attained independence, to the present era where the state is steering toward neoliberal ambitions, there still remain concepts such as Devaswom or the Temple Board. Today, despite rising apartment buildings and fashionable single family units mushrooming across Kerala, tavazhies still exist and they regroup annually to celebrate their ancestors’ memories. In fact, in the Puravankara tarawad, the thousands of family members join
together to form a Family Trust that could help maintain the old tarawad. Olappamanna Mana is a staunch example of an illam trying to adapt to a modernizing state while still attempting to reclaim lost customs through ceremonies and by preserving old customs. The Devaswom Board continues to build temples while also preserve old ones. Malayalee devotees throng to these temples with utter devotion, and continue to practice many customary dances and celebrate festivals. *Vishu* and *Onam* are now public holidays with families and social organizations recreating the past in the present.

That is to say, even with notable changes in the habits of the people, and the erasure of caste from the socio-cultural fabric, there still remain pockets of rural life that sustain traditional agrarian homesteads, which have been co-opted as part of recent neoliberal imageries. Few are repackaged as boutique homestays to propagate cultural tourism, but a few others have given way to real estate developments. However, a sizable number of homesteads have managed to sustain and practice the past with ritualistic fervor sans caste, and, in doing so, re-appropriate the past into the present in a manner that cannot be reduced to mere nostalgia. Such examples beget the question of the temporal capacity of domestic space to converge the past and the present, collapsing them into one site and reveling them as a fully lived space subverting the notion of what domesticity should look like.

In my attempt to comb through the spatial living in these upper-caste agrarian homes, the tension of presenting a unique world's affective and aesthetic would often arise. There were moments when translating a practice such that a foreign audience could grasp came up with its set of challenges. The houses and inhabitation could not be huddled under a global umbrella of definitions. There were multiple layers to be teased out, and despite that, the work remains just
one perspective amongst many. In those moments of tension, ethnographer Lisa Stevenson's words from her book *Life Beside Itself* (2014) offered me inspiration. She writes:

I want to consider a mode of anthropological listening that makes room for hesitation—a way of listening for that which persistently disrupts the security of what is known for sure. This entails taking the uncertain, the confused—that which is not clearly understood—as a legitimate ethnographic object. Fieldwork in uncertainty would be less about collecting facts than about paying attention to the moments when the facts falter. Such attention to moments of doubt, of hesitation, dissolves the professional distance between the ethnographer and her subjects.²⁵²

Indeed there was hesitation as I delved into a world that teemed with the uncertain. Even a word like ‘belief is abstract and does not encompass the events, the people, and the house. But it is in that very uncertainty and the disbelief that this work sits. Spatial living in the agrarian houses was enveloped with Gods, people, superstitions, mythology, and power play—some created by God while others by men. There was no one way to find out the ongoings here. By taking the acts performed in the homes, I was also capturing the vagaries that came with it. Much like the story of the nine blind men and the elephant, I have presented just one perspective. These tiny fragments are pieced together to create one story amongst many.

²⁵² Stevenson, Lisa, and Lisa Stevenson. *Life Beside Itself: Imagining Care in the Canadian Arctic*, University of California Press, 2014, 2
Appendix:

Interview Excerpts:

Smt. Sridevi Vasudevan interviewed by Devi Nayar, M S Prashant and Annet Edwin (Research Assistants) on September 12th, 2021. [Translated from Malayalam]

AE: Tell us about life in Olappamanna as a young bride. How was the gendered space managed here?

SV: The house was divided into two – the smaller and the bigger Naalukettu. As a bride, who was college educated, I only spent a week here, after which I moved out with my husband. Things had changed by then. We women were becoming educated, we could go out. But I used to come here, as this was my family now. My father-in-law and mother-in-law lived here. This house was occupied by the eldest Nambuthiri male and his wife. So my in-laws lived here.

I am more familiar with the smaller courtyard house. This smaller house was designed for the women folk, the Antharjanams. The bigger courtyard house facing the south is accessed only by the male members of the house. The Bhagavathi prathishta (main deity’s idol) is located in the men’s section. The women would never go to the men’s section and vice versa. But during weddings, the veli that is, we could go there and watch the ceremonial procedure.

AE: What happens during the Veli?

SV: The Nambuthiri marriage in the case of the men is called veli. In the case of the woman, as she is given away to another family, the marriage is called penn kodal. The ceremonies are elaborate, in the sense that, this is what I have heard — the ceremonies take place in both the groom’s and bride’s home separately. The bride and other women first take an oil bath. We would always have a lower caste Nayar woman who was more of an escort for us, since back then we couldn’t speak with outsiders, even men. So we would go to the bath house (kadavu) and indulge in an oil bath. We would sing devotional songs as we bathed. We would then have an elaborate lunch followed by the mylanji ceremony. I have heard these types of ceremonies go on for about four days in total. But in my time it was only one day, as times had changed by then.

But the veli, is when the bride is brought by the groom and his family to his house. When the veli begins, it is only the bride, cloaked in the mundu, who appears in the men’s courtyard. She is made to sit there for a while and then after a few rituals she has to take three pradakshinas (circle around) of the jasmine platform (mulla thara). She has to pray to the Bhagavathy idol kept in this courtyard.
During the veli, unlike other days, we women are allowed to enter the men’s section. In fact, we are also allowed to enter the men’s section if there is an important puja where we are required to pray to the main deity’s idol. Apart from these occasions, entry into the men’s house is prohibited. Moreover, we are not allowed to be seen by other men. But it is okay, if that happens. But ideally it shouldn’t. But times changed, and today this is not a problem anymore.

AE: Tell us about the women’s house.

SV: In the North East is the kitchen. This is our kitchen. This is where the women servants and the women members of the family usually convene. We usually grind paddy there. We cook our food there and mostly also have our meals there. But there is also the Vatakke Kettu (points to it). That is where we should be ideally having our meals, it’s a medium sized hall. But we preferred eating in the kitchen. In the kitchen, there is a small puja room attached. The smaller idols representing the Bhagavathi and other pantheons of Gods are kept here for us. We have our special pujas, which we perform daily. They are short though.

You know about the shudham rituals? It was important that we kept ourselves pure. So when we were menstruating, we had to move into a small and relatively dark room on the other side of the vatakke kettu and remain there for three days. No bathing, nothing. We could come out to have our meals, but then we should clean up the space afterward with cow dung as a precautionary measure and go back. After three days, we are now allowed to go take a bath on our side of the kadavu. Our Nayar irukanaamas would bathe us with turmeric — it’s a turmeric bath actually. This ensures that we are pure again. Now we can go back to normalcy.

This room was also used as a labour room, to deliver babies. It is quite dark though.

There is also a room on the ground floor in our house for the oldest woman, usually quite old. She would sleep there.

AE: What about celebrations such as the Kaikottikali dance?

SV: Yes, we had those dance performances. We would have our special meals in the kettu and then clear it and dance amongst ourselves.

AE: Tell us about the sleeping arrangements.

SV: It’s changed over a course of time of course. But back in the day, since only the eldest Nambuthiri male and his wife or wives lived here, there was only one bedroom which was in the men’s house. The rest of us including children would sleep together in the halls. Nothing specific. The younger Nambuthiri brothers as a rule had to marry a Nayar woman. So they would use the granaries (pathayapuras) which are the houses you see outside, as their homes. The Nayar women couldn’t really use our house.

---

253 Lower Caste Nayar women who would perform the role of serving the Antharjanams.
AE: But would they still access it?

SV: Yes, they would come in through the North Eastern side of the kitchen, but that’s about it.

AE: What about now? Do you still follow the traditional wedding ceremonies?

SV: (laughs) No, no. Today everybody wants to get married in the Kalyana Mantapas (commercial buildings designed to be rented for marriage events). But yes, although they do that, they still come back to our house to perform the veli.

AE: You mean here?

SV: Yes, the bride comes in and she has to perform the same rituals around the jasmine platform even today. We are a large family, with so many members who live all around in the cities. So when any event like this happens, then everybody comes along. Of course, the veli still happens in this courtyard. But that’s about it.
Bibliography

Archives:

"1872 Marriage Act." n.d.


"Census of India, 1911: Travancore." n.d.


"Descriptive Memoir of Vellinazhi Desom." n.d.


Lawrence, James. The Empire of Nairs: An Utopian Romance. 1811.


"Madras District Gazetteer." n.d.

"Madras Tenancy Act." n.d.


"Oral Questioning, Cases 2 & 3." n.d.


"Report of the Nair Regulation Committee." 1919.

"Report on Administration of Travancore." n.d.


—. *The Traditional Kerala Manor*. Institut Francais de Pondiceri, 2012.


"Vellinazhi Desom: Olappamanna." n.d.


"Villangipier: Thirvalla Taluk." n.d.