

203

5

## *Vital Exchanges: Land and Persons in Kerala*

CAROLINE OSELLA AND FILIPPO OSELLA

### INTRODUCTION

Valentine Daniel, in what is still one of the most useful analyses on land in South Asia, sets out some fundamental principles governing the ways in which a specific soil on a particular territory forms and shapes those who live on it. He writes that, 'The *ir* [village] can have an effect on its inhabitants . . . for this . . . to be accomplished, there need be no ingestion of food or water.' (1987: 84). Further, 'The soil of an *ir* changes the *putti* [mind] of its residents. The *putti* and *kunam* [disposition] of the residents, however, can also change the substance of the soil' (1987: 94). Daniel shows how people planning to migrate search carefully for territory which will be compatible with their own natures, and outlines some ways in which character and dispositions are held to be transmitted to people by the land on which they live. We have also alluded to this phenomenon in the context of Kerala, where we have found that by contiguity even the most apparently impermeable matter can be altered by the subtlest of influences (Osella and Osella 2002).

In this paper, drawn from several periods of fieldwork in Kerala, we explore Malayāli ideas about the interconnections between land, houses, and their residents (who may be human, or animals, or spirits). We will summarize knowledge—held more deeply and in better detail by artisan and service castes, more superficially among the general population—about the forces and influences present on the land, and ways in which they can be managed. In exploring

→ 1987 in the  
ref.

the ways in which people try to maximize auspiciousness within their plots of garden land, house, and outbuildings, we find that they are searching to bring territory into harmony with the beings—both living and dead—resident on and around the land.<sup>1</sup> Kerala's rather unusual—from a pan-Indian perspective—funeral practices lead the way towards understanding how humans are able to settle successfully on a patch of land and make it 'theirs' by virtue of actually coming to participate in its substance. Thinking about the opposition made between garden land—as a place suitable for human habitation—and paddy-land—suitable for paddy but widely felt as dangerous and polluting to humans—also distinguishes the marginalized social position of those castes that live and labour to produce rice. While we will suggest that recent work stressing the partibility, permeability and mutability of the person is also useful in understanding data on land, we will take issue with the suggestion that all phenomena can be understood as examples or types of 'body metaphors' or 'body symbolisms'.

The various periods of fieldwork on which this paper is based took place from 1989 to 1999 in and closely around one panchayat we call Valiyagramam.<sup>2</sup> This consists of two named villages which have no clear boundary either between them or between their neighbouring panchayats, representing the type of dense flat land settlement for which Kerala, with its enormously high population density, is famous. Valiyagramam is a mixed *grāmam* (here: village, rural settlement) characterized by a rapidly expanding middle class, a small and declining elite, and a substantial and increasingly impoverished working-class sector. Villagers are also divided and stratified by *sammudayam* or *jāti*, community or caste. Hindu families of traditionally high caste status (such as Brahmins and aristocratic Nāyars) live largely in the village interior near to temples; Christians and lower-caste Hindus live scattered around the village. Residential areas are divided between a few neighbourhoods inhabited by single communities, and several mixed areas. Members of Dalit castes—Pulayars and Parayars—continue to live in segregated areas (some of which are formally designated 'Harijan colonies') at the edges of the paddy-fields; they are still overwhelmingly employed as

labourers, moving into areas such as house-construction or inland fishing as the agricultural economy continues to decline.

#### LIVING PLOTS

Kerala's land is divided by geographers and inhabitants alike into three natural longitudinal divisions: the 'shore-land' or low-lying coastal and backwater strip; the 'same-height-land' or central zone, 30-200 m, characterized by red laterite soil and scrub land; and the 'mountainland' which used to be thickly forested, now less so. Valiyagramam lies in the flat lands, bounded on the south and east by a river and on the west by an artificial irrigation canal separating its paddy fields from those of the neighbouring panchayat. The northern border, not demarcated by any boundary, is where the village runs into the next panchayat, a small Muslim and Christian trading town. Following state land registry boundaries, the panchayat of Valiyagramam (covering the two villages) spreads over 5,577 acres, divided into three types of land: to the west stands the *puñja*, 2,985 acres of one-crop paddy land, which gets flooded during the monsoon, being 2 m below sea level. This land forms the south-east corner of Kuttanad, Kerala's rice-growing region. To the east is the *viruppu*, 758 acres of land lying just 0.5 m below sea level, and which yields three harvests (two of paddy and one of sesame). Between the *puñja* and the *viruppu* lies the 1834 acre strip of *paṅampu*, or garden land, which is used for habitation and the cultivation of coconut, banana, jackfruit, areca, mango and cashew trees; root vegetables such as *kappa* (cassava/tapioca), *cēna* (*Arum campanulatum*, a type of yam), and *cēmpu* (*Caladium esculentum*, a large yam indigenous to Sri Lanka); and secondary cash crops such as pepper and, most lately, rubber. The distinction between habitable and non-flooding garden land (*paṅampu*) and the rest is the major feature differentiating village land. Land in the seasonally flooded *puñja*—thickly planted with paddy and home to the lowest castes and fiercest spirits—is viewed with ambivalence by those not living on it. The vast majority of people living on the western *puñja* are Pulayars, former agrestic slaves who even now are identified as an agricultural labouring caste. The eastern *viruppu* is home to a mixed settlement of Pulayars and

poorer Ījavars, again mostly working as agricultural labourers. These two areas, especially the *puñja*, are avoided by most villagers and held to be both the abodes of dangerous and ambivalent spirits, fierce and wild deities and demons and also places harbouring disease, 'bad air', dirty water and so on (Uchiyamada 1998, 2000). If garden land (*paṇampū*) stands for fruit trees, the possibility of building a good permanent house, proximity to temples, bus-stops and shops, then the paddy field lands stand for temporary huts and relative isolation from services. We will begin this paper by setting out some ways in which houses and people are grafted onto domesticated and auspicious garden land—positive spaces and moments in the lives of the respectable bourgeois and higher status families—before moving on to a greater appreciation of the significance of flows of influence and qualities by way of thinking about some spaces and moments considered by those mainstream families as disruptive and dangerous: death and funerals, and the flooding of the paddy lands during monsoon.

Land and landscape in Kerala are alive and, like the humans and animals seen on them, subject to continual flux. There is a lively market in land, as since the 1960s many of the village's wealthier and more educated professionals (notably Nāyars and Christians) sell up and move out to the cities while upwardly-mobile families (especially Ījavars and lower-status Christians) buy up the vacant plots and sometimes also houses, shifting into more prestigious areas of the village. Daniel records the importance for rural Tamils of ensuring compatibility between land and people, often expressed in terms of caste, such that the soil in certain areas is said to be 'sweet' and hence suitable for members of a certain community. In Kerala's crowded and highly mixed coastal belt settlements, the various zones of the main village do not have such strong associations with particular social groups; here it is an individual plot that is assessed in close detail, and whose characteristics may turn out to be completely different from those of the plot next door.

When land is bought or transferred, a horoscope is drawn up for the plot, using the date of purchase or access as birth date: 'When we buy or get a plot of land, it is like giving birth to it' explained one Āsāri (building artisan). The horoscope can be drawn by anyone

with knowledge of astrology, but clients prefer to consult a member of the Āśāri caste, a group which in rural areas continues in the caste occupation of building and carpentry work. The *nakṣatram* or 'ruling star'/asterism of the house is calculated according to the name of the plot. For example, the initial of a plot to be known as 'Vellayil Tekketu' is the Malayālam letter 'Va', and the *nakṣatram* which corresponds to this letter is *rohini*. Such information will be needed by the diagnosing astrologer if there are later disturbances or problems with the house or land.

According to Āśāri informants, during a fight between the Dēvanmār (gods) and Asuranmār (demons), Mahāviṣṇu fell to earth and became Vāstupuruṣan (land man—see Madan 1987: 139). Each and every marked plot of land contains one Vāstupuruṣan, plus the 81 gods who live on his body.<sup>3</sup> When humans wish to settle on a plot of land, the Vāstupuruṣan dwelling there must be made comfortable and his body respected, as we will outline below. Melinda Moore (1990), writing about the ideal Kerala house, has suggested that there is only one Vāstupuruṣan covering the house, but our informants were clear that there are always at least two to be considered: the one whose body maps or fixes a plot of land, and the one(s) whose body/ies form(s) the house. Against Moore's understanding that Vāstupuruṣan actually is the land, we shall work with an assumption that is both in agreement with what has generally been written about land in India (e.g., Fuller 1992: 43, 193), which certainly seems to make more sense of our data and which is also suggested in Caldwell's recent notes on land in northern Kerala (1999: 104ff). This is that land is a female divine being (Bhūmi-Dēvā) who, like other female beings, must be pacified by a male being if her transformative and protective powers are to be safely used in the human world (cf. Östör 1980: 199). Menon and Rajan (1989: 1) state that when Kerala was formed: 'The newly reclaimed land presented many problems—floods, landslides, earthquakes. [. . .] Parasurama is believed to have stabilized the land and made it habitable through the installation of 108 Sivalingas and 108 Shakthipeedhas (fixed seats for male and female generative powers) and consecrating them with tantric rituals.' Vāstupuruṣan is not, then, the land itself but the

consort of the land who, by binding and containing her, domesticates her: if Bhūmi-Dēvī is life, Vāstupuruṣan is form.

Where we depart sharply from Caldwell is in then refusing to consider this human body/land body homology as a totalizing metaphor. We therefore avoid assuming a consistency or durability across discourses and realms, so that, for example, we do not wish to suggest or assume that Vāstupuruṣan necessarily for all Malayālis at all times is focused on stabilizing Bhūmi-Dēvī by means of sexual intercourse. We will suggest a far more cautious interpretation, which is that at some times, certain parts of natural phenomena are held to resemble each other. Some features of the human body or particular aspects of human reproductive processes are pilfered to make metonyms with which to explain animal and paddy reproduction and vice versa, but these metonymic relationships of resemblance, contrast or homology are not drawn into neat metaphors by means of which any phenomenon can then be understood in terms of another.

We also differ considerably from Melinda Moore in our positioning and orientation of Vāstupuruṣan on the land and in house. When we worked with village practitioners in the field of Āyurvēda we found a close correspondence, with only minimal variation, between the 'authorized version' as presented in pan-Indian texts and actual local practice, but in the realm of architecture/geomancy (*tacūśāstra*) we claim the existence of a semi-autonomous local tradition. But this does not mean that Kerala Āśāris are less scrupulous about respecting *śāstra* or more informal in their knowledge-practices; the Āśāris we interviewed did not rely on memory or oral transmission, but had their own hand-written manuals, passed down from father to son and consulted carefully.

While Moore expresses ambiguity and doubt on the subject of Vāstupuruṣan's orientation (1990: 182), our informants were very clear that land man fell to earth face down, his arms and legs outstretched, and that he touches the earth at four cardinal points, i.e. at his spread hands and feet. His buttocks are raised, his back is straight, and his head is raised to look south-west, towards the Ocean. His position as described (and acted out) to us is similar to a four point prostration, like that adopted when greeting a deity in

performing the *sūryanamaskāram* (see Fig. 5.1). It therefore differs considerably from the orientation given by Beck (1976) and picked up by Moore (1990), in which land man lies, arms and legs folded inwards, flat on his back or stomach, and always facing north-east.<sup>4</sup> The places where his hands and feet touch earth according to our informants' positioning (Fig. 5.1), named by Āśāris as the four *kōṭi* (knots or bound points), turn out to correspond exactly to the four cardinal points. This makes sense in view of the understanding that space is something to be held down and bound, and land something to be stabilized: with his extremities firmly flat on the ground, land man not only maps but also ties and fixes physical space. When building a house, Vāstupuruṣan of the land plot must not be disturbed, so the Āśāri's first job is to locate him and map him out.

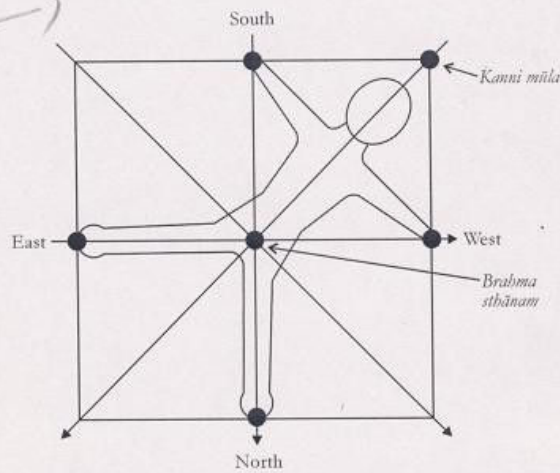


Fig. 5.1: Vāstupuruṣan as he is described by artisan practitioners.

The directionality given here reproduces exactly what Āśāris told us. Thus, while Europeans are accustomed to a geography and a

cartography in which north is the top and in which north-south is the direction of the primary axis, the Āsāris we met spoke of a south to north axis, while in diagrams they draw 'upside down' from the orientation usually given in western conventional maps. In this ethno-geography, south is 'up', while north is 'down'.<sup>5</sup> Another particularity is that the land—in this coastal region, apparently totally flat—is actually said to have an unseen slope, running from south-west to north-east—in the direction also taken by monsoon winds, a fact also confirmed by Moore (1990; see her discussion pp. 187ff on 'the presumed underlying and universal cline' and 'an underlying flow of good influence from the south-west towards the north-east', p. 189). Water runs from south-west to north-east, which is why, for example, a house well is placed at the north-east corner, to take advantage of the ease with which water will flow at this corner. While Moore, following building manuals, places the goddess Nirrti in the south-west corner, our informants placed Dēvī there—both as Bhūmi-Dēvī embodying or protecting the land and as Mahālakṣmī in the form of the rice-store; we note that the head of land man also comes in this corner. Given the nature of these entities, and given the presumed unseen slope, we can think of the south-west corner as the uppermost point.

#### RETURN TO THE *TARAVĀTU*

The unit of reproduction of the Nāyar family—the matrilineal *taravātu*—has been the subject of many anthropological explorations of kinship (Gough 1961; Fuller 1976; Jeffrey 1994 [1976]). Moore (1985) stresses the importance of understanding that the old Kerala Nāyar matrilineal *taravātu* were not simply matrilineages, but, crucially, units of house, land, and people together: what she does not say, but which is clear to us in Valiyagramam as in Valentine Daniel's Tamil ethnography (1984), is that land and houses, like people, are considered to be living beings imbued with particular qualities (*gunam*). It is also clear that many qualities are passed and exchanged between land, house, and people. The living household is not composed only of its human members. At the same time, houses, paddy-land and garden plots do not merely reflect the status of

Chelli  
R  
-

#L



their owners: they constitute, like individual persons, objectifications of the wider family group, of the latter's name and reputation, and, like people, act both as a source and as a target of quality. Moore also neglects to mention the house-land-people units of other communities: many families among Kerala's Tīyyar and Īḷavar communities were also matrilineal and ran large *taṅavāṭu*, while patrilineal Christian families built large homes modelled either on *taṅavāṭu* or on colonial styles. Brāhmins meanwhile had their *illam* and Kṣatriyas their *koṭṭāram* (palaces). All such buildings of 'big families' are better thought of not simply as 'houses' but as large structures supporting many dependants and servants. Dilip Menon has explored the historical significance and working practices of the nineteenth-century *taṅavāṭu* and demonstrated the politico-economic indivisibility of its component parts: land, house, people, animals, and crops (1994).

While the number and extent of a house's dependants and attached properties have generally declined and while the *taṅavāṭu* as such no longer exists since the legal abolition of matriliney (in a range of legislation between 1912 and 1976), an idealized *taṅavāṭu* model still prevails. Whether named as *taṅavāṭu*, *illam*, *koṭṭāram* or simply house (*vīṭu*), the house is the long-lasting and concrete embodiment of a family's success or failure, its relative worth and reputation, indicated in the identity between family and house-names. In Taussig's terms, it is a monument to the family (1997). It is particularly understood as the objectification of the worth of the family's senior male, the householder, who provides the cash to buy land and build the house.<sup>6</sup> A man's first duty, after marrying and fathering children—taking on Hindu householder status—is to build or improve the family home, leaving behind (usually to his youngest son) something of value and which speaks of a certain status. Buying, renovating or building a house is a priority, as brick and tile houses replace thatched or wooden huts, and concrete or costly granite and teak replace brick. As considerable capital is required to build a new house, this is usually a long-term goal (an average of between Rs 1,50,000 to 2,50,000 in 1990, Rs 4,50,000 -to 7,50,000 in the early 2000s for a prestigious concrete three bedroom house, excluding the cost of the land).

Since concrete houses have become relatively common, wealthy villagers have begun to maintain distinction by having their new houses built either brickwork style, or according to traditional *nālukettu* design (traditional Kerala four-sided house built around a central courtyard, discussed below). Houses are constructed over a period of years: the ritual placing of a foundation stone is like a vow (*nēruva*), in which the Hindu carpenter (*Āsāri*) acts as priest, and is a public commitment to build, years before the cash to continue work is raised. Side extensions, verandas, extra storeys, may all be added long after the original house has been built. A house is a never-finished project: as a family's wealth, reputation, prestige and membership grows, the house will also grow. But this growth is far more than a matter of symbolic capital or embodiment of householder's *mānam* (prestige, standing). Growth is an attribute of living things, and successful growth testifies to the auspiciousness of the house and the land on which it is built, a positive quality which will act favourably upon residents (cf. Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995).

#### BUILDING A HOUSE

Melinda Moore (1990; see also 1985) has already described the layout of a traditional Kerala high-caste four-sided house, or *nālukettu*, and has discussed the *taccuśāstra* (manuals about the science of house building). Although most new houses now are built using non-traditional materials, and often to new designs, Hindus and Christians alike continue to consult and employ the Hindu *Āsāris*,<sup>7</sup> since the choice of suitable site and layout depend upon factors which only these specialists understand. Migrants may buy plans from a Gulf-based architect, but take the *Āsāri*'s advice on alterations necessary to bring the house structure into line with *śāstrik* principles. *Āsāris* allow leeway in interpretation to permit desires for a filmi-style house rather than a *nālukettu*. For example, strings of small holes which should be placed in house walls to allow the passage of *vāyu* (wind) (Moore 1990: 175) can be improvised: 'We can count a door or window as a hole, and put more windows and doors into the house in the necessary places', Vasudevan *Āsāri* explained. A recent counter-trend to the extravagances of the 1970s is to turn

to the restoration of existing properties or to build anew, but in traditional style.<sup>8</sup> Often the existing *aru* (paddy-store) of an old house, referred to as the heart of the house or as Mahālakṣmī, is preserved, renovated, and used as the core of the new building. The *aru*, as much as the kitchen fire, is a core living part of a building which itself lives, having a life-span, a horoscope, and being subject to the same laws and forces as those which affect other organic bodies.

In house-building, first the plot must be squared-off and measured out, and the lines of force mapped, so that Vāstupuruṣan is correctly aligned. Thankappan Āsāri told us that there are 10 or 12 types of house, classified according to size and directionality, and that a *nālukeṭtu*, four-sided single atrium house, actually holds not one but four land men. The *nālukeṭtu*, a four-sided building around an open central courtyard, is the basic model or prototype for all houses; an *eṭtukeṭtu* (double atrium house) is just two *nālukeṭtu* side by side. The majority of houses in Valiyagramam are what the Āsāri call *adharmā grhaṣṭab* (adharmic houses), being half (the commonest house) or one quarter of a *nālukeṭtu* (cf. Moore 1990: 171).<sup>9</sup>

*Nālukeṭtu* means 'four knots' or 'tied down in four places'. Lines are drawn in on the squared-off land plot as a whole before placing the first *kōṭi* or knots which will tie and stabilise the plot and enable building (see Fig. 5.2):

1. East to west = *Brahma sūtram*, the line of Brahma, supreme god.
2. South to north = *Yama sūtram*, the line of Yama, death or darkness. The centre cross of the south to north and east to west axes is marked as *Brahma sthānam* (Brahma's place, at the centre of the plot, considered by Moore (1990) and Beck (1976) to be the location of the navel of the land man, but according to our informants and diagrams, it is at the *naṭu*, the lower back (see Fig. 5.1). In a house, the point where the axes cross corresponds to the open courtyard, a square of earth left open to the sky, where a sacred basil may be planted.
3. South-east to North-west = *Mṛtyu sūtram* (the line of death); if the house touches this line, death will come.
4. South-west to North-east = (given by informants in Malayālam as) *Kaṭṭana sūtram*, and translated by a research assistant as the

Handwritten notes in red ink: "Kṛ." and "Kṛ."

line of the neck or jugular vein. Moore (1990: 175) gives the name of this axis as *karnan*, and translates it as ear, diagonal or corner line, from Sanskrit.

In deciding where on the plot to build the house, some rules are followed: the house must be situated in one of the eight spaces produced by drawing the above four axes, in such a way that it does not intersect any of the lines (see Fig. 5.2). Permissible locations for the house are the following triangular spaces within the original plot: south-south-west, west-south-west, north-north-east and east-north-east. The house then sits either in the upper portion of land man's body, or in the space between his legs. In other words, it cannot be placed externally to his body, but must be encompassed by it; the house must be tied or held in place by the land. Vāstupuruṣan

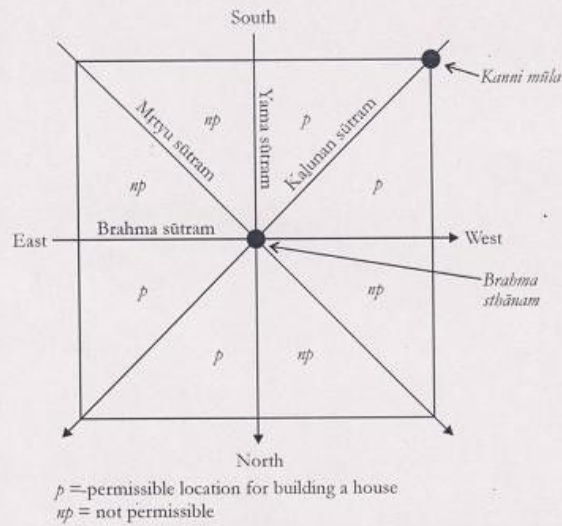


Fig. 5.2: Lines of influence as they are drawn in on a land plot, and permissible locations for building a house.

therefore acts as an unseen bridge holding together and merging into one object two physical entities, earth and the house. The rules about axes not intersecting make clear that the earth is subject to cosmic influences which travel across the land and which have effects on the built structures upon it. It is perhaps the body of Vāstupuruṣan, connected to both, which acts as transmitting medium for these influences to pass from earth to house. The 'rules' are of course normative expressions of ideals, such that while we have never seen a Brahman *illam* which contravenes any of the Āśāris' ideals, there are houses in Valiyagramam which flout one or more of them. At the same time, problems in the families of those living in such homes are quickly attributed to the *adharmic* nature of the buildings.<sup>10</sup>

The house itself is also built by human bodies, in the same all-fours, head raised, buttocks-raised attitude described above for the land man on the plot, but with the arms and legs less widely spread to allow for the fact that the spaces to be fixed here are not squares, but rectangles (see Fig. 5.4). The *nalukettu* is considered by Āśāris the basic and best model, consisting of four full men.

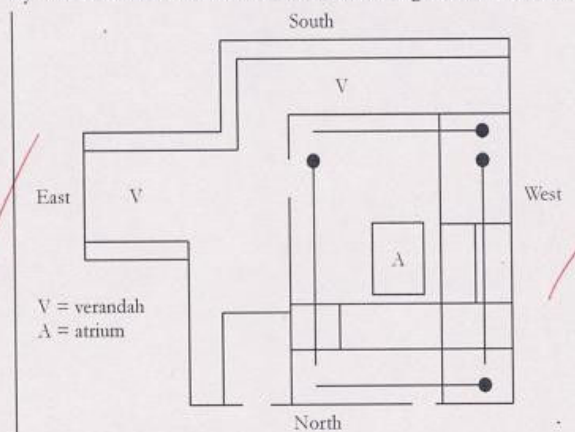


Fig. 5.3: How more than one Vāstupuruṣan are put together in a *nalukettu*.

'All other houses are just portions of a *nālukettu*, and this is then what makes them *adharmā grhasṭab* (demonic/amoral buildings): our diagrams clearly show the way in which they would then be incomplete, holding dissected portions of what should ideally be whole bodies of *Vāstupuruṣanmār* or land men (Figs. 5.3 and 5.4). This is, after all, appropriate, since they are traditionally the houses of Christians or *avarṇa jāti*, who by orthodox reckoning are incomplete persons: Nambutiri *illam*, Kṣatriya *koṭṭāram* and high-status Nāyar *taṟavāṭu* alone are alleged to be complete *nālukettu*.<sup>11</sup>

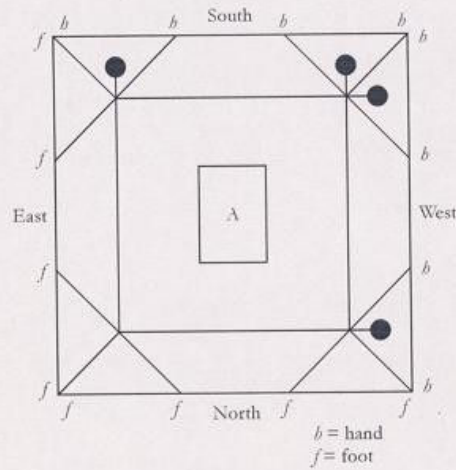


Fig. 5.4: *Nālukettu* and the four *Vāstupuruṣans*.

In the arrangement of space-fixing male bodies around a house, the positions of the hands and feet show that the general principle of arrangement is that the men are oriented towards the south-west corner. Of the four men who form the four sides of the house around the central atrium, one is considered pre-eminent, the *tekku pēru* (south-side person). The south side of the house is the most important side, referred to by Āśāris as *stbhāji* (fixed); it is the side

along which the main veranda runs and is, we note, firmly held down by four hands.<sup>12</sup>

When a house is to be built, the Āśāri and householder together first plant a splint of jack-fruit, a white latex-bearing tree, at the compound's south-west point. Here, post-cremation, family members' bones will be buried, to be later transformed into fertile substance (discussed below). This south-west corner is the most significant angle: it is where the initial foundation-stone is laid, often years before any further building work takes place, where the first splint of jackfruit wood is planted, and where all initial *pūjās* are done. After this will come the doorframe and then the east-west roof frame, house-man's spine. *Tekku pēru* is the man on the principal (south) side of the house, he whose head lies in the south-west corner of the building, whose spine forms the east-west axis which 'holds everything together'<sup>13</sup> and whose ribs mark out important south-north axes (Fig. 5.4). In the best and commonest sort of *nālukeṭṭu*, the *patittāru* (west) house, whose front porch and main entrance are to the east, the beams of wood—whose 'heads' (tops of the beams) must always face west—run in exact concordance with south-man's spine, the top of which is also in the west. The three lesser men whose spines form the other roof-beams are arranged as shown in Figs. 5.3 and 5.4, the rule being that no head should lie in the north-east corner, which must be left clear.

The central atrium, which Moore perspicaciously links to the empty centre and to the Hindu cosmos (1990: 199), is in our understanding empty not, as she claims, because it corresponds to the navel of a single house-man, but because it is the central point where the axes cross and the *Brahmsthānam* of the house. Here the earth is left empty and unbound, free to connect with the universal source of power and energy (*paraiaketi*), while all lines of cosmic influence come together in a 'hot spot' of power (Fig. 5.2).

The doorframe of the main entrance to the house, which is the first structural part to be placed after the foundation stone and jackfruit wood splint at the south-west corner, is, according to Āśāris, the anus of the main house-man (see Figs. 5.3 and 5.4). We have double-checked this assertion, even if it is clear from the diagrams that the entrance does correspond indeed to an anus. Perhaps any

problem we have in assimilating this information lies in thinking of this door as an entrance: for family members, whose proper place after all is not outside the house but within it, this door is more appropriately an exit. Family members and friendly visitors rarely use this main 'entrance', preferring to skip around the side (males) or via the kitchen (females).<sup>14</sup> Often the door is placed there simply for *taccuāstrie* requirement, and is actually left closed up and never used. Knowing that this 'official main door' door is land man's anus also throws extra significance on the fact that corpses and departing new brides are ceremoniously exited by this door, excreted, as it were, from the house.

All these initial steps—foundation stone, jack-split, doorframe, east-west roof frame—before building proper commences are accompanied by *pūjās* performed by householder and chief Āsāri together. A small piece of gold, a little paddy, some red flowers, and some milk—items clearly related to the material world, to prosperity and fruitfulness—are buried under the foundation stone. Thankappan Āsāri told us: 'I do all these *pūjā* myself, I get *dakṣiṇā* for it: money, betel-nut, a new cloth. Brāhmins know nothing about all this, they cannot do it.' What the Āsāri is stressing here is that he has knowledge and a power for action which the Brāhmin does not, remunerated and respected exactly like Brahmanical knowledge, with *dakṣiṇā*. This knowledge and technical skill relates to the material world and to the life-processes of organic beings. Even a Brāhmin must call an Āsāri to plan his house and do the necessary *pūjā*; his knowledge is not powerful enough to allow him to act here for benefit in the realms of material prosperity and fertility.

After the ceremonial inauguration of construction-work, the Āsāris are left to finish the house. In house-plans, twelve boxes representing the months of the Malayalam year are drawn surrounding the house, in exactly the same way as is done when preparing a person's birth-chart; Āsāris referred to this as drawing up the house's horoscope (Fig. 5.5). The scheme for placing rooms and facilities is done by reference to the horoscope and not to the cardinal points (cf. Moore 1990: 172ff), since houses need not always be built facing east; an east-facing house is the best but not the only possible *dharmic* building (also Moore 1990: 174). We can, however, draw



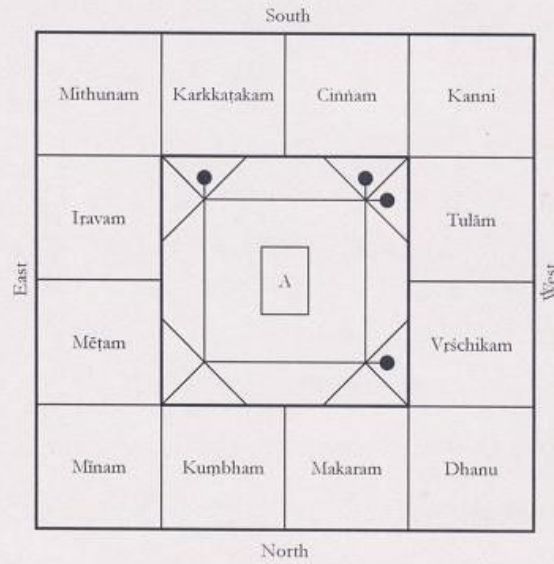


Fig. 5.5: The house and the months of the calendar.

out a general implication that life-sustaining powers of fertility and increase are highly concentrated around the rice store (*aya*) and the foundation-stone, while physiological processes bringing pollution (childbirth, excretion) are kept in the next corner (moving clockwise). In an ideal home, these would be the south-west and north-west corners.

RECYCLING THE DEAD

An aspect of Kerala life which never fails to provoke unease or even horror among north Indians is the practice of keeping the family dead very close by. Unlike north Indian funerals, in which a polluting dead body is removed to a cremation ground outside

the village or the urban residential area, and subjected to rites which aim at complete removal of the dead (Parry 1994), in Kerala villages dead bodies remain around the house, in the compound, while aspects of the dead person are actively sought, captured, and passed on to living relatives.

A good death is one which is slow and prepared for, so that the soul and the body have time to separate properly (cf. Madan 1987: 118, 125; Parry 1989: 503ff). Informants' idealized responses to questions about 'good' and 'bad' deaths indicate that the best death is that which comes in very old age, after a long illness which involves bed rest at home and much suffering, with one's family around and the names of the gods on one's lips at the final breath. Of course, people are actually happy not to see relatives suffer and linger and may very well hope for a smooth and painless death for themselves, but are able to take comfort from slow deaths in an ideal which teaches that the more you suffer while waiting for death, the more your lifetime's sins will be paid for, leaving less to be dealt with after death. Since *karma phalam* (the fruits of action) are held to affect not only the individual sinner but also close associates, the house, the livestock, and the land, a slow death by painful illness saves not only the sinner but all those around from future torments. While people sometimes refer to (individualized) *karmam* they are more likely to express these ideas in terms of (more generalized) *dōṣam*. As we will explain in more detail below, the negative fruit of the actions of a sinner affect not simply their individual soul but the entire family group, and are transmitted largely through the land and house.

Death, then, should be slow, at home, and at an appropriate time with regard both to one's own age and place in the family (e.g., a son should not die before his father), when it will be accepted gratefully as a liberation from the body and from this world. A painful death is often spoken of as the sinner paying for their sins before dying, thereby, as we will see, leaving less *dōṣam* to be dealt with by descendants. The souls of young people (who still hold desires or attachments to the world), of those who die suddenly without preparation, or of those weighed down by unpaid for sins, are unlikely to be able to leave the world. Their spirits are expected

to hover around, trying to re-embody themselves via possession, in order to experience the earthly life which they still crave, to take revenge on those who caused their untimely death, to pay for or pass on to others their sins, or to stay near their loved ones from whom they cannot yet bear separation.<sup>15</sup>

We interviewed informants from all the Hindu communities, plus funeral specialists like barbers and woodcutters, about the funeral procedures; there was substantial disagreement over fine details. Nowadays in Valiyagramam washermen and the drummers refuse to come to funerals, so all the *karmam* and preparations—apart from the woodcutting, which is still done by the *Tantāns* (woodcutters)—are conducted for *Nāyars* and *Ījavars* by the community's own barber; *Pulayars* do everything themselves, while *Brāhmins* have their own funeral priests. Partly because of the difficulty of finding barbers, washermen and so on to participate in the rites, the NSS and SNDP community associations (*Nāyar* and *Īavar* respectively) have published booklets explaining how to conduct a 'do-it-yourself' cremation.<sup>16</sup>

There are five rites, cremation, exhumation and purification, food sacrifice/*pinṭam* balls, feasting, taking to the ocean. Death day is day one, and even if the cremation is not performed on this day, it is always treated as though it had been; from that day, a family may decide to keep pollution (*pula*) and do the first four rites spaced over seventeen, eleven or— as is usual— five days, depending upon convenience.<sup>17</sup> The usual practice now is to keep five days' pollution and then collapse the *sañjayanam* (purification and burial under jack-tree of cremains<sup>18</sup>), *bali* (sacrifice) and *valiya kēpi* (pollution-breaking feast) all together on the fifth. One year after day one, the purified cremains are dug up and taken to the sea. *Brāhmin* funerals are even more complex, while for pragmatic reasons Scheduled Caste and poor *Īavar* funerals are often stripped down to a simple and inexpensive burial on the compound land.

Persons in Kerala do not suddenly disappear at death. At death and in the ensuing rituals, they must be subjected to extreme fragmentation and many transformations. Cremation and the ensuing rites appear, like birth, as similar to the original creative sacrifice (Beck 1976; Parry 1989: 503ff). This is not surprising,

because birth and death are often associated: a death in one arena is a birth into another (Beck 1969; Kapferer 1991: 298). This does not mean that the one is an exact metaphor for the other; and again, we reiterate our unwillingness to force the data into the sort of interpretation which would make the one (and already one would need to ask: which one, death or birth?) into a template for the other. We are instead dealing with an association of two semantic domains by virtue of drawing metonymically on looser and mutually resembling principles, in this case more general processes of union and separation (Östör 1980: 180-1). In such processes, what is held together is broken apart and spilled, yielding both the regenerative seeds of new life (cf. Shulman 1980) and also some unwanted negative residues. This type of process is, as we shall outline below, also observable in paddy agriculture.

Over the course of funeral rites, through a great many successive transformations which take place at increasing distances from the death-place, various parts of the person become less and less personalized and more anonymous or undifferentiated; these parts, good and bad, are refined and separated out by the actions of persons, trees and land. The component parts of the person which are broken down are many. First, there is elemental matter in combination which is first broken back down into its constituent *pañcabhūta* and returned to the immediate physical environment of the house compound (on the *pañcabhūta* or five elements, see Subbarayappa 1966). This breakdown is achieved by prayer (Īlavars) or by ritual actions (Nāyars) done before the pyre is lit. The pyre itself effects a second transformation. After it burns for two or three hours, people watch to see the body break in half and collapse inwards. When the burning body breaks at the lower back, *pāpam* or *dōṣam* (sin or faults, evils including and bringing with them bad luck, illness and so on) are said to be liberated into the air along with the soul, as the stomach bursts and the lower back breaks (note, not the skull as in north India, but the *naṭu*—the part corresponding to the empty bare earthen courtyard in the house and the crossing-point of lines of force in the body of *Vāstupuruṣan*). At this point further transformations are effected, when the barber performs rituals using a pot of milk to try to 'catch' and neutralize the released

*dōṣam*. What is not caught will settle on the land and contribute to its characteristics. Some substances, however, remain in the ashes and bones in the pyre pit (the *cremains*). After cremation, some of these cremains are ritually washed (purified with holy water, cow's urine, and so on) and taken away to the compound's south-westerly jackfruit tree by the chief mourner. The remainder is left in the pyre pit, which will then be dug over.

These early-day transformations of the dead body which begin to break the person down and settle different components in different places around the compound, transformations which are begun by living persons, are then continued over the next years by the actions of trees and the land. Because household members do not disappear to cremation grounds but remain around the compound, actually becoming part of the compound and its vegetation, a plot can become 'ancestral' land very quickly and easily—as soon as one person has died there—facilitating Kerala's fast-moving land market. When new people move into a plot, they generally take over and adopt the ancestral spirits already existing around there; the possibility of incorporating high-status ancestors and high-quality influences and substances from the land into one's own household is actually a strong motivating factor for families seeking to buy land from city-bound high-status families, such as the many *Īlavars* who have moved into former *Nāyar* plots or the few *Nāyars* who have managed to buy old *Brāhmin* plots and houses. The wealthy ex-untouchable *Panṭāram* (*pappāṣam*-making) family with a son in the USA who have managed to buy an old *Kṣatriya kottāram* are an extreme example of this 'capturing' of auspicious and high-status qualities. At the same time, a plot with undesirable ancestral spirits or influences can easily be diagnosed and 'cleaned' by the actions of an astrologer and appropriate rituals.

After *sañjayanam* (cremain purification), the pyre pit is planted with three important fruit and root bearing plants; banana at the south (head) side, coconut in the stomach (central) side, and a tuber at the north (feet) side. The dug-over pit, with its cremains, is then left on the land to feed (to become the food of, i.e. to be transformed by) trees, which will then feed the house dwellers. Before the pit is filled in and planted, some fragments of the bones have been taken

and washed in *sañjayanam*; after this purificatory ritual washing, these remains—which must include skull fragments—are then buried for a year underneath the jackfruit tree at the extreme south-west corner of the compound, left to be transformed by the tree. Any residual *dōṣam* left in the remains will go into the newly-planted pyre pit plants and the jackfruit tree. The jackfruit, which yields a cold white fluid and large fruits made up of hundreds of smaller seeds, objectifies household fertility, prosperity, and increase; the fruit is a good icon for all members together on the ancestral plot, for the *janicuvāl*, *maricuvāl* (all *taṅuvāṅu* members, including those yet to be born and those already dead) invoked as such during funeral rites. The tree will during the year transform the purified remains; something from them will remain in the remains and something will enter the tree. This jackfruit tree must never be cut down, and gives continuity of cool refined ancestral substance, distilled by the tree from cold white bones.<sup>19</sup>

The final remnants of transformed matter are dug up from under the jackfruit tree after one year, presumably completely transformed by now, and are taken by the chief mourner to the Ocean.<sup>20</sup> If the soul is now ready to detach itself from the land and family, it will go with (in) the purified and transformed remains to be released into the ocean. The scattering into fast-flowing water of the soul can be understood as enacting *mokṣa*, the final obliteration of the self, merger with godhead. The highly refined remains (the exhumed remains) going into the water also contribute to the continuance of a larger and less differentiated circular flow of life. We can, following the funeral's sacrificial logic (see e.g., Beck 1976; Parry 1989: 503ff; Hildebeitel 1990: 357), think of them as the sacrificial remnants which contribute to new life (the cooled-down 'fiery seed'—Shulman 1980: 90-3). If the *jivātmānu* (individualized soul) successfully de-differentiates itself during its post-cremation year of wandering, it will settle in the bone fragments and go willingly to the ocean, where it might go to heaven or into total dissolution. If it remains attached (to the land, to the people living there), it might stay in the compound<sup>21</sup> as a domesticated and now deified ancestor, tied and fixed into a *kurjāla* (ancestor shrine), or as a disembodied

not in ref.

and unsatisfied ghost (*piñaci*), who will eventually find its way to the paddy fields, where many disembodied spirits wander.

We see, then, that the qualities of the person are also fragmented. Some sin is burnt off by the bodily suffering immediately prior to death, which is why a long debilitating illness is preferred. Some is burnt in the pyre; the more it smokes, the more *dōsam* and sin are burnt off. 'To make more smoke' is given as a reason why green wood is used on the pyre and why men must smoke cigarettes at funerals. Some more *dōsam* and sin comes out of the corpse's stomach when it bursts and the lower backbone breaks. Some of this goes into a pot of water carried by the chief mourner, from where it may be neutralized by the barber through the addition of cows' milk. Any residual *dōsam* which remains firmly 'stuck' to the bones and ashes after all the rites are concluded will go into the three trees planted in the pyre pit, and from there, into the bodies of the descendants who eat the fruit of the tree. The fate of the soul meanwhile is uncertain. People simultaneously claim that it remains on the compound land, *wandering, wanders* around the village until it is reincarnated; goes into the *kuryāla* (ancestor shrine); stays under the jackfruit tree; goes to heaven; merges with 'Viṣṇu's leg'; and goes to the sea and dissolves there into universal spirit.

Most often, a soul is too differentiated and too attached to the earth to be able to go off to the sea in purified bone remnants, and it stays wandering around its old neighbourhood. It may be weighed down by *dōsam* which is said to be so 'sticky' and 'heavy' that it will not pass from it. Or it may simply be attached because of unfulfilled desires: to see a grandson born, to stay around a much adored wife, to continue living in the house it loved. If the funeral rites were not carried out properly, or if the death was a bad one, the soul will certainly be unable to detach from the death place. In all the above cases, it will initially be unhappy and probably cause disturbance to the family, so that they will realize that it is there, and help it. *Bhūmi dōsam* and *bhavana dōsam* (problems with the land and with the building respectively) are common causes of family troubles such as illness, unemployment, and family squabbles. If *dōsam* needs to be put right, the astrologer can diagnose it and advise treatment, after which the spirit can be comfortably settled in the ancestor shrine.

If a spirit has no *dāṣam*, but is simply attached, wanting to carry on being part of the family, then it can; but only on condition that it accepts its new status and stays in the place now appropriate for it, the *kuryāla* (ancestor shrine). It may travel the slow road to *mokṣa* (release) like this. After a while, it will merge with the other familial spirits in the *kuryāla*, until it becomes only part of de-differentiated Appuppan (granddad) the group spirit of all dead family members. From here, it is a short step to total dissolution.

Not only the soul and the *dāṣam* but other qualities and parts of the person also remain in the earth of the family compound. There they will be transformed by the land to give substance to trees whose fruits will be eaten by family members. Any sticky (extremely bad, severe) residual *dāṣam* or sins which resisted transformation by the pyre and have also resisted transformation by the land and by the tree, will then be passed on to the descendants. When they eat the jackfruit, banana, coconut and tubers, they will be eating transformed ancestral substance: in Kerala, *karma phalam*, the fruit of the actions of the ancestors, is not an empty figure of speech but is literally ingested and assimilated by the living descendants.

#### FLOODS AND PADDY LANDS

The monsoon, breaking shortly after harvest, brings chaos to the village: canals and rivers overflow their banks, wipe out many of the roads, travel is difficult everywhere and in places impossible, the rain destroys houses, sometimes crops and animals, and finally departs. It leaves the paddy fields flooded to a depth of 2 m with a sea of water in which float rotting plants, dead small animals, human excreta, the wreckage of houses, and scores of tiny fish swimming in the silt rich water. Fish is valued only second to rice as a food by non-Brāhmins, is served daily in those homes which can afford it, and its relative absence in the diets of the poorest is sorely lamented. Monsoon is a time of abundance of this food, as boys from all the non-vegetarian castes go to fish in the canals and paddy fields.

This water then, contains life, in the form food and a multiplicity of living creatures; and death, in the form of chaos, destruction, and excreta, all abundantly mixed. It is also out of control, overflowing,



threatening to invade the ordered centre of the village, where the temples are, and where the higher castes live. Higher castes guiltily picture the Harijan colonies as even more dirty and miserable than usual during the monsoon, and arrange alternative emergency accommodation in the village primary school for the season. But many refuse to go, moving in with family who live nearer the edges of the *puñja*, or, if they are lucky enough to have brick houses, staying put, ignoring the water which laps around and even in through the front door, travelling to market and receiving visitors by boat. When the monsoon arrives, many Pulayar young people told us, 'You must come out in the boat with us to see the flooding'. We assumed that they wanted us to see the extent of the damage suffered by their community; many had their entire houses destroyed. But there was another, equally strong, reason, that we should see and share their enthusiasm for the beauty of the flooded paddy-fields.

The beauty of the *puñja* was a recurrent theme of our conversations year round. Pulayars spoke about the *puñja* (our *puñja*, they always called it) with more attachment and sentimental regard than even the most traditional high-caste landlord. High-caste informants told us, 'We are attached to the land, that's why we don't like to migrate, that's why we shouldn't sell it', but in truth they are mostly attached to their garden land. As regards the paddy-fields, they are attached only to their refined end product and to the concept of land-owning, of being rooted within the village (Miller 1954; cf. Strathern 1990 [1988]: 81ff).

The Pulayars, who often jokingly reminded us that they were the 'true sons of the soil', living and working on the paddy land, had a qualitatively different relationship with it from any other group: they continually praised its beauty and power, and their attachment to it. When we asked whether they felt it was unfair that they were stuck in colonies at the edges of the village, and asked whether they would like to move nearer the centre, they were emphatic that they would not. Even during the monsoon, they pointed out, only those most desperate and with nowhere else to stay went to the village school; everyone who could, stayed on the *puñja*. What they wanted, they told us, was to stay living in that place, but in solid brick houses instead of huts. When we talked about land reforms, they

acknowledged that they had done badly, compared to the middle communities who, having been tenants, got the right to buy at fixed prices. The Pulayars had never legally controlled land, and so had no right to buy. However, they continued to regard the *puñja* as their own land; on paper, they pointed out, it had been unrightfully usurped years ago by outsiders, but in spirit it still belonged to them. They lived there, their dead were buried there, their ancestors, and other spirits which only they knew how to deal with, walked there (Uchiyamada 1998, 1999, 2000).<sup>22</sup> The upper castes have usurped the products of the land, but they have not really managed to take control of it; they do not go there that often, some only once a year, to supervise the harvest, and all of them, including the Christians and the ex-untouchable Īlavars, are terrified to go near the *puñja* at night. Only people from the lowest castes—Pulayars and Paṛayars—are completely unafraid and happy to be on the *puñja*.

As monsoon water levels recede, 'bundhs' (dykes) and irrigation channels (sealing, bounding, channelling flow) are built by Pulayar men, while cleaning and weeding (refining, transforming) is done by Pulayar women, to clear out the dirty or unwanted life-forms and to prepare the ground for the cultured crop of rice. From the point of view of high-caste villagers, the water is now channelled, under control, its rotting and unwanted elements disposed of by ex-untouchable caste members and its fertility put to the social purpose of agriculture. Just as low-caste ritual specialists deal with a polluting corpse, trying to neutralize sin and *dōṣam* in milk while liberating a person's soul to become a benevolent resident ancestor, the Pulayar labour in filth to turn the chaotic rot of the paddy fields into a bounty of rice. As might be expected, among Pulayars another viewpoint exists. This accepts the abundances (fish and rice; progeny) brought about by floods and accepts that the forces and powers which energize and move the material world into productivity must, of necessity, scabble in the dirt. Unlike the Nāyar bank-clerk, the Brāhmin schoolteacher, and the Īlavar shop-owner, all of whom have a horror of manual labour and a general ambivalence about the mess and disorder involved in productive and generative processes, the Pulayars, who still have no option other than manual work and residence on the site, are more accepting of the ambivalence inherent

in material life (Kapferer 1991: 298; Kapadia 1996). The Āśāri, making his point about the laying of the foundation stone as being a *pūjā*, also reminds us of the complexity of life-processes such that, as another Āśāri remarked, when talking about menstruation and childbirth, 'even these things have their own sort of purity'.

#### FLAWS AND CONNECTIONS

Bringing together what we can understand about the land plot, house building, and funeral rituals, we can see that what is being stressed in all cases (as also in Āyurvēda) is connection and flow, with a need for the non-obstruction of channels. These channels exist within the bodies of Bhūmi-Dēvī, Vāstupuruṣan—land man and house-men—and persons, living and dead. Bodies—seen and unseen—should be bounded externally and fixed while still permitting flux within and permeability to the outside, so that forces and substances are able to circulate healthily. This can be done by marking out a plot, building walls and a roof, and always respecting lines along which influences move and substances flow. Spaces must always be left within the boundaries, to allow circulation and the exchange of qualities and substances between bodies: human and non-human. Particular emphasis is placed upon enhancing and fixing the re-generative qualities of paddy, cattle, and humans within the land; lines of flow of substance circulation sustain this process (transmission of ancestral qualities to the living via cremains transformed into food; of the lines of flow, the most important is that which originates in the south-west (Moore's 'underlying flow of good influence from the south-west towards the north-east', 1990: 189). Tracing its course inwards, it moves past (not across, since none of the diagonals must be intersected) the jackfruit tree in the compound under which cremated family members' bones are buried, the foundation-stone of the house, the newly-weds' bedroom, the paddy-store and/or *pūjā* room, the head of the major house-man, the atrium, the kitchen and the well.

Flows, although they may appear to be linear because our knowledge permits only part of their course to be tracked out with relation to the house,<sup>23</sup> actually appear to be like flows within the

human body—continuous, re-cycling and transforming the matter that passes through their spheres of influence and touching various stopping-off points along the way. If we plot the movement of paddy—the substance of life—it can be seen to flow anti-clockwise. It is brought upwards from the paddy fields on the village's west side to the *aza* (paddy-store), where it becomes an embodiment of Mahālakṣmī in the house's south-west corner; thence it moves downwards to the kitchen, where it is again transformed by the cooking fire in the north-east corner; it is further processed in eating and digestion by the humans of the house; finally its residues are excreted in the latrine, usually placed towards the north-west corner of the compound, at a convenient distance from the north-easterly well. Eventually, this human excreta will be broken down by the land, and more crops will be produced.

Human beings meanwhile appear to follow a complementary clockwise trajectory. If we plot their movements, they are born in the north-west quarter, moving upwards to live and eat in the north-east corner. They die and are laid to rest in the south-east quarter and are transformed into spirits and fragmented subtle substance in the topmost south-west corner. The soul (*jīvatmānu*) may well stay on the land, fixed into a *kuryāla* (ancestor shrine) at the south-west. Part of their subtle matter and possibly also their spirits (if they have not been fixed, but are still *wandering*) will continue to be re-cycled, moving towards the *puñja* to the west, helping to fill it and contribute to its nature as a place full of spirits, ghosts, influences and untied substances.

We also notice that architectural principles place the jackfruit tree (containing white fluid, pure refined substance of the ancestors) directly opposite the latrine. This splitting of the final end-products of human beings into two parts, a refined and pure precious white fluid associated with ancestors and a dirty and polluting unwanted part, underlines by metonymic resemblance similar processes taking place within the paddy land. In the case of humans, the agent of transformation is the garden land and its trees; for paddy plants, it is ex-untouchable humans who refine and separate out the harvestable rice from the initial chaos of the flooded field. Human persons clearly stand in opposition to the growing paddy: they mature and

grow inside the house, and on the east side of the atrium, while paddy matures and grows outside of the house/compound, and on the west side. Flows of humans and of paddy run parallel to each other, crossing and connecting, and being transformed and re-cycled by the land, the house and the persons within.

Cecilia Busby (2000) and Rich Freeman have both recently proposed that we can best understand the complex and shifting nature of persons in Kerala and the ways in which Malayālis act to alter the environment and the people around them by means of ethnosociologically-derived concepts: permeability, flux, and so on. Freeman notes, 'in a culture where personhood can be bestowed on inanimate objects, invested in architectural sites and projected onto entire polities, and where even mundanely human bodies throng inwardly with multiply individuated beings, and extend outwardly into invisible zones of pollution, everyday western models of the person and its powers are hardly a helpful guide' (1999: 173).

Noting that the temple is considered the deity's physical body, Freeman is picking up on a fact which could lead us towards the sort of analysis given in 1976 by Beck, in which the perfect (male) human body is given as a sort of template for the temple and indeed the cosmos (Freeman 1999: 167; Beck 1976). Like Beck, Das (1985) too is preoccupied with the ways in which human and cosmic bodies mimic each other, and takes the human body as a sort of root metaphor or primary motivator. But Freeman's complex understanding of what Kerala personhood represents, and hence what a Malayāli human body actually is, means that his analysis does not suffer from the literalism of the 'master metaphor' as explored by Beck and Das. Freeman's insistence on holding on to the fluid and partial nature of the embodied person also echoes Busby's exploration of how Malayāli persons come to be gendered (2000). As Busby notes, '(T)he incorporation of substances through eating, intimacy and exchanges is an important part of understanding bodily identities and relationships, and thus what men and women *do* is very much understood as part of what they *are*' (2000: 219). What Freeman and Busby reiterate in the case of personhood and the human body goes then also for other entities, which themselves often draw upon principles embedded in the realm of the human.

Another recent writer on Kerala, Sarah Caldwell, has unfortunately gone against the fresh and nuanced current proposed by Busby and Freeman and instead slipped back into a literalist and heavily formalist style of analysis, rooted in conventional understandings of normatively stable and unitary personhood, in which the body is taken as an *a priori* fact and in which the realm of the body and especially sexuality is taken to provide the principal motivator (both in terms of psychic, personal and symbolic motivation) of cultural life (1999). In our own (1993) theses we traced out in some detail many parallels between human and paddy reproduction, but still refused to consider these as constitutive of an all-encompassing correspondence between realms. Caldwell has been less restrained and has enthusiastically argued for human sexual reproduction as a sort of master-metaphor (1999).<sup>24</sup>

The data which we have presented on land and territory, which has necessarily broadened out to consider houses, persons, and spirits, suggest that human reproduction and the life-cycle are not modelled on or mimicking paddy production, but stand in a relation to it which is similar in some aspects but also in opposition. Humans are not crops but are complementary to crops, while humans and crops feed each other and contribute to each other's processes of growth and change. Correspondences between domains are based on metonymic principles, and not on an all encompassing root metaphor which can then be used to understand every cultural domain from gardening through cooking to social organization. That no 'model', which entails predictability, coherence, consistency and so on actually exists, becomes apparent when it is measured against actual processes. The notion of resemblances and correspondences based upon immediately observable (externally motivated) internal metonymic principles, at first appears to be far less powerful than that of a consistent cultural (internally motivated) metaphor (see Barley 1983). However, this type of bricolage may in the long run turn out to be far more generative and suggestive of connections, since it does not straitjacket data or force certain interpretations.

Indeed, thinking about Kerala itself—densely populated, with no clear boundaries between villages which themselves also have no central nucleus, shows us the way forward for thinking about

Malayāli persons, houses and land plots (Miller 1954). 'Nālukettu', after all, means 'tied down in four places': the corollary may then be that the rest of an entity is not tied down, but remains fluid. While land needs to be stabilized and tied down at the cardinal points, the rest of a plot is carefully left open to the outside: house-builders purposely leave extra holes in houses to permit the flow of influences and qualities; the entire centre of the home is left as bare earth and described as a major crossing-point where cosmic influences flow. Meanwhile, Vāstupuruṣan's (form) attempts to stabilize and hold down Bhūmi-Dēvi (life) are best thought of as a continual process, not an accomplished fact. The annual transformation of the west side *puñja* offers another clear reminder of life's flux and of the inability of humans to control their lived environment as monsoon rains flood roads and houses but new life forms suddenly proliferate, and the visible environment is completely transformed. Kerala's landscape is constantly in flux, while land in the rice-growing villages of Kuttanadu, lying at and below sea-level, has a close relationship to the sea. Coastal backwater villages, where dense habitation nestles between lagoons, also mark the closeness of Kerala's relationship with the sea and the ease with which land can be transformed into water. Popular geography, meanwhile, remind us that when Kerala was formed, 'the newly reclaimed land presented many problems—floods, landslides, earthquakes' (Menon and Rajan 1989: 1). Zimmerman has explored the classical opposition between the north Indian dry lands, the jungle (*jāngala*) and the marshy lands (*ānīpa*) where buffalo roam (1987). Perhaps we need a different south Indian ecology and geography in which the ocean—surrounding the sub-continental tip and offering us the breathtaking spectacle of the place where three oceans meet—is given its due importance, and where the importance of the fluid in the life of the land is not lost.

*Acknowledgements:* We have received support for various periods of fieldwork in Kerala and writing-up from June 1989 to the present from: the Economic and Social Research Council of Great Britain; the London School of Economics; the Leverhulme Trust; the Nuffield Foundation; the Wenner-Gren Foundation; and the Society for South Asian Studies. We have been affiliated to the Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala; Madras Institute

for Development Studies, Chennai; the Centre d'Études de l'Inde et de l'Asie du sud, Paris. For generous and thoughtful comments on earlier versions of the paper, we thank Gilles Tarabout, Daniela Berti, Chris Fuller. Andrew Kingston made the diagrams.

## NOTES

1. Paddy land also forms part of this complex, but for reasons of space we have opted not to discuss or include it here.
2. See Osella & Osella 2000 for a full-length ethnographic monograph.
3. The art or science of knowing how to deal with land and houses and Vāstupuruṣan(s) is generally known in north India as *vāstu*, but in Kerala was referred to as *taccūśātram*—'carpenter's knowledge'.
4. Beck (1976) and Kramrisch (cited by Moore 1990) writing about space, were actually working from temple building manuals. House-building is not analogous to temple-building: see Klostermaier 1989: 300ff.
5. This disposition is indeed peculiar in that it does not follow either the one in use in India, or in Kerala by other specialists in architecture and astrology, where it is the east which is always placed at the top of diagrams (Editors' note).
6. Generally, young couples stay for some years with the husband's parents, until they have enough capital to construct a separate house. Nuclear families are the norm, with youngest sons remaining at home to look after the ageing parents. In patrilineal (Christian) families, youngest son inherits, but among ex-matrilineal (Nāyar and Ījavar) families even now the family home may be given to a daughter as dowry, leaving the youngest son to construct his own new home where he will take his parents to live with him.
7. Also used as a generic for the wider community of artisans/craftsmen, divided into carpenters (Taccāśāri), stonemasons (Kalāśāri), blacksmiths (Kollan), goldsmiths (Taṭṭān) and so on.
8. Laurie Baker, an architect of English origin settled for over 40 years in India and recently awarded citizenship, has long worked with the Kerala government and HUDCO (Housing and Urban Development Corporation) to encourage low-cost housing built using as far as possible traditional materials (including mud) and house-building principles. The demand for his houses among the fashionable of Tiruvananthapuram city is helping the movement away from the expensive and uncomfortable concrete Gulf/filmi-style mansions (see Bhatia 1991).



9. We are here synthesizing and cutting a large body of information collected on *tacūśāstra* in order to present only what seems pertinent to this paper.
10. An interesting development in Delhi is a shift away from *vāstu* (as it is there known) and towards the use of Chinese *feng shui*. This is perceived as a cheaper and easier alternative means of making one's living space auspicious (personal communication, Radhika Chopra).
11. Even today, there is only one four-sided house in Valiyagramam owned by an *avarna* family; the rest all belong to the higher *jāti*.
12. Moore (1990: 183) quotes Kramrisch as claiming that in the temple, the north side is considered most fixed, but goes on to admit that she found no such idea among her own Kerala informants relating to houses.
13. The *māntayuttaram*, compound of *mānta*, face and *uttaram*, roof beam.
14. We are not suggesting that people know that the main door is an anus; apart from specialists who have access to house-plan knowledge, they certainly do not. However, this door is normally kept locked in many houses, and people clearly do have some sense—perhaps because they see that Brāhmins do not use the 'front' door—that it is not an everyday entrance, but a formal exit.
15. The worst death is in childbirth, after which the thwarted and jealous mother will surely return as a *yakṣi* (female spirit) to harass more fortunate women. Other bad deaths include suicide, violent accidents, murder, and the deaths of people who have not yet satisfied their earthly desires for marriage and children. Young unmarried women who die are especially prone to return and, out of jealousy and a desire to experience married life, take possession of the bodies of brides. In an attempt to avoid this, they are sometimes buried dressed in bridal finery, but the numbers of such spirits around indicates that this subterfuge often fails.
16. This may have contributed both to the standardization of the rite among those members of the non-twice-born castes who have seen and used such booklets, and to the confusion about 'correct' practice among those who have not, but who are relying solely on the barber to have what knowledge was once shared between himself, the drummers, and the washermen.
17. Different communities used to keep different lengths of *pūla*, as would be expected from the literature (see e.g., Orenstein 1968, 1970; Panikkar 1918; Gough 1959). Nowadays, *pūla* is something not related by most

not = ref.

1958 in ref.

people to caste status, and families choose for how long to observe it. Nāyar and Īavar barbers told us that 'in the old days' Brāhmins and Nāyars kept 10/11 days, Īavars and Pulayars 16, but 'now we're all the same, so we all do the same. For convenience everybody can do the rice balls, *saijayanam*, and tea-party on the fifth day if they want'. This is the 'reformed' funeral as promulgated by the NSS and SNDP caste associations. Brāhmins still keep 11 days *pula*, because they reason that it takes 11 days to build a new body for the spirit (cf. Parry 1985); most other people do not know that this is what is supposed to happen. This novel situation reverses two of the usual features of death-pollution lengths: the highest caste keeps the longest period of *pula* (cf. Orenstein 1968; Marglin 1977); in line with this fact, observance of *pula* is thought to be an index of orthodoxy, so that longer *pula* means higher status. For non-Brāhmins, it is normal to collapse all the ceremonies into five days, and break the *pula* on the fifth; it is ostentatious to do more unless you are a Brāhmin. Nobody keeps 17 days: it is a theoretical possibility entertained only by barbers. It should be noted that the reformed practice of keeping five days, and of collapsing ceremonies into one day, is more economical: this fact was often pointed out by informants.

18. A now widespread term in English to designate the remains after a cremation.
19. The jackfruit tree yields a very 'cold' fruit, and a white latex. The white latex, as cool and highly refined substance, is then like semen or breast milk. When a new house is built on the compound, some of this substance is placed in the foundation-stone. The fruit is a many-held-together in the one, having many tiny seeded fruits held within one skin. Jackfruit is both an extremely cold food, and is renowned for causing wind, i.e. to be indigestible. Pregnant women often immediately go off jackfruit; its taste and even smell makes them sick. It is then apparently a powerfully symbolic plant. While Caldwell notes several aspects of the jack, especially the fruit's likeness to breasts (1999: 111), and associates it with Bhadrakālī, we prefer to think of it as a multi-valenced and ambiguous, over-productive symbol which cannot be fixed as male or female, the fluid neither breast-milk nor semen, nor even characterized as being about death or regeneration, but as offering possibilities of associations with all these things.
20. Preferably Kanyakumari, the place where three oceans meet.
21. Never in the house. Persons are kept on the Inside, but spirits belong to the Outside.

22. Of course, some of this 'tough talk' is part of a self-conscious and politicized 'sons of the soil' rhetoric. One imagines that if a Pulayar family were to make enough money to be able to move into the centre they too, like the Paṅṭāram family mentioned here, would relish the chance to buy up an old high-caste *taḡavātu*.
23. An illusion compounded by our diagrams' use of straight lines.
24. See Malamoud 1975 for a similar exercise, in which cooking rather than sex becomes the master-metaphor for all. We plan to argue elsewhere in more empirical detail against Caldwell's highly partial view of Kerala society, which appears to us to be influenced by mechanisms of projection and orientalist sexualizing fantasy and to make rather sweeping claims, considering that it is somewhat lightly rooted in anthropological participant-observation fieldwork (two weeks continuous residence in a village plus longer-term fieldwork of trips out from a large town to view performances and conduct interviews, Caldwell 1999: 51, 201).

## REFERENCES

- Barley, N., 1983. *Symbolic Structures: An Exploration of the Culture of the Dowayos*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Beck, B., 1969. 'Colour and Heat in South Indian Ritual', *Man*, n.s., 4: 553-72.
- , 1976. 'The Symbolic Merger of Body, Space and Cosmos in South Indian Ritual', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, n.s., 10, 2: 213-43.
- Bhatia, G., 1991. *Laurie Baker: Life, Work, Writings*, Delhi: Viking/Penguin.
- Busby, C., 1997. 'Permeable and Partible Persons: a Comparative Analysis of Gender and Body in South India and Melanesia', *JRAI*, n.s., 3: 261-78.
- , 2000. *The Performance of Gender: An Anthropology of Everyday Life in a South Indian Fishing Village*, London: Athlone.
- Caldwell, S., 1999. *O Terrifying Mother: Sexuality, Violence and Worship of the Goddess Kali*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Carsten J. and S. Hugh-Jones, 1995. *About the House: Levi-Strauss and Beyond*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Daniel, E. Valentine, 1984. *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Das, Veena, 1977. *Structure and Cognition: Aspects of Hindu Caste and Ritual*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.

- , 1985. 'Paradigms of Body Symbolism', in *Indian Religion*, eds. R. Burghart and A. Cantlie, London: Curzon Press, pp.180-207.
- Freeman, J.R., 1999. 'Dynamics of the Person in the Worship and Sorcery of Malabar', in *La Possession en Asie du Sud: parole, corps, territoire*, eds. J. Assayag and G. Tarabout, Paris, EHESS, pp. 149-81.
- Fuller, C.J., 1976. *The Nāyars Today*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- , 1992. *The Camphor Flame*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Gough, K., 1958. 'Cults of the Dead among the Nāyars', *Journal of American Folklore*, 71, 281 ('Traditional India: Structure and Change'): 446-78.
- , 1961. 'Nāyar: Central Kerala; Nāyar: North Kerala; Tiyyar: North Kerala; Mappilla: North Kerala', in *Matrilineal Kinship*, eds. D. Schneider and K.Gough, Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 298-442.
- Jeffrey, R., 1994 (1976). *The Decline of Nāyar Dominance*, Delhi: Manohar (2nd edn.).
- Kapadia, K., 1996. *Siva and Her Sisters: Gender, Caste and Class in Rural South India*, Boulder: Westview Press.
- Kapferer, B., 1991 (1983). *A Celebration of Demons: Exorcism and the Aesthetics of Healing in Sri Lanka*, Oxford: Berg/Washington: Smithsonian Institution.
- Klostermaier, K., 1989. *A Survey of Hinduism*, Albany: SUNY.
- Madan, T.N., 1987. *Non-Renunciation: Themes and Interpretations of Hindu Culture*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Malamoud, C., 1975. 'Cuire le Monde', *Purusartha*, 1: 91-135.
- Marglin, F. Appfel, 1977. 'Power, Purity and Pollution: Aspects of the Caste System Reconsidered', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, n.s., 11, 2: 245-70.
- Menon, D.M., 1994. *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India: Malabar 1900-1948*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Menon, P.A. and C.K. Rajan, 1989. *Climate of Kerala*, Cochin: Classic Publishing House.
- Miller, E.J., 1954. 'Caste and Territory in Malabar', *American Anthropologist*, 56: 410-20.
- Moore, M., 1985. 'A New Look at the Nāyar Taravad', *Man*, n.s., 20: 523-41.
- , 1990. 'The Kerala House and the Hindu Cosmos', in *India through Hindu Categories*, ed. McKim Marriott, New Delhi: Sage Publications, pp. 169-202.
- Orenstein, H., 1968. 'Towards a Grammar of Defilement in Hindu Sacred

279



Law', in *Structure and Change in Indian Society*, eds. M. Singer and B. Cohn, Chicago: Aldine.

Osella, C., 1993. 'Making Hierarchy Natural: the Cultural Construction of Gender and Maturity in Kerala, India', London: London School of Economics (PhD. Thesis).

Osella, F., 1993. 'Caste, Class, Power and Social Mobility in Kerala, India', London: London School of Economics (PhD. Thesis).

Osella, F. and C. Osella, 2000. *Social Mobility in Kerala: Modernity and Identity in Conflict*, London: Pluto Press.

———, 2002. 'Quelques points de vue sur l'inné et l'acquis au Kerala, Inde du Sud', in *Images du corps dans le monde hindou*, eds. V. Bouillier and G. Tarabout, Paris: CNRS Editions, pp. 467-95.

Östör, A., 1980. *The Play of the Gods: Locality, Ideology, Structure and Time in the Festivals of a Bengali Town*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Panikkar, K.N., 1918. 'Some Aspects of Nayar Life', *JRAI*, 48: 254-93.

Parry, J., 1985. 'Death and Digestion: the Symbolism of Food and Eating in North Indian Mortuary Rites', *Man*, n.s., 20, 4: 612-31.

———, 1989. 'On the Moral Perils of Exchange', in *Money and the Morality of Exchange*, eds. J. Parry and M. Bloch, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 64-93.

———, 1994. *Death in Banaras*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Subbarayappa, B.V., 1966. 'The Indian Doctrine of Five Elements', *Indian Journal of the History of Science*, 1, 1: 61-7.

Shulman, D., 1980. *Tamil Temple Myths*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Strathern, M., 1990 (1988). *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Taussig, M., 1997. *The Magic of the State*, London: Routledge.

Uchiyama, Y., 1998. '“The Grove is Our Temple”: Contested Representations of *kaavi* in South India', *The Social Life of Trees: Anthropological Perspectives on Tree Symbolism*, ed. L. Rival, Oxford: Berg, pp. 177-96.

———, 1999. 'Soil, Self, Resistance: Late-Modernity and Locative Spirit Possession in Kerala', *La possession en Asie du Sud: parole, corps, territoire*, eds. J. Assayag and G. Tarabout, Paris: EHESS, pp. 289-311.

———, 2000. 'Passions in the Landscape: Ancestor Spirit and Land Reforms in Kerala, India', *South Asia Research*, 20, 1: 63-84.

Zimmermann, F., 1987. *The Jungle and the Aroma of Meats: An Ecological Theme in Hindu Medicine*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

1

240 blank