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Cover Page Footnote

This article results from fieldwork conducted in Kerala in 2018 as ICCR Senior Fellow and in 2019 as Tagore National Fellow affiliated with Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts. I am extremely grateful to both the institutions for their support.

Bodies of Silence, Floods of Nectar

Ritual Music in Contemporary Brahmanical Tantric Temples of Kerala

Paolo Pacciolla

My first fieldwork in Kerala in 2017 focused on two apparently contrasting ritual art forms: *kūṭiyāṭṭam*, the highly codified form of Sanskrit theater traditionally performed by high-caste members of the Brahmanical temple society; and *kaḷameluttu pāṭṭu*, a ritual performance centered on a floor drawing (*kaḷam*) made with colored powders performed in different ways by various communities. It was researching the relationship between drumming and visual arts, and the multicolored and multifaceted worlds of these two art forms were almost exclusively based on the sound of powerful and fascinating drums. As my research progressed, I realized the deep connections of these arts with Brahmanical temples and decided that I had to expand the study to include temple music. I started reading all the writings I could find on the subject, and even on Tantra in Kerala, for its evident pervasiveness in the rituals of many communities of the country.

The first knowledgeable insight on temple music was given to me by T. Vasudevan, a well-known representative of the tradition of *Ayyappan Tīyyāṭṭu*, a form of *kaḷameluttu pāṭṭu*. Replying to my questions on *para*, the drum used in his ritual, he urged me to attend a performance of *marappāṇi*, the most sacred composition performed in Brahmanical temples, which he described as an architecture built with silence. He added that he would have tried to put me in touch with a performer, but that it was difficult to finding someone willing to share information about this composition due to its secrecy and sacredness. A couple

of weeks later a friend introduced me to Prashant Nampūtiri, a “Brahman lover of temple music.”¹ By chance, the celebrations of the yearly festival (*utsava*) of his family temple had just started and, after receiving permission from the elders of the family, he invited me to attend the performance of *marappāṇi* early the following morning. They even allowed me to video record it, but I could not enter the shrine and I had to stand near the northeastern door, bare-chested and wearing a *dhoti*, according to the temples dress code. At the end of the celebration, after pointing out some Tantric aspects of the rituals, he introduced me to Vijayan Mārār, the leader of the ensemble of performers. I tried to ask a few questions about *marappāṇi*, but he told me he could speak of this composition only with members of his community.

The opportunity to come into contact with a member of the community of Brahmanical temple musicians (Mārār) and to speak about *marappāṇi* was offered to me, one month later, by the octogenarian P. K. Narayanan Nambyār, the most important representative of Nambyārs, the community of drummers who once had the exclusive right to play the drum *miḷāvu*, the most important instrument of *kūṭiyāṭṭam*. He was with his daughter, C. K. Jayanthi, a Sanskrit scholar and expert of *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the ancient treatise on performing arts. At the end of an extended and exciting interview that touched on many aspects, including Tantra, they invited me to meet Kallekulangara Achuthankutty Mārār, whom they described as one of the most knowledgeable and

eminent representatives of the Mārār community. Furthermore, he was ready to share his knowledge of Mārār music. They themselves fixed the appointment for the following day. Kallekulangara Achuthankutty Mārār welcomed me into his house and at first asked about me and my research project, while looking deep into my eyes. Soon, however, he trusted me and replied to all my questions. His interpretation of *marappāṇi* and other aspects of Mārār music, entirely based on Tantric concepts, strongly contributed to my understanding of the deep interconnection of the ritual arts of Kerala, despite their association with communities occupying different positions in the social hierarchy.

These experiences were extremely helpful and taught me that I had to expand my research field. Thus, when in 2019 I started my second fieldwork in Kerala with a project on ritual drumming, I included various ritual performances connected with the opposing contexts of the Brahmanical temples, dominated by male gods, and the folk goddesses' shrines (*kāvus*), and studied different communities of ritual performers.² In this essay I focus on the ritual procedure in contemporary Tantric Brahmanical temples of central Kerala, and investigate its structure and meaning on the basis of the information collected from musicians (Mārārs) and priests (Tantris), textual sources, and musical analysis.³

Tantra and the Human Body

The word *Tantra* generally refers to a pan-Asian religious phenomenon spread over numerous centuries and including a wide number of sects having different and even opposing philosophical and theological approaches. As Gavin Flood points out in *The Tantric Body*,⁴ the unifying factor

of such diversity is the divinization of the body or the understanding of the human body as a metaphor for the cosmos and its processes. The human body, in Tantra, is a representation of an emanationist cosmology that proceeds as a movement from the pure to the impure and from the subtle to the gross.⁵ In other words, the structure of the body is a reflection of the hierarchical structure of the cosmos, and is itself thought to be an emanation from a higher level. In this perspective, salvation is conceived as a pathway back through the levels of the cosmos from the impure to the pure to its source, and the human body, which is an icon of the cosmos, is conceived as the path itself. Thus, the body of the Tantric adept, invalidating any distinctions between knowing and acting, is simultaneously object of knowledge and instrument of knowledge, place of action and means of action.⁶ In a similar way, Tantric ritual, which is modeled on the human body, is both a kind of action and a kind of knowledge. In other words, it may be said that ritual action—be it a body posture, a hand gesture, the uttering of *mantras*, the playing of musical instruments, or any combination of these—is embedded with knowledge. Furthermore, as the human body is a process and narrates the emanation of the cosmos and its reabsorption into the source, Tantric ritual is also a process and a narration. This means that Tantric rituals may be read as meaningful sequences of actions and may be interpreted as representations or enactments of a process or as dramatizations of philosophical teachings—a kind of text.⁷ However, while the body is considered by all Tantric traditions as a cosmos, as a path that has to be known and as a means of knowledge, it is mapped in tradition-specific and text-specific ways through ritual and interior practice.⁸

Brahmanical temple Tantrism as practiced in contemporary Kerala, with its own map of the body, interior practices, and rituals including music, is a tradition that helps an understanding of the concepts and ideas embedded in Tantric ritual practices and musical forms. As I argue below, the human body is the model for temple architecture and musical forms, and ritual activity is intended as a reenactment of the process of enlightenment as conceived in this Tantric tradition. In fact, some of the Nampūtiri⁹ Brahmans I met and interviewed during fieldwork in Kerala explained the main sequence of rituals included in the annual festivals as being like a text or the narration of a process happening within the anthropomorphic body of the temple. In their words, ritual action was filled with meaning and could be understood by knowing the main ideas behind it and the rules of its language. Nampūtiri and scholars maintain that most of the Tantric texts in the Brahmanical tradition of Kerala¹⁰ provide detailed instructions on rituals connected with the building of a temple and with every kind of activity associated with it—from daily rituals to festivals—but do not dig deep in their explanations.¹¹ Interpretation of the meaning and symbolism behind the many rituals is a matter of personal interest and study with knowledgeable representatives of the Nampūtiri community.¹² In a similar way, although these texts attribute high importance to music and mention when it has to be played, they do not record any information about its forms and meaning.¹³

The ritual musicians of the Mārār community with whom I had conversations maintained that their compositions serve to invoke deities and complete the Tantric rituals performed by Brahmans. Mārār preserve the repertoire of ritual music and

transmit it orally and exclusively to members of their own group.

In this essay, I first trace the historical background of the Tantric Brahmanical tradition and describe the main architectural model of temples and the organization of the different groups of temple functionaries. Then I argue that, although temple tradition defines Mārār as temple servants with the function of musicians, we should think of them as a category of priests whose ritual action is based on the sound of musical instruments. In this perspective, temple ritual becomes a process synchronically performed by two classes of experts contributing to its efficacy in different ways. Accordingly, I take both of them into consideration. Contemporary Brahmans present a verbal interpretation of the ritual, while Mārār contribute compositions structured on geometrical forms and mathematical formulas which musical analysis shows to be embedded with Tantric ritual meaning. I conclude the essay by reconstructing a narration behind the contemporary ritual procedure which integrates and synthesizes the points of view of the two communities around the pouring of water and other substances (*abhiṣeka*) on the icon of the deity.

Brahmanical Temples and Tantric Traditions

The history of temples and temple ritual cults in Kerala starts in the period between the eighth and ninth centuries B.C.E. with the diffusion and consolidation of agrarian villages headed by Brahmans who had migrated from Tamil and Karnataka. They were temple-centered villages managed by a corporation of Brahman landlords who held all the agrarian tracts as individual holdings (*brahmasvam*) and temple holdings (*dēvasvam*), and hence controlled

the settlers of the village. As noncultivating people, Brahmans leased most of their lands, as well as temple lands, to functionaries who did not belong to their order.¹⁴ Two significant and intertwined factors that acted in favor of temples, and of the Brahmans' social fortune and importance, were the support of the kings (Perumāḷ) of the Cēra dynasty (ninth–twelfth centuries) and the emergence of Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* cults, which reflected and legitimized the new social order.¹⁵

Society was organized as a pyramid, and at the apex of the feudal hierarchy was the king of the so-called second Cēra dynasty. Brahmans occupied the next-highest position. They were not a single group. Those who were landlords and members of the temple corporations (*sābha*) were the most powerful and enjoyed the highest economic and ritual position. They were custodians of the temple wealth and Vedic priests. A separate group of *āgamic* experts called Tantri, having the same ritual status, flanked them. Below Brahmans were functionaries who did not belong to the Brahmanical order and worked as secretaries of the temple. Below them were various temple functionaries, including drummers, who were collectively called *antarālas* (intermediaries) and were rewarded in land tenure for their services in the temple ritual activities. Most of the temple lands and individual Brahmana holding were leased out to intermediaries belonging to various groups from the non-Brahman order but retaining a high social position. Among them, Nāyars were the most economically and politically important. At a lower level of the hierarchy were the different groups of artisans and craftsmen, and at the very bottom of the society were the peasants.¹⁶

When, in the early twelfth century, the Cēra kingdom came to an end, small kingdoms headed by less powerful chieftains emerged. Temple-centered Brahmana settlements gained complete autonomy and Nampūtiris started consolidating their dominance. Spread all over Kerala, temples had a well-defined area, called *saṅkētam*, under their jurisdiction and were almost the only institutions capable of dictating economic, social, and cultural patterns, to the extent that even local chieftains had to submit to their conventions.¹⁷ While important works were written in Kerala during this period on temple architecture and Tantric rites of different sects, such as the Śaiva *Prayogamañjarī* by Ravi (ca. eleventh century), the Vaiṣṇava *Viṣṇu Saṃhitā* by Sumati (eleventh–twelfth centuries), the Śākta *Māṭṛsadbhāva* (ca. eleventh–twelfth centuries), and the eclectic *Īśānaśivagurudevapaddhati* by Īśānaśiva (twelfth–thirteenth centuries), Buddhism and Jainism, which had flourished for centuries in the country, were eradicated.

By the thirteenth century three rulers emerged as the most powerful: the Kōlatiri of Kōlattunāṭu, the Sāmūtiri of Calicut (Ēraṇāṭu), and the Tiruvadi of Vēnāṭu. They worshipped fierce deities associated with warfare, such as Bhadrakālī, the Sapta Māṭṛkas, Vēṭṭaykkorumakan, and Ayyappan; built new temples; and patronized priestly non-Brahmanical groups who maintained the ritual activities. Royal support facilitated the spread of the cults of these gods among warriors and other groups. In the period between the thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries, the society as a whole underwent a process of transformation, agitated by new tendencies toward local culture and regional identity that started emerging in works of arts and literature.¹⁸

The mutual influence of Brahmanical and Dravidian cults and practices was a crucial factor in the cultural and social formation of these centuries of medieval Kerala. Indeed, various local gods and goddesses were incorporated into the Brahmans' pantheon, included in their temples as lesser gods/goddesses (*upadevatas*) and worshipped as such. At the same time, Dravidian society incorporated Vedic-Purāṇic concepts, modifying them to suit to its worldview.¹⁹ The nonsectarian tradition systematized by the *Tantrasamuccaya* (fifteenth century), which was composed under the Sāmūtiris by Cennas Narayanan Nampūtiri, offers a clear picture of this kind of process. This important text—prescribing the ritual procedures for seven gods, including major deities such as Śiva, Viṣṇu, and Durgā, minor and local deities such as Gaṇapati, Subramanya, and Śāsta, and Śaṅkaranārāyaṇa, a synthesis of Śiva and Viṣṇu—completed an extremely effective syncretistic operation.²⁰ The *Śeṣasamuccaya*, composed shortly after the *Tantrasamuccaya* as its corollary, prescribed a Brahmanized version of the ritual procedure for a number of goddesses, including Bhadrakālī and the Sapta Mātṛkas, who had not been described in the main text. Indeed, Śākta traditions of worship thrived in Kerala. The *Śeṣasamuccaya* indicates as its source the *Māṭṛsadbhāva*, the twelfth-century text devoted to the cult of the Sapta Mātṛkas, and this, in turn, was linked to the Śākta southern *Brahmayāmala* texts (ninth-tenth centuries).²¹ The presence of the sculptures of the Sapta Mātṛkas in the sancta sanctorum (*śrīkōvil*) or in minor shrines in the inner enclosure of various temples from the ninth to the twelfth centuries confirms textual evidence.²²

Another aspect that makes the ritual landscape even more nuanced is that,

as clearly pointed out by A. Sanderson, “Tantric elite literature provides an entirely inadequate representation of the historical realities of the religion since the learned writers represent and describe Tantric traditions schematically, as clearly distinguished from one another for their distinctive doctrines, without reference to their actual coexistence in the real world of practiced religion.”²³ Sanderson maintains that Śaiva traditions were not either one or the other but interacted in complex ways, as demonstrated by Kashmir ritual manuals that incorporate elements from the esoteric Śākta traditions as well as from the exoteric Siddhānta. In a similar way, the interaction is represented by royal patrons who resorted to the Śaiva Siddhānta tradition for initiation or temple consecration and to Śākta Śaiva tradition in time of emergency, to perform special rites to protect the kingdom from invasions, floods, plagues, and so on. Such royal behavior corresponds, for instance, to the religious policy of the Sāmūtiris, who worshipped fierce gods according to Śākta system in order to receive their support and powers in battles, and at the same time lavishly sponsored temples of Brahmanical gods and supported Brahmanical culture.²⁴ We may see processes of incorporation at the ritual level as well, since some of the medieval royal temples where Śākta worship was performed have been, over time, Brahmanized, while many of the previous ritual practices are still followed. Two important instances are the Sree Kurumba Bhagavati temple at Kodungallur and the Tirumandhamkunnu temple at Angadipuram. Other Śākta temples, such as the Māṭāyikāvu and Piṣārikāvu, still follow the Śākta system known as Rurujit Vidhāna, and the priests belong to specific non-Brahman groups who perform rituals

including offerings of blood and flesh, and sacrifice cocks.²⁵ However, a close look at the ritual practice shows that even in these temples a kind of synthesis of various elements of different Tantric traditions, including Kashmiri Krama and Śrī Vidyā, may be found at work.²⁶

During the period from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries, the structure of the society based on agrarian socio-economic relation and on the caste system remained almost unchanged. This was despite the continuous warfare prompted by colonial incursions starting with the Portuguese and followed by the Dutch, French, and English; the increase in trade; the introduction of new technologies; and the changes resulting from the interaction of people with different worldviews. Rulers, chieftains, and powerful Brahman temple authorities continued their religious affairs undisturbed. Each important temple had a well-defined territory under its control, particularly in central Kerala, and Nampūtiri had a privileged social position.²⁷

Brahmanical temples were a space reserved to Nampūtiris, temple functionaries, and nobles until the beginning of the twentieth century. People belonging to low castes even had to keep away from the external walls of the temple, just as they had to keep their distance from Nampūtiris for reasons of pollution. It was only during the 1930s that the socioreligious and caste reform movement led to the temple-entry proclamations—in 1936 in Travancore, and in 1947 in Cochin and Malabar—that canceled the ancient privileges of few castes, making temples a space open to all Hindus.²⁸ The land reform introduced in 1957 and finalized in 1969 dismantled the network of relationships upon which the traditional system and temple society had

been built, completing the deep process of social transformation. Presently, non-Hindus are generally not allowed to enter Brahmanical temples, which have become emblems of Hindu culture and spaces of political interest.²⁹

The *Tantrasamuccaya* is still the main ritual text of the Tantric Brahmanical tradition, which may be described as a Smārta-Brahmanical combination of Śaiva-Siddhānta, Pāñcarātra, and Srī Vaiṣṇava traditions, including elements of Śākta worship as well as low-caste local gods and goddesses.³⁰ Thus, notwithstanding the stability and centrality of its main text over many centuries, we cannot speak of Brahmanical Tantra in Kerala as a single, unified tradition. Instead, we must consider it as an extremely multifaceted phenomenon based on ritual practice and having a strongly syncretistic nature, which has allowed it to absorb and adjust into its world a number of other cults.

Brahmanical Temples of Kerala

Resulting from the synthesis of various cults, even Brahmanical temple architecture has evolved along a particular path, and Kerala temples show unique features. The earliest Brahmanical temples date from the ninth century, but the architectural design evolved over several centuries and culminated in the systematization of a typical style sanctioned by the *Tantrasamuccaya*.³¹ Such temples, alternatively called *kṣetras* or *ambalams*, consist of six parts: the shrine, or *śrīkōvil*, and the *pañca prākāras*, the five successive enclosures surrounding it (Fig.1). The *antar-maṇḍalam* is the innermost enclosure (*prākāra*). It surrounds the *śrīkōvil* and includes a pillared hall built in front of it and the *balipīṭhas*, which are stones representing the eight regents of space (*aṣṭa-dikpālas*) and

other divinities. The *anta hāra*, the second enclosure of the temple, is fundamentally a colonnade including many functional chambers like the kitchen, a storeroom, and sometimes subshrines. The *madhya hāra*, the third enclosure, is built around the outer wall of *anta hāra* and separated from it by a narrow space. The wall of the *madhya hāra* is attached to a structure of poles with lamps (*vilakku*) affixed on it. The *bāhya hāra*, the fourth enclosure, is the courtyard around the *madhya hāra* and includes various structures, subshrines, and stones (*balipīṭhas*) installed at cardinal points. The latter represent minor deities in the retinue of the main god of the temple and, at the same time, mark the circumambulatory path. *Valiya balikal*, the most important of such stones, is a miniature of the *śrīkōvil* in this enclosure of the temple and is placed in front of the main deity, while the *dhvajastambha*, is the flagpole. The *maryāda* is the fifth and the outermost enclosure of Kēraḷa temples, consisting of the compound wall with *gōpura* and a dining hall.

Temple Communities and Music Performances

The sound of a shell (*śaṅkha*) blown between 3:30 and 4:00 a.m. breaks the silence of the night and gives a start to the daily routine of the temple. In a similar way, at about 9:30 in the evening, it marks its end. In between these two sequences of sounds, a number of rituals are performed by different classes of priests to the enlivening accompaniment of the ritual musicians playing percussion instruments such as hourglass drums (*iṭakka* and *timila*), cylindrical stick drum (*ceṇṭa*),³² barrel drums (*maram* and *maddalam*), cymbals (*ilattālam*), the circular idiophone *cēṅgilam*, horns such as *kompū*, and reed instruments such as *kurum kuḷal*.³³

Rituals include different performers arranged in precise hierarchical order. High priests called Tantris, belonging to important families of Nampūtiri Brahmins, are the leaders of the rituals. They generally perform at special functions and lead annual festivals. Daily rituals are taken care of by another class of trained Brahmin priests, called Śānti. Different communities of functionaries

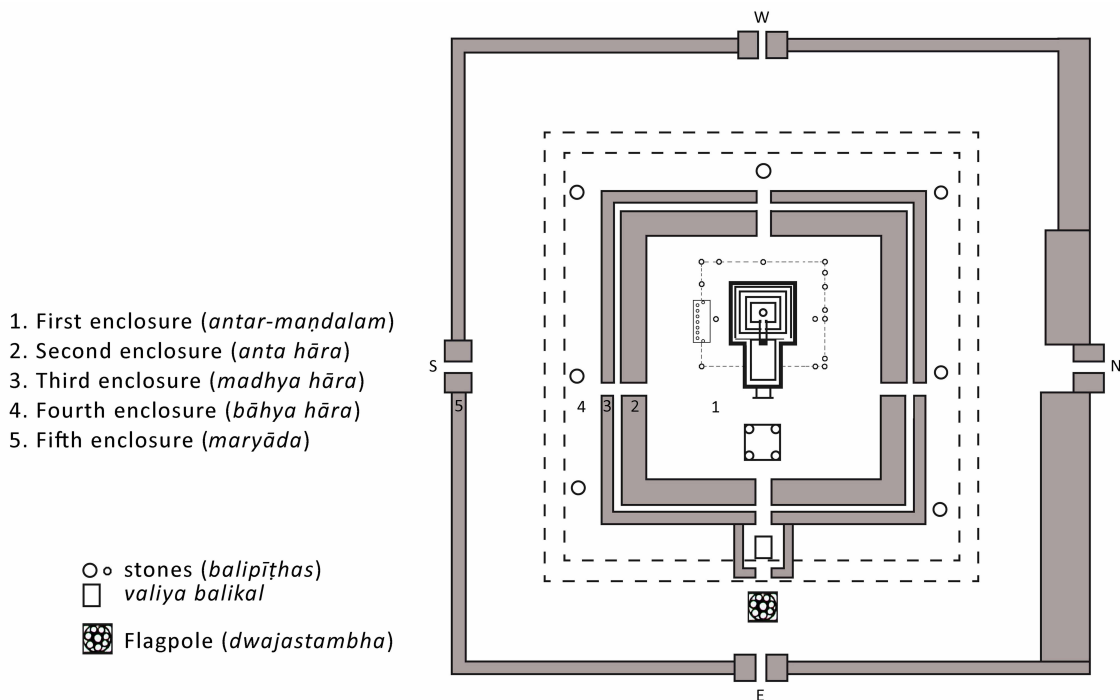


Figure 1: Ground plan of Brahmanical temple of Kerala. (All photos and image compositions by the author.)

traditionally called temple servants (*ambalavāsi*) perform rituals by means of music, and they are also hierarchically organized. The most important among them belong to the Mārār community.³⁴ They are the ones who maintain the ritual-music repertoire and have the exclusive right to play *maram*, *śaṅkha*, *ceṅṭa*, *iṭakka*, and *timila*, which are the most important temple musical instruments.³⁵ There is also a hierarchy among Mārārs, established on the basis of the repertoire and the areas of the temple where they perform. The most authoritative are those entitled to play *marappāṇi*, the most sacred of temple rituals based on music, performed near the *śrīkōvil*. Important figures are also the leaders (*pramāni*) of the big ensembles (*mēlams*), which perform in the fourth enclosure of the temple. Members of the Nāyar or Nambiyasan communities generally play the *maddalam*, while other instruments, such as *ilattālam*, *kompū*, and *kurum kuḷal*, may be played by members of any group of temple functionaries. Another class of musicians with no precise restrictions performs only in the fourth enclosure or outside temples; they play the barrel drum *tavil* and a reed *nāgasvaram*.³⁶

Ritual music ranges from sacred compositions in which silence dominates over sounds (*marappāṇi*), to very soft and intimate songs sung by a single musician accompanying himself on the *iṭakka* drum (*sōpāna saṅgīta*), to extremely loud and powerful compositions played by big ensembles (*ceṅṭa mēlams* and *pañcavādyam*) during festivals (Figs. 2 and 3). Improvisation is not a performing practice included in Brahmanical temple music.³⁷ Compositional forms may be distinguished on the basis of the enclosure of the temple in which they are played. The most sacred and

ancient forms, such as *marappāṇi*, *sōpāna saṅgīta*, the processional *pariṣavādyam*, and small-ensemble *ceṅṭa mēlams*, are connected with the rituals performed by the priest inside the *śrīkōvil* or just around it, and are played within the inner enclosure. Compositional forms such as the processional *ceṅṭa mēlams*, *pañcavādyam*, and other forms played standing, such as *keli*, *kuḷal pāṭṭu*, *kompū pāṭṭu*, and *tāyampaka*, are performed in the fourth enclosure (*bāhya hāra*) or outside temples. They are considered as offerings³⁸ and are ritually important, but at the same time they are also played to entertain the devotees during festivals.³⁹

According to traditional methods, ritual knowledge was passed on from master to disciple and exclusively among members of the same community for centuries until the nineteenth century, when, following radical social, political, and economic changes, the Brahmanical Tantric temple tradition faced a significant decline.⁴⁰ Apparently, various rituals and associated musical compositions were lost.⁴¹ Thus, from the 1970s on, in order to counter such a situation, institutions such as the Thantra Vidya Pethoom⁴² and the Kshethra Kala Pethoom Academy were established, aimed at imparting expertise in ritual performance and Brahmanical temple



Figure 2: *Pañcavādyam*, Thekke Madhom, Thrissur

music, respectively, to members of any social group. Most of the Brahmans and Mārārs I met thought that temple traditions are declining. As an example of this situation, some pointed to the fact that while it is well known that the gestures of the priests and the music played by Mārārs once had to be perfectly harmonized and coordinated in order to make the ritual more effective, at present no one in the Brahman and Mārār communities is aware of the rules on which such coordination was once based.⁴³

The decline of the ritual music of the nineteenth century has been followed over the last few decades by a strong revival of interest in temple music, and *ceṇṭa mēlam* in particular. Indeed, they have become so popular that schools have been started in both temples and private institutions where training in these ensemble forms is imparted to members of any community. However, knowledge and performance of ritual music in the inner enclosure remain the exclusive right of Mārārs.

Brahmans and Drumming Priests

As noted above, the typical rituals in Brahmanical temples of central Kerala include two main categories of performers, Brahmans and Mārārs. According to the traditional definition, Brahmans are priests and belong to the highest class of ritual experts, while Mārārs are musicians and belong to the intermediate class of temple servants. However, the traditional definition, which coincides with the Brahmanical view, does not properly describe Mārārs' role in rituals. Indeed, if we look at temple rituals without investing them with preconceived ideas, we see two classes of ritualists performing different actions in a coordinated and synchronized manner. In other words, we see that Mārārs do not simply play to support the actions performed by Brahman priests, as the traditional definition holds, but perform sonic actions that combine and complete the Brahmans' priestly function. To put it another way, they do not appear as musicians accompanying the actions of



Figure 3: *Ceṇṭa mēlam*, Olarikkara Bhagavati temple, Thrissur

the priests but as a different class of priests. While Brahmans perform rituals by means of *mantras* and gestures (*mudras*), Mārārs perform rituals by means of the sound of musical instruments (*vādyā*) and songs. Indeed, it is a fact generally accepted – by any member of the temple community, and even by devotees – that the ritual performed by the Brahman is not complete and efficacious unless at least one Mārār beats the prescribed drum phrases along with him.⁴⁴

Mārārs perform rituals along with priests and rituals cannot be done without them, since they are the ones who invoke gods with the sound of their instruments. The Mārār saying “Nampūtiris are necessary because they feed the gods, we are necessary because we invoke them”⁴⁵ quite clearly states – from the Mārār perspective – that both groups are necessary in temple rituals and play different functions. Interestingly, even in other ritual performances such as *kaḷameḷuttu pāṭṭu* and *muṭiyēttu*,⁴⁶ where they officially perform a priestly role, Mārārs and the associated group of Kallaṛra-Kuṛuppus and Kuṛuppus invoke gods by both drumming and singing. And drummers of the Nambyār community invite gods on the stage of *kūṭiyāṭṭam* by drumming as well.⁴⁷ Furthermore, the drum is the main priestly emblem in a number of communities of Kerala. Thus, Mārārs cannot be exclusively thought of as subservient to the priests but have to be recognized as ritual experts worshipping by means of songs and the sound of musical instruments. Since Mārārs perform in a group, it is the leader of the ensemble who actually performs the ritual action in the function of the priest, while the others contribute to empower his action.

It is not known when the community of Mārārs entered Brahmanical temples in the role of functionaries, but a well-known

myth of origin says that one day, while the older of two Nampūtiri brothers went into the *śrīkōvil* to pour empowered water onto the icon of the deity, the younger stood outside the shrine tapping the wood (*maram*) of the door. All of a sudden the icon started speaking, telling the older brother that he was satisfied with that bath and that he could stop pouring water. The priest thought that the satisfaction of the deity might be partly attributed to the rhythms accidentally produced by his brother; hence he commanded him to play standing outside the *śrīkōvil* every day from then on.⁴⁸ The boy started doing it on a drum rather than on a wooden door, but from then on he was known as Mārār, one who plays the *maram*. Although the Mārārs I interviewed knew this myth, they did not accept it for various reasons. Nevertheless, we may observe once again that rituals, to be efficacious, require the involvement of both Brahmans and Mārārs. Indeed, performers of both groups maintain the same concept, while stressing the importance of the perfect synchronization of their actions.

We know from temple inscriptions dating from the eighth to the twelfth centuries that temple drummers were called Uvaccans or Koṭṭikals. Their function was credited with high importance, since they were remunerated in kind at a level not much lower than that of priests⁴⁹ and had to pay high fines in case of absence from that duty.⁵⁰ Their significant ritual function was also prescribed by important medieval Tantric texts such as the *Īśānaśivagurudevapaddhati* (twelfth century)⁵¹ and the *Viṣṇu Saṃhitā* (thirteenth century).⁵² Since, as we have seen, in the period between the thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries temple society was reorganized and new groups of

functionaries appeared, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the community of temple drummers alternatively called Mārāns, Mārāyars, or Mārārs in the different sources – and along with them Kuruppus and Potuvāls – replaced the previous groups during the same period. However, absent historical research on medieval temple communities, the earliest mention of Mārāyars as temple functionaries that I could find dates to 1679 C.E. and is reported in a chronicle (*granthavāri*) of the Sāmūtiris.⁵³

Confirming the nuanced landscape of cults and performers of Kerala, the ethnographic reports of the early twentieth century by H. A. Stuart, Edgar Thurston, and Krishna Iyer⁵⁴ divide Mārāyans into two groups: those who belong to northern Kerala and are barber-drummers, perform funerary rites of members of higher castes, and sweep the temple courtyard; and those who belong to southern Malabar, traditionally dominated by the influence of Nampūtiris, have entirely given up the profession of barbers, and call themselves Mārār, adopting an honorific term. Interestingly, the area of southern Malabar to which they refer has always been the stronghold of Brahmanical culture in Kerala includes the present-day districts of Thrissur, Palakkad, and Cochin.⁵⁵

Unless we intend to consider Mārārs as unrelated to the efficacy of ritual, we have to conceive the music they play not only as an essential element of the ritual but as ritual action itself. In other words, we have to think of Tantric ritual in Brahmanical temples as resulting from the action of two groups of ritualists performing two different sets of actions in a simultaneous and coordinated way. Thus, in order to approach ritual

performance in this peculiar tradition, we have to take into consideration both of them at the same time.

The Temple as the Body of an Enlightened Yogi

It has been seen that the five enclosures (*pañca prākāras*) of the temple are important for ceremonial purposes; however, their symbolic value is by far the most important aspect, since it helps us to understand the meaning of the ritual actions of priests and musicians in each one of them, as well as the overall ritual procedure. In explaining the core idea of the Brahmanical Kerala temple, Elangallur Narayanan Nampūtiri told me:

Normally we don't get enlightenment because we have blockages in our five sheaths. In Hinduism we believe that we incarnate, and in every incarnation we have *karmic* impressions that accumulate in our body and create obstacles to attain salvation. So, if we have to attain salvation, we have to remove all these *karmic* impressions. Once someone gets salvation, almost all the *karmic* impressions are removed out of his body, his five sheaths become pure, and so, when other persons come in contact with him, they also get a kind of purification. This is why people go to yogis and enlightened persons, because they have a pure aura, and when we enter in that aura our body also gets a kind of purification. So, in temples we try to make the representation of this enlightened yogic body, the body of a pure yogi. So when a devotee enters a temple he doesn't have to pray, he just sits in a temple; just like sitting by the side of a yogi, the devotee gets a kind of purification.⁵⁶

According to Tantra texts of Kerala, Tantris, and knowledgeable Mārārs⁵⁷ with whom I have spoken, the temple is a replica of the human body and the five enclosures

represent the five sheaths that constitute it.⁵⁸ They are the physical sheath (*annamaya kośa*), the vital body sheath (*prāṇamaya kośa*), the mental sheath (*manomaya kośa*), the intellectual sheath (*vijñānamaya kośa*), and the bliss sheath (*anandamaya kośa*) (Fig. 4).

These five sheaths represent the physical body of the deity on the horizontal plane.⁵⁹ According to texts and performers, another category of correspondences between the temple and the human body is established on the vertical plane, and in this case it relates to the so-called energetic centers (*cakras*) situated along the internal channel (*susumnā*) in the spine. They are *mūlādhāra*, *svādhiṣṭhāna*, *manipūra*, *anāhata*, *viṣuddha*, and *ājñā*. At the base of the channel, imagined as a coiled serpent in the lowest of the *cakras* (*mūlādhāra*), *Kuṇḍalinī*, the feminine life force or Śakti, is thought to reside. At the opposite end, above the six power centers, the thousand-petaled lotus (*sahasrāra cakra*) is the abode of Śiva. Before the erection of the *śrīkōvil*, a hole is made in the place where the deity will be installed. In this hole, which represents the *susumnā*, six symbolic elements associated with the six centers in the human body are installed, one over the other.⁶⁰

The identification of the temple with a yogi and the *cakras* in the human body is visually expressed on the cover of the book *Kṣetra Caitanya Rahasyam*, written in 1988 by Madhavan (Fig. 5, next page), an influential Tantric scholar who contributed to the foundation of the Thantra Vidya Pethoom.⁶¹ In the background of the picture we can see the shape of a yogi superimposed on the structure of the temple, highlighting their identification, while in the foreground are juxtaposed a drawing of *Kuṇḍalinī* with *cakras* and the flagpole (*dvajastambha*), which is symbolically associated with the spinal cord.⁶²

Thus, the temple is considered as the body of a human being whose soul (*ātma*) is represented by the idol in the *śrīkōvil*, and the aim of the rituals is to keep this “being” not only alive, but in a constant state of enlightenment. Indeed, the concept implicit in this vision is that in attaining enlightenment a man, a yogi, becomes a deity, since enlightenment is a permanent quality of gods and irradiates, benefiting not only the devotees visiting the temple but the entire society.

1. Bliss sheath (*anandamaya kośa*)
2. Intellectual sheath (*vijñānamaya kośa*)
3. Mental sheath (*manomaya kośa*)
4. Vital body sheath (*prāṇamaya kośa*)
5. Physical sheath (*annamaya kośa*)



Figure 4: The five sheaths in the human body

The Ritual Sequence and Its Meaning According to Contemporary Brahman Performers

The rituals performed by the Brahman priest inside the *śrīkōvil* behind closed doors are extremely important and helpful to an understanding of the overall project of Brahmanical temple rituals in their daily and festival versions. They are explained in detail in the *Tantrasamuccaya*⁶³ and other more recent temple manuals, but their concept was summarized in clear words by Elangallur Narayanan Nampūtiri as follows:

Through *pūjā* the priest becomes one with God. There is a saying, “In order to worship Śiva you have to become Śiva,”—that’s the theory behind it. At the beginning the priest becomes one with the God using *mantras*, *mudras*, and *nyāsa*, and so on, and then tries to

awaken the *Kuṇḍalinī śakti* of the deity and make it reach the *sahasrāra padma* of the deity. Every day it is repeated. So we believe that every day this *Kuṇḍalinī śakti* of the deity is awoken and it reaches the *sahasrāra padma* of the deity, so that the deity becomes as pure as a perfect yogi.⁶⁴

Daily *pūjā* in Kerala includes several phases.⁶⁵ Soon after offering reverent salutation to the God, the priest has to perform the ritual purification of the different constituents of the body. This involves the imaginative dissolution of his body and the five elements—ether, air, fire, water, earth—that constitute it and the creation of a new purified body divinized by means of letters of the Devanāgarī alphabet and *mantras*. The concept implied in this process is the identification of the worshipper with the deity. It is enacted by means of an imaginative projection of the macrocosm and its elements into the microcosm of the practitioner’s own being. Once this process has been completed, the priest takes a conch and fills it with water purified by the *mantras* of all the cosmic principles (*tattvas*),⁶⁶ visualizes himself and his new body as pervaded with divinity, and worships himself as a deity. Subsequently, he worships the seat on which the icon sits and proceeds with the invocation (*āvāhana*) of the deity onto it. This is done by transfusing a fragment of the priest’s consciousness (*caitanya*) into the idol. He takes flowers along with water from the conch in his joined hands positioned near *mūlādhāra cakra*, where *Kuṇḍalinī* is believed to reside. Then, by reciting *mantras*, he imaginatively raises his consciousness through the central channel (*suṣumnā*) to the *cakra* of the heart and up to the *sahasrāra cakra* above the head, where he joins the fragment of his consciousness

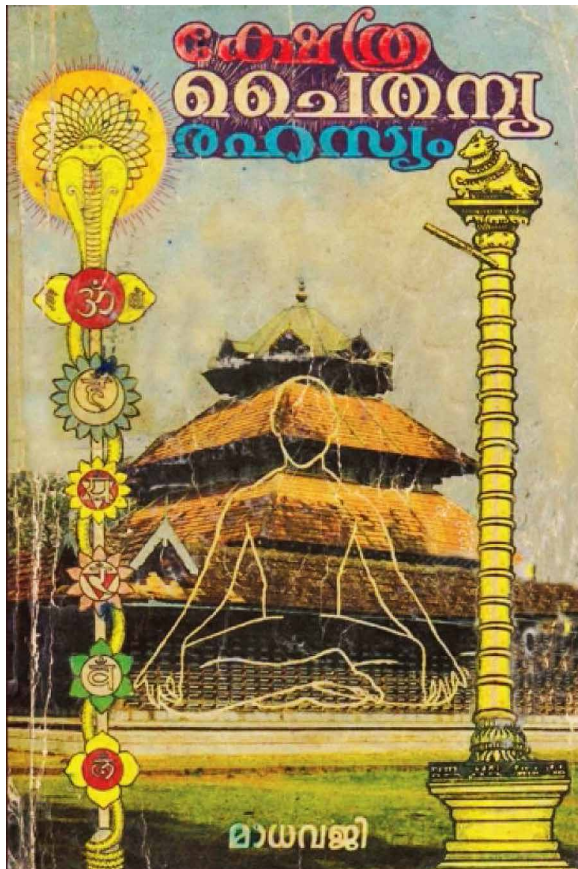


Figure 5: The cover of the book *Kṣetra Caitanya Rahasyam* by Madhavan

with the supreme self that is situated there. Reciting the *mantra* of the deity, he invokes his/her presence, conducts it in the form of breath into the flowers and water he keeps in his hands, and pours all of them over the head of the idol. Then, as he previously did on his own body, he installs the different *mantras* into the body of the idol. Soon after that he offers various kinds of honorary services to the deity, worships him/her, and offers food (*naivedya*). While the main door of the shrine is still closed, at the time of the offering of honorary services, a Mārār musician standing near the steps of the *śrīkōvil* offers royal music, playing specific compositions on the *iṭakka* hourglass drum. At the end of this offering the priest opens the door, and devotees catch sight of the deity (*darśana*) and exit the inner enclosure of the temple.

Once food has been offered to the main deity, it is also offered to the members of his/her retinue in a ritual known as *śivēli*. It includes two sections, the first performed in the inner enclosure, the second in the fourth enclosure. No one except priests and Mārār musicians has the right to perform the first section. The ritual begins when a Mārār plays a *timila pāṇi* to invite the gods. The priest, accompanied by a small ensemble of musicians, moves around the *śrīkōvil*, stopping at each point marked by the stones where the various deities are supposed to reside to offer them different substances that symbolically represent the five elements. This is one of the most important rituals, and each of its sections is supported by specific drum patterns associated with the different deities.

Once the offering to the deities in the first enclosure has been completed, the portable replica of the icon of the main god or goddesses is taken out of the *śrīkōvil*

by a priest. He joins, together with an attendant carrying a lamp, the previous group of ritual performers, and they all move together to the fourth enclosure of the temple. The priest carrying the idol on his lap jumps on the caparisoned temple elephant⁶⁷ and a new procession, led by musicians playing a short version of a *ceṅṭa mēlam* and followed by the elephant, performs three circumambulations of the enclosure while the priest offers food to minor gods believed to reside there (Fig. 6). When *śivēli* is over, the deity is worshipped with royal items, including *sōpāna saṅgīta*⁶⁸ sung by a Mārār accompanying himself on the *iṭakka* hourglass drum, and offered flowers. At the end of worship the deity in all his/her components is withdrawn from the image of the deity back into the body of the worshipper. The same ritual procedure is performed during *utsavas*, or yearly festivals, but its scale is greater and special rituals are added. They are celebrated to



Figure 6: *Utsava bali*. The Tantri, along with two Mārārs playing *vīkan ceṅṭa* and *cēṅṅilam*, distributes offerings to the deities in the fourth enclosure under the surveillance of the god carried on the elephant by a priest. Tiruvambadi temple, Thrissur.

bring prosperity to people and to increase the consciousness of the main deity that might have deteriorated or been lost due to improper ritual performance during the year following the previous festival.⁶⁹ *Utsavas* generally last from seven to nine consecutive days and follow a specific ritual sequence that may change depending on the temple but always includes 1) the flag hoisting (*dhvajarohana*) that marks the start of the festival, 2) *Brahma kalaśa*, 3) *utsava bali*, an extended version of *śivēli*, 4) the “royal hunt” (*paḷḷiveṭṭa*), 5) the “royal sleep” (*paḷḷikkuruppu*), and 6) the royal bath (*ārāṭṭu*).

The very core of the festival is *Brahma kalaśa*. This ritual, a magnified version of the daily invocation (*āvāhana*),⁷⁰ essentially consists of the filling of pots with water and other materials, sanctifying them with *mantras* of the cosmic principles (*tattvas*) and pouring their contents over the idol. *Brahma kalaśa* indicates, at the same time, the ritual that may involve up to 1,000 pots,⁷¹ including the main pot (*kalaśa*), which is brought to the *śrīkōvil* in royal procession, since it represents the main deity of the temple. All the stages of this ritual are supported by music. *Marappāni* is performed at the end of the process of filling the pots and before moving the *Brahma kalaśa* to the *śrīkōvil* to pour its contents over the idol. It is played by one or two *maram* players accompanied by one *cēṅgilam* and one *śaṅkha* player. The procession of the *Brahma kalaśa* and its pouring is accompanied by the playing of *paṇṣavādyam* by an ensemble including *vīkan ceṅṭa* (bass *ceṅṭa*), *timila*, *ilattālam*, *kompū*, and *iṭakka*.

Every ritual is performed on a grand scale during *utsavas*, and hence also the quantity of the offerings to the retinue of the deity and the power of the music increase significantly.

The patterns played in the inner enclosure become more complex and extended, and the small ensemble of musicians playing for the circumambulations of the fourth enclosure of the temple is replaced by an ensemble (*mēlam*), including several *uruṭṭu ceṅṭa*,⁷² *vīkan ceṅṭa*, *ilattālam*, *kompū*, and *kurum kuḷal* players, who fill the air with the powerful sound of compositions lasting hours. In a similar way, the number of elephants involved in processions grows together with their keepers, who, standing on their shoulders, perform specific choreographies while holding in their hands special implements that amplify the majesty of the procession of the animals and the deity inside the temple (Fig. 7, next page).

On the second to the last day of the festival, the deity mounted on the main elephant moves out of the temple for “royal hunt.” This is a ritual mock hunt in the forest based on the killing of an artificially created demonic figure or wild beast by shooting him with an arrow. While the deity is exiting the temple in a silent procession, the success of the hunt is celebrated with the playing of *paṇṣavādyam* by an ensemble including *timila*, *maddaḷam*, *ilattālam*, *kompū*, *iṭakka*, and *śaṅkha*. On the following day, after a night of rest or “royal sleep,” the icon of the deity, accompanied by ensemble music, is again taken in procession on an elephant to the river or a tank, and there he/she receives a royal bath. Once the ritual is completed the idol is taken back to the temple, where the *utsava* culminates in the dawning of the flag.⁷³

According to various contemporary knowledgeable performers and textual sources, the symbolic meaning of these rituals is associated with the awakening of *Kuṇḍalinī*.⁷⁴ In their view, once awakened,

Kuṇḍalinī rises, piercing the various *cakras* in the internal channel of the yogi. When it eventually joins the *sahasrāra cakra*, it generates an outpouring of blissful nectar (*amṛta*) that floods his entire body. In other words, with the temple being conceived as a reproduction of the body of an enlightened being, or a god, the entire daily ritual sequence is thought of as a reenactment of the awakening of his *Kuṇḍalinī* and the outpouring of nectar. This is the most crucial moment of the process and coincides with the pouring of water and other elements (*abhiṣeka*) on the idol. In this narration, *śīvēli* and its festival version, *utsava bali*, the circumambulations in the different enclosures of the temple to offer food to the retinue of gods associated with the main deity are conceived as the reenactment of the spread of the elixir flooding the various sheaths of the temple body (AV Ex. 1⁷⁵). The symbolic meaning attributed to the rituals of the last days of the festival may be also understood

in a similar way. In fact, the procession of the deity for the mock hunt is meant to cut away all the negativities from the areas around the temple, the royal sleep represents the deity entering the state of *samādhi*, and the procession out of the temple for the royal bath reenacts the flooding of the elixir within the entire community.⁷⁶

While this narration appears to be shared among contemporary elites of temple society and textual sources as well, when we turn to music, any kind of interpretation or explanation of the meaning of music and musical forms from a symbolic perspective is very rare. Indeed, whereas the ritual importance of playing musical instruments is highlighted in texts and by performers, its ritual meaning is neither pointed out nor explained.⁷⁷

This situation may be due to the fact that Mārār are allowed to share their knowledge only with members of their community. Group hierarchy is strong and



Figure 7: Caparisoned elephants, Arattapuzha temple

only those Mārār who are acknowledged as knowledgeable have the right and the position to openly maintain an interpretation, and even to face any criticism from inside or outside the community. Peruvannan Mārār was very generous and detailed while explaining the nuances of the *ceṇṭa mēlams*, but when I asked him about the ritual compositions played in the inner enclosure, he suggested that I meet Kallekulangara Achuthankutty Mārār, who was an expert and had also published the notation of such compositions in his last book. Authoritative and knowledgeable experts of rituals such as Thrikkampuram Krishnankutty Mārār or Sadanam Divakara Mārār contributed to the preservation and the transmission of the heritage and emphasized their ritual importance, but did not publish any text with speculations on compositions.⁷⁸

Furthermore, it has to be considered that the decline of the temple tradition and its economic system forced various groups of temple communities, including Mārār, to leave their traditional jobs and look for other sources of income, and this might have caused a gap in the transmission of knowledge. This gap is acknowledged by members of the Mārār community and was clearly expressed to me by Kallekulangara Achuthankutty Mārār. He was particularly worried about the risk of distortion of rituals and compositions due to the weakening of the oral tradition and the lack of texts written by performers. Emphasizing the importance of the correct execution of ritual action and musical composition, and the need of theoretical knowledge to explain both, he said:

We are bound to derive what we are saying and what we perform. If you ask me, why have you done so? Because of

that I have done this. . . . This is the reason for that. . . . I am bound to derive, for ancestors are pleased if I do it.⁷⁹

Musical analysis reveals structures, geometrical forms, and mathematical aspects whose refined organization may not be thought of as ritually meaningless. Indeed, this feature helps understand the need for theoretical explanations expressed by Kallekulangara Achuthankutty Mārār. Most of the compositions performed inside the inner enclosure are based on numbers of beats, and musicians adopt specific expedients to keep the count correct and avoid mistakes. In fact, it is often mentioned that this music is devoid of emotions (*bhāva*) and aesthetic pleasure,⁸⁰ and although tradition says that music should be aligned with the character of the *pūjā* and the deity for whom it is performed, such character is again conveyed by means of drum patterns codified according to ritual rules and principles.⁸¹ While compositions for big ensembles need the contribution of every performer and for this reason create strong group cohesion and produce psychological effects—Peruvannan Mārār pointed out that this is something that the leader of the ensemble should take care of—it is to theatrical forms like *kūṭiyāṭṭam* and *muṭiyēttu* that we have to turn to feel drummed emotions.

Mārār music is embedded with meaning and it is by analyzing the geometrical figures and the numbers on which it is built in the light of Tantric symbols and ideas that such meaning becomes manifest. What, then, is the contribution of the Mārār in temple rituals? What is the relationship between specific compositions and specific ritual moments? How are musical structure and ritual meaning related?

Sound Bodies and Bodies of Silence

In this section I will first analyze the structure of two main musical forms performed during festival rituals and then, in light of the explanation provided by performers and textual sources, propose an interpretation of their ritual meaning answering the above questions.

Pāṇi is the most important of the ritual forms and *marappāṇi*,⁸² performed with the *maram* drum, is the most sacred class of compositional forms played during festivals and on special occasions such as *Brahma kalaśa*. Various kinds of *marappāṇi* are performed in Kerala and their renditions may change according to district. Notwithstanding the differences, they have been composed according to similar principles and have similar structures.⁸³ *Marappāṇis* are so sacred that it is said that any kind of mistake made by the drummer may lead to his own death. He has to observe ritual purification, to put sacred marks on his forehead and chest, and to wear new garments and the *uterium*, a twisted cotton cloth worn by priests.⁸⁴

Marappāṇis are performed near the steps of the *śrīkōvil* (Fig. 8) and require a silent and concentrated atmosphere. No one except temple community members is usually allowed to attend them. *Marappāṇis* are played in ascending or descending mode;⁸⁵ the former, which starts from the slowest tempo and concludes in its fastest tempo, is performed to invoke (*āvāhana*) the consciousness of the deity; the latter, played in reverse order, is performed to withdraw (*samhāra*) it.⁸⁶ The two main classes of *marappāṇis* performed in central Kerala are called *kriyādhiṣṭhita pāṇis*, “regulated by the ritual action,” or *tattvam pāṇis*, and *mūrtiadhīṣṭhita pāṇis*, “regulated by the form of the god.” They are usually distinguished

on the basis of their geographical location, the former being played in the areas south of the Chalakkudy River and the latter in the areas on its northern side. While they are similar in many aspects, they have different structures and are based on different concepts. Although it might also be adequate for *kriyādhiṣṭhita pāṇis*, the following analysis relates in particular to *mūrtiadhīṣṭhita pāṇis*.

An important and unique aspect that differentiates the *marappāṇi* from any other compositional form of temple music is its extensive use of silence. Indeed, it is a class of composition in which silence dominates over sound. If we take, for instance, a *marappāṇi* played to invoke the consciousness of a deity, it starts with three blows on the conch immediately followed by the first stroke on the *maram*. The second stroke comes after about forty seconds, followed, after the same gap of silence, by a third stroke. The composition proceeds in a similar way, while the duration of silence halves in stages until the end of the piece, which may count from sixty-four to more than 100 strokes. *Marappāṇis* are based not on rhythm cycles



Figure 8: Mārārs performing *marappāṇi*

(*tāla*) but on beats (*akṣara*),⁸⁷ and the duration of the strokes generally starts from thirty-two beats, and then reduces to sixteen, eight, four, and two beats.⁸⁸ Due to this structure, which proceeds in different stages marked by a decreasing number of rhythmic units, *marappāṇi* is described as a solemn architecture built with silence⁸⁹ and is visualized as a shape similar to a downward-pointing triangle, a cone, or an inverted pyramid⁹⁰ (Fig. 9[a]) since, as pointed out by Kallekulangara Achutankutty Mārār,⁹¹ it aims at concentrating into a specific point (*bindu*) the divine energy which is spread all around the universe.

While *marappāṇi* is played soon before moving the *Brahma kalaśa* in a procession from the place where it has been filled to the *śrīkōvil*, the pouring of its contents (*abhiṣeka*) over the idol is accompanied by *pariṣavādyam* performed around the *śrīkōvil* and followed by the playing of *pañcāri mēlam* during the circumambulation of the fourth enclosure.

Architectural analogies with temple towers and visual representation as a cone or a pyramid are not exclusively established with *marappāṇi* but are shared by almost

all the compositional forms adopted in Brahmanical temples in Kerala.⁹² Indeed, *marappāṇi* is generally considered the most ancient and sacred musical form, and all the others are believed to derive from it.⁹³ Thus, *marappāṇi*, *pariṣavādyam*, and *pañcāri mēlam* follow the same conical or pyramidal structural pattern. However, I maintain that the process performed in temple music may also be visualized as series of concentric circles, each one of them representing a different stage and having a diameter half that of the previous one (see Fig. 9[b]). This alternative visualization of the major structure of compositional forms allows us to highlight important aspects implied in this model.

Pañcāri mēlam follows the typical structure and performing procedure of all the various percussion compositions called *mēlams*. They are played while circumambulating the fourth enclosure and proceed in different stages, or *kālam*s, characterized by a definite number of beats.⁹⁴ The ensemble performs each *kālam* while standing in a space opposite to each of the doors of the temple, and plays the bridges that connect the various *kālam*s

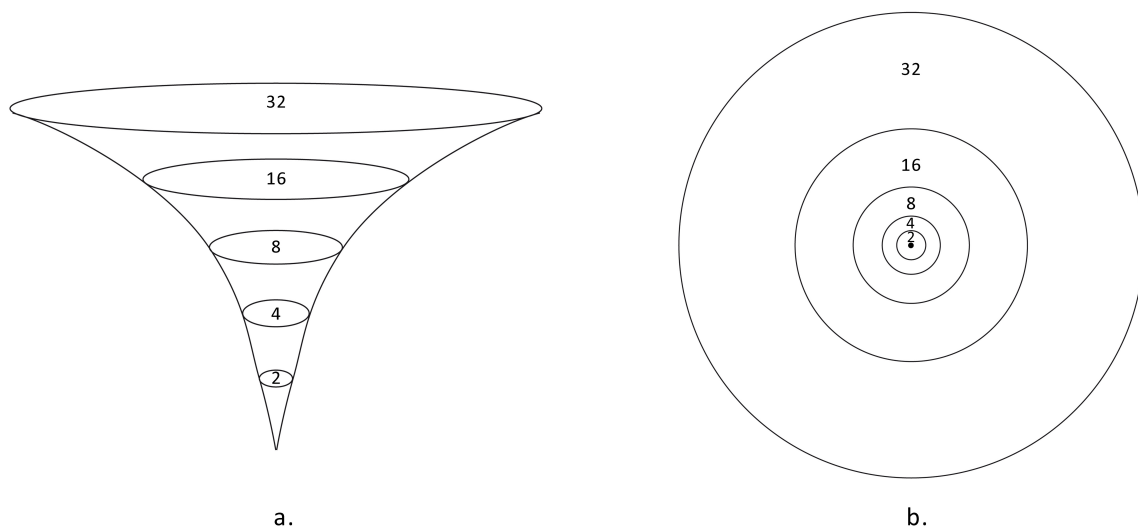


Figure 9: Visual representation of *marappāṇi* as downward-pointing cone (a) and as concentric circles (b)

while moving clockwise from east to south to west to north, and back again to the east. A significant feature of *mēlams* in general is that the halving of the number of beats included in each *kālam* is paralleled by a steady increase in speed. *Pañcāri mēlam*, which is considered the most refined and aristocratic of all *mēlams*, consists of five different stages including ninety-six, forty-eight, twenty-four, twelve, and six beats, respectively. Thus, the first *kālam*, lasting ninety-six beats, is the slowest, while the last one, lasting six beats, is the fastest. If we represent the structure of *pañcāri mēlam* as five concentric circles increasing in size in the proportion of one, two, four, eight, sixteen, and compare it to the plan of the temple described in the *Tantrasamuccaya*, we see that the musical structure reproduces in time what the enclosures represent in space. Each *kālam* corresponds to an enclosure in the temple, and even their proportions bear significant similarities. Indeed, according to the *Tantrasamuccaya* (II.73), the measures of the five enclosures are half, one, two, four, and seven units of measure (*daṇḍa*).⁹⁵ Hence, each enclosure is double the previous one and, apart from the last one, which measures seven instead of eight units, shows the same rhythmical proportion presented in music.⁹⁶

According to Kerala Brahmanical temple tradition, the five enclosures are also connected with the five elements (*pañca bhūtas*) that constitute the universe.⁹⁷ The *pañca bhūta* theory maintains that the universe consists of five elements: ether (*ākāśa*), air (*vāyu*), fire (*tejas*), water (*jala*), and earth (*pr̥thivī*). They are associated respectively with the qualities of sound, touch, form, taste, and smell. Each one of them is generated by the previous one and absorbs its qualities. Ether is not only the first element but the one that generates all the others. It is symbolically represented by sound, and for this reason musical forms are considered extremely important ritually. The relationship of the five elements with the five enclosures may be visualized through the image of five concentric circles, where the innermost represents the element ether and the outermost the element earth. Alternatively, by establishing the same relationship between circles and elements on the image of an upward-pointing cone, we have the visual representation of the evolution of the elements from ether to earth as a movement proceeding downward, and the contraction of the elements into ether⁹⁸ as an upward movement (Fig. 10). Indeed, if we consider again the

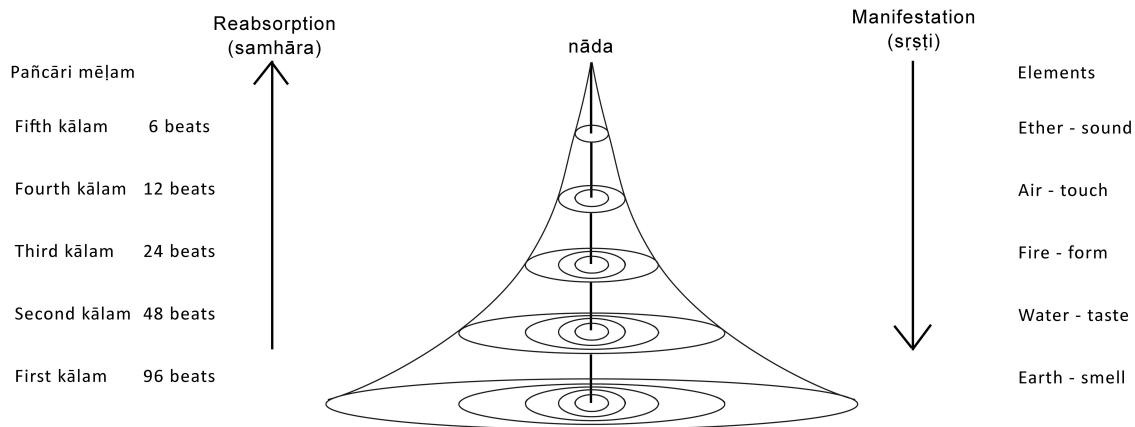


Figure 10: The sequence of generation of the five elements as representation of the manifestation of the universe from *nāda* and its reabsorption into it

association between ether and sound, the two movements will be a representation of the manifestation of the universe from its sonic source, which in Tantric cosmology is called *nāda* (*Tantrasamuccaya* V.50),⁹⁹ and its reabsorption into it.

On the basis of the analogy of the enclosures with the elements, the *pañcāri mēlam* may be conceived as a representation of the process of reabsorption of the universe into its source. I have said that the last *kālam* of each *mēlam* is the fastest, but it is also the loudest. In fact, it is an explosion of sound that, once having reached its peak, suddenly ends and dissolves into silence. However, from the ritual perspective, it is an invocation of the divine consciousness in the place where it is played, that is, the fourth enclosure of the temple.

The most significant aspect suggested by the analogy between *pañcāri mēlam* and temple plan is that as the five enclosures of the temple represent the five sheaths (*kośas*) of the deity in space, the five *kālam*s of *pañcāri mēlam* reproduce the five sheaths (*kośas*) in time (Table 1). In other words, this composition is a sonic representation of the body of the deity. Furthermore, since *pañcāri mēlam* shares its structure with most of the compositions in the repertoire, it can be inferred that the human being with its five sheaths is an important model for temple music.¹⁰⁰ This understanding of Brahmanical temple musical forms,

which, as far as I know, has never been pointed out by previous scholarship, is not new to knowledgeable performers. Indeed, it was confirmed by Kallekulangara Achutankutty Mārār¹⁰¹ and by Pallatheri Nambiathan Nampūtiri. He maintained that *marappānis*¹⁰² are representations of the anthropomorphic body of gods and told me that according to his master S. Appu Mārār, *tāyambaka* is a recreation of the cosmic man (Puruṣa) by means of the sounds of *ceṇṭa*.

The sound of musical instruments is so ritually important because *nāda*, the primordial sound and creative life force, or *śakti*, stands at the origin of the universe and keeps it alive. However, in order to empower the deity in the proper way, it has to be shaped as a human body. Thus, while the *pañcāri mēlam* and other compositions played in the fourth enclosure create sound bodies and may be conceived as representations of the body of the cosmos manifested by *nāda*, *marappānis*, which are played near the *śrīkōvil* and are mostly made out of silence, create bodies of silence since the Absolute is silence beyond *nāda* itself.

It is now possible to suggest an explanation for the relationship of specific compositions with ritual. It has been seen that the priest has to transform himself into the deity he wants to worship, and that in order to do this he has to destroy his body and its constituent elements to create new purified ones. The same process is

Temple	Elements	Human body	<i>Pañcāri mēlam</i>
1. First enclosure	Ether	Bliss sheath	Fifth <i>kālam</i> 6
2. Second enclosure	Air	Intellectual sheath	Fourth <i>kālam</i> 12
3. Third enclosure	Fire	Mental sheath	Third <i>kālam</i> 24
4. Fourth enclosure	Water	Vital body sheath	Second <i>kālam</i> 48
5. Fifth enclosure	Earth	Physical sheath	First <i>kālam</i> 96

Table 1: Correspondences of the *pañcāri mēlam* with temple enclosures, sheaths of the human body, and elements

performed to the elements of the idol, which are first resumed or contracted to their source (*samhāra*) and then recreated and infused with all their renewed constituent principles (*tattvas*) into a pot (*Brahma kalaśa*) and subsequently poured over the idol. It has been seen that the pouring (*abhiṣeka*) of the *Brahma kalaśa* over the idol is a reenactment of the outpouring of elixir resulting from the joining of *Kuṇḍalinī* and the *sahasrāra cakra*, or the moment in which a yogi is pervaded by the bliss resulting from enlightenment. Since *marappāṇi* is played at the most crucial stage preceding the climax of the outpouring of elixir, it may itself be considered a representation of the moment in which *Kuṇḍalinī* joins the *sahasrāra cakra*. In fact, it is also the moment in which the yogi has created his new perfect body – which is represented by the body of silence framed by the strokes of the *maram* – and receives the enlightenment. Furthermore, only two strokes are produced on the *maram*. They are named by the onomatopoeic sounds *ta* and *tvam*, which are associated with “*tat tvam asi*,” one of the great sayings (*mahāvākya*) of the Upaniṣhads, which means “you are That,” and establishes the identity of the human soul or *ātman* with the universal *Brahman*.¹⁰³ It is for these reasons that *marappāṇi* is so sacred, important, and dangerous for the Mārār performing it. If it is not properly executed, the entire *utsava* may be nullified.

As *marappāṇi* stands for enlightenment, the playing of *pariṣavādyam* near the *śrīkōvil*, and subsequently the playing of *pañcāri mēlam* in the fourth enclosure, correspond to and represent the flooding of the elixir into the whole temple body. Their compositional form sonically enacts the same process and celebrates the joy and bliss resulting from it. The acoustic and aesthetic effect of each of

these compositions is very powerful in its own way, but the overall effect may be thought of as sound whose mass and volume gradually increases while moving from the first to the fourth enclosure in accordance with their proportions. In fact, the silence-based *marappāṇi*, performed by no more than four Mārārs, is followed by the vibrating sound of the medium-size ensemble playing *pariṣavādyam*, and then by the explosion of sound produced by the ensemble performing *pañcāri mēlam*, which may count tens of musicians. Furthermore, the excitement produced by the pace and the density of the strokes increases each stage of the *pañcāri mēlam* and reaches its peak at the fifth stage. The final apotheosis in its last section usually ends in *ēka tālam*, one-beat rhythm, pulsating like a fast heartbeat that for a few minutes reverberates into the temple, the bodies of the musicians and all the people in attendance.

Floods of Sound

In Tantras, the concept of creating bodies by means of sound is known for its association with *mantras* and *nyāsa*. It has been seen that the priest, through alphabets and *mantras*, creates a new purified and divinized sound body that allows him to worship gods. The *Tantrasamuccaya* (V.14–15) clearly says that the priest has to fix alphabets in the various parts of his body in order to shape a new body made of letters. It instructs him to visualize all the letters of the Devanāgarī alphabet in the *cakra* of the heart as a spring of nectar and to imagine that such nectar falls over his head and spreads to all his limbs.¹⁰⁴ This visualization provides a synthetic version of the entire process analyzed above and helps us understand another interesting aspect: sound, represented by musical instruments or letters, is the “substance” that floods the

body of the priest performing *nyāsa*, as well as the body of the temple in daily rituals and *utsavas*. In other words, it clarifies that sound is nectar, and since such an outpouring of nectar after enlightenment is consciousness, it establishes the equation of sound and consciousness. It also explains why sound and even silence are the most appropriate substances to be used to create bodies of consciousness for deities, and why music is played to increase their consciousness. Furthermore, if we consider that sound is nectar, the pouring of water over the idol and the flooding of the body of the adept may be imagined as floods of consciousness.

To conclude, musical analysis has shown that Mārār compositional forms performed

in Brahmanical Tantric temples in Kerala are meaningful and that their meaning is in line with the narration of rituals proposed by contemporary Brahmans. Thus, the rituals performed by the two communities meld, doubling their effect and increasing the power of the ritual and its efficacy. The analysis suggests that there may once have been strong ritual coordination between the actions of the priests and the music of the Mārārs, maintained by members of both communities. Furthermore, although most contemporary Mārārs do not provide any information about the ritual meaning of the compositions they play, their ancestors, who composed them, might have been acquainted with such meaning and aware of its implications.

NOTES

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1 This was how that friend introduced me to Prasanth Narayanan Nampūtiripāḍ, an architect specialized in temple architecture and traditional house building methods, who strongly appreciates ensemble temple music. Nampūtiri is the name of the most influential community of Brahmans in Kerala.

2 I conducted research on Nampūtiri Brahmans, Mārārs and Poṭuvāls, temple musicians, Kuṛuppus, musicians and performers of ritual performances such as *muṭiyēṭtu*, Tīyyāṭi Nambyārs and Kallarā-Kuṛuppus, performers of *kaḷameluttu pāṭṭu* and sword dances, Cākyārs and Nambyārs, *kūṭiyāṭṭam* actors and drummers, respectively.

3 The issue of meaning in Tantric ritual has been extensively treated by Sanderson and Törzsök, who have argued the importance of the speculation about the meaning of rituals in Tantric texts and exegesis, pointing out how such meaning changes according to different soteriological approaches and perspectives.

See Alexis Sanderson, “Meaning in Tantric ritual,” in *Essais sur le rituel*, vol. 3: *Colloque du Centenaire de la Section des Sciences Religieuses de l’Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes* (Paris: Peeters Lovain, 1995), and Judit Törzsök, “The Search in Śaiva Scriptures for Meaning in Tantric Ritual,” in D. Goodall and A. Padoux, eds., *Mélanges tantriques: A la mémoire de Hélène Brunner* (Pondicherry: Institut Français de Pondichéry, 2007), 485–516.

The question of the meaning of music has been similarly approached in a variety of ways and from different perspectives. See Martin Clayton, “Introduction: Towards a Theory of Musical Meaning (in India and Elsewhere),” *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 10/1 (2001): 1–17; Ian Cross, “Music and Meaning, Ambiguity and Evolution,” in D. Miell, R. MacDonald, and D. Hargreaves, eds., *Musical Communication* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 27–43; and Ian Cross and S. Hallam, “Music and Meaning,” in S. Hallam, I. Cross, and M. Thaut, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Psychology of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 33–46; Richard Widdess, “Music, Meaning and Culture,” *Empirical Musicology Review* 7/1–2 (2012): 88–94. In this essay I will exclusively take into account meaning as it is attributed to ritual and music by contemporary ritual performers and textual sources belonging to the Tantric Brahmanical temple tradition of Kerala.

The relationship between musical form or structure and Tantric concepts and ideas remains largely unexplored in academic studies. Notable exceptions in the context of Vajrayāna are the studies by Terry Jay Ellingson, “The Mandala of Sound: Concepts and Sound Structures in Tibetan Ritual Music” (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1979) and Mireille Helffer, *Mchod Ro: Les instruments de la musique tibétaine* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 1994). Valuable studies on Kerala temple music have been written by Groesbeck, Killius, and Morehouse, but they do not analyze music from a Tantric perspective. See Rolf Groesbeck, “Pedagogy and Performance in Thayambaka: A Genre of Temple Instrumental Music of Kerala, India” (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1995); Rolf Killius, *Ritual Music and Hindu Rituals of Kerala* (Delhi: B. R. Rhythms, 2006); and Katherine Morehouse, “Perspectives on the Uses and Functions of Chenta Ensembles in the Religious Festival Processions of Kerala, India” (thesis, University of Maryland, 2011). Alter has contributed to the study of the relationship of drumming with Tantric sects in the Himalayas. See Andrew Alter, “The Significance of Tantric Sects for Drum Practice in the Central Himalayas,” *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 41 (2009): 187–98. Terada and Tallotte have produced interesting studies on music in Tamil temples, but none of them systematically analyses the relationship between the structure of ritual music and Tantric concepts and ideas. See Yoshitaka Terada, “Temple Music Traditions in South India: Periya mēlam and Its Performance Practice,” *Asian Music* 39/2 (Summer–Fall 2008): 108–51; and William Tallotte, “Meaningful Adjustments: Musical Performance and Ritual Action in a South Indian Temple,” *AAWM Journal* 14/1 (2015).

4 Gavin Flood, *The Tantric Body: The Secret Tradition of Hindu Religion* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), 28.

5 Ibid., 28.

6 Ibid., 6.

7 Ellingson, “The Mandala of Sound,” 69; and Axel Michaels, *Homo Ritualis: Hindu Ritual and Its Significance for Ritual Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

8 Flood, *The Tantric Body*, 28.

9 During my fieldwork I met and had conversations with various Nampūtiris. In most of the cases they were Tantris, the experts of rituals. Among them, Elangallur Narayanan Nampūtiri, Pallatheri Nambiathan Nampūtiri, and Prasanth Narayanan Nampūtiripād have been particularly significant for my research. With them I had extended conversations on ritual procedures and their ritual and philosophical

meaning, which they study for personal interest. Narayanan Nampūtiri belongs to Elangallur *mana*, or house, and is the Tantri of numerous temples in Thrissur district. Prasanth Narayanan Nampūtiripād, of the Puliyannur *mana*, belongs to an important family of Tantris who supervise a number of temples in Thrippunitura, Ernakulam district; his family owns the Muthukulangara temple at Eroor. Nambiathan Nampūtiri, of the Pallatheri *mana*, is unique among the Nampūtiri community for his deep interest in temple music, which he studied under eminent Mārārs. He plays all the Mārār drums and knows how to craft them. Now in his seventies, he had the chance to study under Kalpuḷa Divākara Nampūtiripād – one of the most eminent Nampūtiri of the last century and founder of the Tantra Vidya Pethoom institution for the teaching of Tantra – and other Brahmans of similar eminence. He has published two books on temple music and written a manuscript on *marappāṇi*.

10 The most important texts are: *Prayogamañjarī* by Ravi (tenth–eleventh centuries), *Īśānaśivagurudevapaddhati* by Īśānaśivaguru (twelfth century), *Viṣṇu Saṃhitā* by Sumati (thirteenth century), *Tantrasamuccaya* by Cennas Nārāyaṇa Nampūtiri (fifteenth century), and *Śeṣasamuccaya* by Śāṅkara Nārāyaṇa Nampūtiri (fifteenth–sixteenth centuries).

11 This is a well-known fact among Nampūtiris. It was clearly pointed out by Prasanth Narayanan Nampūtiripād (interviewed April 12, 2018), Elangallur Narayanan Nampūtiri (interviewed Sept. 3, 2018), and Pallatheri Nambiathan Nampūtiri (interviewed Aug. 13, 2019). Other scholars highlight this feature of ritual texts of Kerala: N. P. Unni, *Tantra Literature of Kerala* (Delhi: New Bharatiya Book Corporation, 2006); S. S. Sarma, “The Eclectic *paddhati* of Kerala,” *Indologica Taurinensia* 35 (2009): 319–25; P. I. Ajithan, *Tantric Rituals of Kerala Temples: Texts and Traditions* (New Delhi: DK Printworld, 2018).

12 This is what I was told by Narayanan Nampūtiri and Prashant Pallatheri Nambiathan Nampūtiri, Prashant Nampūtiri. In fact, Prashant Nampūtiri, who was not confident about certain ritual aspects connected with music, told me he would have asked for advice from a knowledgeable Brahman related to his family. Frits Staal clearly stated the purely ritualistic approach of Nampūtiris. Pointing out Nampūtiris’ absolute care for the correct execution of the ritual action and their disinterest for its meaning, he wrote: “their primary concern, if not obsession, is with rules. There are no symbolic meanings going through their minds when they are

engaged in performing ritual . . . also when we ask a brahmin explicitly why the rituals are performed, we never receive an answer which refers to symbolic activity. There are numerous different answers, such as: we do it because our ancestors did it; because we are eligible to do it; because it is good for society; because it is good; because it is our duty . . ." (Frits Staal, "The Meaninglessness of Ritual," *Numen* 26/1 [1979]: 3).

13 Pallatheri Nambiathan Nampūtiri (interviewed Nov. 10, 2020) clearly stated that both Sanskrit and Malayalam ritual texts mention musical instruments to be played in specific occasions, and in particular during *utsavas*, but do not provide any information about the form of the music to be played; Elangallur Narayanan Nampūtiri (interviewed Dec. 3, 2020) confirmed his statements. N. P. Unni, in the introduction to his translation of the *Tantrasamuccaya* (*Tantrasamuccaya of Narayana* [New Delhi: New Bharatiya Book Corporation, 2014]) and in his study of the *Īśānaśivagurudevapaddhati* (*Tantra Paddhati: A Study* [New Delhi: Bharatiya Vidya Prakashan, 1987]), highlights that they only mention musical instruments such as the drum *timila*. Sarma points out that the *Īśānaśivagurudevapaddhati* mentions *timila* (S. S. Sarma, "The Eclectic *paddhati* of Kerala"). J. P. Prajith, in his study "Gods and Worship in *Īśānaśivagurudevapaddhati* (*Tantra paddhati*)" (Ph.D. diss., Kalady University of Sanskrit, 2008), 338, informs us that the text prescribes the playing of different instruments at the time of the royal bath (*abhiṣeka*) and, soon after the flag hoisting, the beating of the drum (*bherī*), along with the *mantras* uttered by the main priest.

14 M. G. S. Narayanan and Kesavan Veluthat, "A History of the Nambudiri Community of Kerala," in Frits Staal, *Agni: The Vedic Ritual of the Fire Altar* (Corea: Samhwa Printing Co., 1983); Rajan Gurukkal, *Social Formations in Early South India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010).

15 Rajan Gurukkal, *The Kerala Temple and Early Medieval Agrarian System* (Kottayam: Vallathol Vidyapitham, 1992); Kesavan Veluthat, "The Temple-base of the Bhakti Movement of South India," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 40 (1979): 185–94.

16 Anna Varghese, "Temple Service Groups in Ancient and Medieval Keralam," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 71 (2010–11): 88–96; "Ugachchan or kummigal: The Temple Drummers from Keralam," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 74 (2013): 133–39; 2013); Gurukkal, *The Kerala Temple and Early Medieval Agrarian System*; and Gurukkal, *Social Formations in Early South India*.

17 K. N. Ganesh, *Reflections on Pre Modern Kerala* (Thrissur: Cosmo Books, 2016); M. G. S. Narayanan, *Perumals of Kerala* (Thrissur: Current Books, 2018); Rajan Gurukkal and Raghava Varier, *History of Kerala: Prehistoric to the Present* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan Private Ltd., 2018).

18 N. M. Nampoothiri, "Cultural Traditions in Medieval Kerala" (Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala Gazetteers Department, 1999); Gurukkal and Varier, *History of Kerala*.

19 B. J. Mailaparambil, *Lords of the Sea: The Ali Rajas of Cannanore and the Political Economy of Malabar (1663–1723)* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

20 Furthermore, scholars such as Ajith Kumar ("Buddhism in Kerala and Its Socio-Cultural Ramifications," *History Today: Journal of History and Historical Archaeology* 2018), A. P. Sadasivan (*A Social History of India* [Delhi: APH Publishing, 2000]), and Nampoothiri ("Cultural Traditions in Medieval Kerala") maintain that Jainism and Buddhism also contributed to the formulation of the syncretistic system that emerged during the fifteenth century and my ongoing research on Brahmanical temple music shows clear Mahāyāna Buddhist influences.

21 A. Atharvavedins Sanderson, "Tantric Territory: The Āṅgirasakalpa Texts of the Oriya Paippalādins and Their Connection with the Trika and the Kālikula. With Critical Editions of the *Parājapavidhi*, the *Parāmantravidhi*, and the **Bhadrakālīmantravidhiprakaraṇa*," in A. Griffiths and A. Schmiedchen, eds., *The Atharvaveda and Its Paippalāda Śākhā: Historical and Philological Papers on a Vedic Tradition* (Aachen: Shaker Verlag, 2007), 195–311; Ananda Subrahmanya Sarma, "Mātṛtantra Texts of South India with Special Reference to the Worship of Rurujit in Kerala and to Three Different Communities Associated with This Worship," in *Tantric Communities in Context: Sacred Secrets and Public Rituals*, VISCOM Conference, Institut für Kultur- und Geistesgeschichte Asiens (IKGA) (Vienna, 2015).

22 Arya V. S. Nair, "Saptamatrikas in Kerala: Iconography and Distribution Pattern," *Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology* 4 (2016): 376–400.

23 A. Sanderson, "Early Śākta Traditions in Regions Other Than Kashmir," Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, Traditions Lecture Series, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sgj9SZ6O1IA>, 2020.

24 V. V. Haridas, "King, Court and Culture in Medieval Kerala: The Zamorins of Calicut, AD 1200 to AD 1767" (doctoral thesis, Mangalore University, 2003).

25 Sarma, "Mātṛtantra Texts of South India"; P. I. Ajithan, "Rurujit Temples of Kerala: A Religious

Site of Co-Existence of Krama Tantrism of Kashmir and Mātrī Tantra of Brahmayāmala” (unpublished paper, 2015). Maciej Karasinski, “A Goddess Who Unites and Empowers: Śrīvidyā as a Link Between Tantric Traditions of Modern Kerala—Some Considerations,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 48 (2020): 541–63.

26 Ajithan, “Rurujit Temples of Kerala.”

27 K. K. Kurup, *Aspects of Kerala History and Culture* (Trivandrum: College Book House, 1977).

28 Joan P. Mencher, “Namboodiri Brahmins: An Analysis of a Traditional Elite in Kerala,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 1/3 (1966): 183–96.

29 M. R. Manmathan, “Temple as the Site of Struggle: Social Reform, Religious Symbols and the Politics of Nationalism in Kerala,” *Advances in Historical Studies* 2/2 (2013): 57–69; Ob Roopesh, “Temples as Political Arena in Kerala,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 2017: 12–15.

30 Rich Freeman, “Pedagogy and Practice: The Meta-pragmatics of Tantric Rites in Kerala,” in Axel Michaels, *Ritual Dynamics and the Science of Ritual* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010); Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

31 H. Sarkar, *An Architectural Survey of Temples of Kerala* (Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1978); S. Jayashanker, *Temples of Kerala* (Thiruvananthapuram: Directorate of Census of Kerala, 1997).

32 The *ceṅṭa* has two faces. When the high-pitched side is played the drum is called *uruṭṭu ceṅṭa*, while it is known as *vīkan ceṅṭa* when the low-pitched side is played.

33 L. S. Rajagopalan, *Temple Musical Instruments of Kerala* (New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi and DK Printworld, 2010).

34 In certain areas of central and northern Kerala, the main community of temple musicians is called Poduvāl.

35 At present, anybody can learn how to play these instruments, except *maram*, but only Mārār can play in the first enclosure of the temple.

36 Rolf Groesbeck, “Pedagogy and Performance in Thayambaka,” 175; Killius, *Ritual Music and Hindu Rituals of Kerala*, 52; Bhalla L. Omchery, *Vanishing Temple Arts* (Gurgaon: Shubhi Publications, 2006).

37 *Tāyampaka* is the only musical form in which musicians have recently introduced improvisation (Groesbeck, “Pedagogy and Performance in Thayambaka”).

38 *Ibid.*, 175; and Kallekulangara Achutankutty Mārār (interviewed April 15, 2018).

39 Killius, *Ritual Music and Hindu Rituals of Kerala*, 52.

40 Ajithan, *Tantric Rituals of Kerala Temples*, 290; and Tantra Vidya Pethoom, article on the Namboothiri Trust website: <https://www.namboothiri.com/articles/thanthraavidyaapeettham.htm> (accessed Aug. 20, 2020)

41 Ajithan, *Tantric Rituals of Kerala Temples*, 249–52. Interviews with Kallekulangara Achutankutty Mārār, April 15, 2018; Pallatheri Nambiathan Nampūtiri, Aug. 8, 2019; and Narayanan Nambyār, April 12, 2018.

42 Ajithan, *Tantric Rituals of Kerala Temples*; Freeman, “Pedagogy and Practice.”

43 I was told about it in the most incisive way by Elangallur Narayanan Nampūtiri, Pallatheri Nambiathan Nampūtiri and Kallekulangara Achuthankutty Mārār. See also Killius, *Ritual Music and Hindu Rituals of Kerala*, 47.

44 Narayanan Nampūtiri, Prashant Nampūtiri, Kallekulangara Achutankutty Mārār, Peruvannan Marar, Kavil Sundaram Marar.

45 Groesbeck, “Pedagogy and Performance in Thayambaka,” 189.

46 *Muṭiyēttu* is a ritual performance narrating the victorious battle of Bhadrakālī against the demon king Dārīka.

47 Paolo Pacciolla, “The Brimming Vessel: An Analysis of the Ritual Repertoire of the Milāyu from a Tantric Perspective,” *Analytical Approaches to World Music Journal Online* 8/1 (2021): 389 and 234.

48 Groesbeck, “Pedagogy and Performance in Thayambaka,” 101.

49 Anna Varghese, “Temple Service Groups in Ancient and Medieval Keralam,” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 71 (2010–11): 90.

50 Anna Varghese, “Ugachchan or kōmmigal: The Temple Drummers from Keralam,” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 74 (2013): 133–39, at 138.

51 Unni, *Tantra Paddhati*, 120.

52 Unni, *Viṣṇu Saṃhitā*, 85.

53 Haridas, “King, Court and Culture in Medieval Kerala,” 235.

54 H. A. Stuart, *Census of India, 1891*, vol. 13 (Madras: Printed at the Malabar Mail Press, 1893); Edgar Thurston and K. Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, vols. 1–7 (Madras: Government Press, 1909); Krishna Iyer and L. K. Anantha, *The Tribes and Castes of Cochin*, vol. 2 (New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1981 [1912]).

55 Gurukkal and Varier, *History of Kerala*.

56 Interviewed April 26, 2019.

57 Elangallur Narayanan Nampūtiri, Prashant Nampūtiri, Kallekulangara Achutankutty Mārār, P. K. Narayanan Nambyār.

58 Important texts such as the *Īśānaśivagurudevapaddhati* (N. P. Unni *Tantra Paddhati: A Study* [New Delhi: Bharatiya Vidya Prakashan, 1987], 107) and the *Viṣṇu Saṃhitā* (Unni, *Viṣṇu Saṃhitā*, 52) clearly state that the temple represents the body of the deity and the idol his soul. In a similar way the *Tantrasamuccaya* associates the idol to the subtle body of the god (V.61) (Unni, *Tantrasamuccaya of Narayana*, 357). It has been said that Brahmanical temples are generally called *kṣetras*. As pointed out by Kallekulangara Achutankutty Mārār, the word *kṣetra* means abode and the concept of temple or *kṣetra* derives from the *Bhagavad Gītā* (XII.1–2), which says that according to the experts *kṣetra* means the body and *kṣetrañña* the perceiver of the body, the soul (R. K. Shringy and Sharma Prem Lata, *Saṅgītaratnākara of Śārngadeva* [Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1991], 36).

59 The system of five enclosures (*pañca prākāras*) overlaps with the *vāstu puruṣa maṇḍala* that sets order, purifies, and cosmicizes the ground where the temple will be built (*Tantrasamuccaya* I.59–73; Unni, *Tantrasamuccaya of Narayana*, 134–44).

60 Jayashanker, *Temples of Kerala*, 105–10. The placing of the six objects is described in *Tantrasamuccaya* (I.74–81) and Unni, *Tantrasamuccaya of Narayana*, 44–50, and includes (I.75) an invocation of the goddess (Śakti) in the square rock representing *mūlādhāra* (Unni, *Tantrasamuccaya of Narayana*, 46).

61 Tantra Vidya Pethoom, article on the Namboothiri Trust website: <https://www.namboothiri.com/articles/thanthraavidyaapeettham.htm> (accessed Aug. 20, 2020). Elangallur Narayanan Nampūtiri spoke about the strong contribution of Madhavan to the institution of the Thantra Vidya Pethoom (interviewed Sept. 3, 2019).

62 Jayashanker, *Temples of Kerala*, 98.

63 The fifth chapter (*patala*) of the *Tantrasamuccaya* presents a detailed description of the *pūjā*, while chapter 9 explains the rituals during *utsavas*.

64 Interviewed April 26, 2019.

65 The following synthesis of the main steps of daily *pūjā* is based on descriptions collected in the field during interviews with Elangallur Narayanan Nampūtiri, Prashant Nampūtiri, Pallatheri Nambiathan Nampūtiri, Kallekulangara Achutankutty Mārār, Peruvannan Mārār, Vijayan Mārār, and Sarath Mārār; and from textual sources including the *Tantrasamuccaya*, Jayashanker, *Temples of Kerala*, and Freeman, “Pedagogy and Practice.”

66 The universe is conceived as structured in thirty-six cosmic principles (*tattvas*) unfolding from the primordial unity of Paramaśiva. They are divided into two paths: the pure *tattvas* and the impure *tattvas*.

The pure path (Śiva *tattvas*), consists of Śiva in union with Śakti and their energies of will (*sadāśiva*), knowledge (*īśvara*), and action (*śuddhavidyā*). The impure path consists of Māyā Śakti, the five types of limitation (*kañcukas*) of the powers of Śiva/Śakti, the Male Principle (*puruṣa tattva*), the Female Principle (*prakṛti*) consisting of three qualities (*guṇas*)—*sattva*, *rajas*, *tamas*. Then the intellect (*buddhi*), the ego-sense (*ahaṃkāra*), the mind (*manas*), and the gross categories of nature grouped in clusters of five, including five sense organs (*jñānendriyas*), five action organs (*karmendriyas*), five subtle elements (*tanmātras*), and five gross elements (*mahābhūtas*). André Padoux, *The Concept of the Word in Selected Hindu Tantras* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990); Teun Goudriaan and Sanjukta Gupta, “Hindu Tantric and Sakta Literature,” in Jan Gonda, ed., *A History of Indian Literature*, vol. 2, fasc. 2 (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1981).

67 Only wealthy temples own elephants. Generally the priest completes the circumambulations by carrying the idol on his lap or on his head.

68 Royal items include song, dance, and instrumental music. *Sōpāna saṅgīta* represents song and instrumental music. Dance is no longer performed, but—according to Kallekulangara Achutankutty Mārār (interviewed June 16, 2019), Prashant Nampūtiri (interviewed April 12, 2018), and Deepti Omchery Bhalla (*Vanishing Temple Arts* [Gurgaon: Shubhi Publications, 2006])—it was once offered by female dancers (*devadāsī*).

69 Jayashanker, *Temples of Kerala*, 210.

70 In line with the procedure of daily *pūjā*, it is preceded by the ritual dissolution of the cosmic principles (*tattva homa* and *tattva saṃhāra*) and their recreation (*tattva sṛṣṭi*).

71 This majestic ritual is called *sahasra kalaśa*.

72 The size of the ensemble varies according to the number of *ceṅṭa* players involved. Each *uruṭṭu ceṅṭa* player should be supported by three *vīkan ceṅṭa*, three *ilattālam*, one *kompū*, and one *kurum kuḷal*. Interview with Peruvannan Kuttan Mārār, June 5, 2019.

73 Jayashanker, *Temples of Kerala*, 221; Ajithan, *Tantric Rituals of Kerala Temples*, 93; P. R. G. Mathur, *Sacred Complex of the Guruvayur Temple* (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts and Aryan Books International, 2009), 129.

74 Madhavan Palakkal, *Kṣetra Caitanya Rahasyam* (Kozhikode: Kshtra Samrakshana Samhiti, 1988) and Jayashanker, *Temples of Kerala* clearly explain the symbolic meaning of the six objects installed below the idol as related with *Kuṇḍalinī*. Knowledgeable Tantris such as Elangallur Narayanan Nampūtiri and Pallatheri Nambiathan Nampūtiri,

and Mārārs, such as Kallekulangara Achutankutty Mārār, discussed the rituals in terms of upward or downward movements of *Kuṇḍalinī* between *mūlādhāra cakra* and *sahasrāra cakra*. In a similar way, an article on “pooja” on the Namboothiri Trust website (<https://www.namboothiri.com/articles/pooja.htm>, accessed Aug. 20, 2020) explains that according to the Tantric practice (*sādhana*), *Kuṇḍalinī* has to be raised up to *sahasrāra cakra*, where she unites with Śiva and the adept realizes the identity of the individual soul with God.

75 From “Makara Jyothi 2018. Invite Prosperity Power Ritual at Kerala,” <http://youtu.be/YssY5Jtzb8>. This sequence of video clips renders visually the concept of the flood of elixir reenacted by temple ritual procedure. The section connected with the text is called “Panchagavya Abishekam” and starts at about 33.40.

76 Jayashanker, *Temples of Kerala*, 211.

77 Katherine Holloway Morehouse writes that only one of the drummers she met “allowed for the possibility that the structure of *mēlams* could be associated with a ritual or spiritual ideas. The rest either laughed or shook their heads, claiming that these things are better left to Brahmins who understand the ritual aspects better than they do” (“Perspectives on the Uses and Functions of chenta Ensembles in the Religious Festival Processions of Kerala, India” [Ph.D. diss., University of Maryland, 2011], 66).

78 V. Kaladharan wrote in an article on *The Hindu* (Aug. 7, 2014) that Sadanam Divakara Mārār completed for the Ministry of Culture two research papers on temple music, “The Ritual Vadyas and Their Mode of Application in Kerala” and “The Secret of Pani,” but I could not find any copy of these texts.

79 Kallekulangara Achuthankutty Mārār (interviewed June 16, 2019).

80 Kallekulangara Achutankutti Mārār (interviewed April 15, 2018).

81 Paolo Pacciolla. *Enlivening Rhythms: Drums and Drumming in Ritual Performances of Contemporary Kerala* (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, forthcoming).

82 The other class of *pāṇi* is played on the drum *timila* and is called *timila pāṇi*.

83 Interviews with Kallekulangara Achutankutti Mārār, April 15, 2018, and Pallatheri Nambiathan Nampūtiri, Aug. 13, 2019.

84 Mathur, *Sacred Complex of the Guruvayur Temple*, 135; Killius, *Ritual Music and Hindu Rituals of Kerala*, 79.

85 Deepti Omchery Bhalla, “The Tālas of Kerala,” in *Indian Music and Allied Arts*, ed. Leela Omchery

Bhalla (Delhi: Sandeep Prakashan, 1990), 7; Omchery Bhalla, *Vanishing Temple Arts*, 57; Pacciolla, *Enlivening Rhythms*.

86 *Samhāra marappāṇis* are played when a damaged idol has to be changed or for rituals (*jīrṇoddhāra*) performed to rejuvenate the temple.

87 In Mārār tradition, “beat” and “count” are interchangeably called *akṣara*, which literally means “syllable,” or *mātrā*.

88 Interviews with Pallatheri Nambiathan Nampūtiri, Aug. 13, 2019; Kallekulangara Achutankutty Mārār, June 16, 2019; and Sarath Mārār, Sept. 13, 2019.

89 This is how T. N. Vasudevan, retired professor of physics and representative of the Tiyyāṭi Nambyār temple community, described it to me. Interviewed June 5, 2019.

90 As I argue in a forthcoming publication, the representation of the various classes of *marappāṇi* is more nuanced than this model, but it is certainly inclusive of the different versions.

91 Interviewed June 16, 2019.

92 According to Kallekulangara Achutankutty Mārār, it is a typical feature of Brahmanical temple music of Kerala (interviewed April 15, 2018). Thrikkariyapuram Krishankutty Mārār maintains that all the percussion musical forms have been arranged in a pyramidal order: see <https://video.webindia123.com/new/music/percussion/parishavadyam/index.htm> (6.07 min.; accessed Aug. 18, 2020). Kariyannur Narayanan Nampūtiri, in his book on *pañcavādyam*, represents it as a pyramid; see Kariyannur, *Pañcavādyam Padanam—Thimila* (Thrissur: Kerala Sahitya Academy, 2012), 30. Groesbeck reports that V. V. Balaraman provided him with a sketch of the structure of compositional form *tāyampaka* represented as a pyramid (Groesbeck, “Pedagogy and Performance in Thayambaka,” 378). Killius writes that the *pañcavādyam* artist Pallavur Maniyan Mārār compared *melams*’ and *pañcavādyam*’s structure with the towers of the Dravidian temples, whose shape is similar to a pyramid. Killius suggests that the ritual meaning conveyed by such pyramidal musical structures is similar to the gothic spires and that temple musicians “create a sonic atmosphere expressing the connection between human and spiritual spheres, the former indicated by the slow and measured rhythm, and the latter shown by the loud and extremely fast beat supported by all instruments” (*Ritual Music and Hindu Rituals of Kerala*, 61).

93 Kallekulangara Achuthankutty Mārār (interviewed April 15, 2018), Kavil Sundaram Mārār (interviewed March 29, 2021), and Sarath Mārār Mārār (interviewed Sept. 13, 2019).

94 All the percussion ensembles (*ceṅṭa mēḷams*) are structured on the same pattern but are based on different *tālas* and named from them. Thus, *campaṭa mēḷam* is based on *campaṭa tālas* (eight beats), *pañcāri mēḷam* on *pañcāri tāla* (6 beats), *ataṅṭa mēḷam* on *ataṅṭa tāla* (fourteen beats), and so on. Most of them include four or five *kāḷams*.

95 Mathur, *Sacred Complex of the Guruvayur Temple*, 135.

96 The *Tantrasamuccaya* (II.73), soon after mentioning the measures of the five enclosures, clarifies that the first and the fifth ones are squared while the other three have a slight elongation by about one-eighth of the width and hence are rectangular (Unni, *Tantrasamuccaya of Narayana*, 144). It has also to be noted that these proportions – which are symbolically significant – are not strictly followed since, as pointed out above, the third and fourth enclosures are usually separated by a narrow space.

97 The theory of *pañca bhūtas* is almost pan-Indian.

98 The process of contraction (*samhāra*) of the elements into their source, called *tattva samhāra*, is described in the *Tantrasamuccaya* (V.26–27) and Unni, *Tantrasamuccaya of Narayana*, 334–35 as a visualization through which the priest, starting from the element earth, contracts the elements and their qualities one into the other.

99 Ibid., 350.

100 In a recent article I argue that the structure of compositions for the *miḷāvu*, the main drum used in the Kūṭiyāṭṭam Sanskrit theater practiced in Brahmanical Kerala temples, is associated with the shape of the human body.

101 Interviewed Aug. 1, 2018.

102 In particular he refers to the so-called *mūrtiyadhiṣṭhita pāṇis* of central Kerala, which are specific *marappāṇi* exclusively played for Śiva, Viṣṇu, or Bhagavati. For a detailed study of *marappāṇi* played in central Kerala and including musical analysis and analysis of the visual content of such compositions, see Pacciolla, *Enlivening Rhythms*.

103 This association was clearly pointed out by Prashant Nampūtiri. See also Mathur, *Sacred Complex of the Guruvayur Temple*, 135.

104 Unni, *Tantrasamuccaya of Narayana*, 327.