CHAPTER V

RELIGION AND THE AGRARIAN SOCIAL LIFE

The focus of the preceding two chapters was predominantly on the communitarian nature of religion, where we have dealt with worship as religious expression and the location of the individual in the community through life-cycle rituals. In order to survive every community has to engage in some economic activities, and these activities tend to have a religious dimension. Thus, a study of indigenisation of religious experience has to consider how the economic activities of a community are influenced by its religion. Accordingly, this chapter focuses on the aspects of indigenisation of Catholicism as manifested in the economic sphere of the community.

Agriculture is the main activity of the area under our study. Even non-agricultural activities are geared towards agriculture. Traditionally, with regard to agriculture and allied activities the villagers have observed a series of rituals and festivals that have had some religious significance. While the Church has neither prescribed definite rituals related to this sphere nor endorsed the practices which the people have traditionally followed, it has evolved a set of prayers to go with the native rituals. Our interest here is in the way the Catholics carry out these rituals and the extent to which Catholicism exerts influence on the existing collective beliefs and practices.

The rituals related to agriculture follow a fixed sequential order, namely, ploughing, sowing, seeking rain, controlling pests, and harvesting. The harvest festival marks the culmination of agricultural activity. Our analysis, however, is not confined to
rituals associated with agricultural activities, but it also considers the rituals concerned with crafts and house construction. These later rituals may or may not be connected with agriculture. But, to the extent that these crafts and craftsmen contribute to the economic and social life of the community, the rituals associated with them become significant for us.

AGRICULTURE AND RITUALS

*nalleer kaTTutal* (Ritual Ploughing)

The Tamil New Year begins with the month of Cittirai, corresponding roughly to the period 14th April to 14th May. The first day of Cittirai is considered to be auspicious for commencing agricultural operations. On this day the villagers observe the ritual of *nalleer kaTTutal* (inaugural of ploughing), though the actual ploughing is resumed only with the onset of the south-west monsoon in the months of Vaikaaci (May-June) and AaNi (June-July).

On the first of Cittirai agricultural implements are cleaned and the oxen are bathed and decorated with sandal paste and *kuMkumam*. The villagers assemble in the churchyard with their plough and oxen, and the elders invite the priest to initiate the ritual with a Christian blessing, which is carried out in the field. Led by the *tappu* all march from the church to the field. Before the procession starts the women folk touch the plough and pass the hand over their forehead. The plough and the oxen are integral to their livelihood and as such they become objects of reverence.

Once they reach the field the male folk start the ploughing in the field that belongs to the church. As they go round ploughing, on the third round the priest blesses the men,
the plough, the oxen and the field. The Parayars play the *tappu* and the women *kulavaivaitaarkal* (sounds made at important transition points to drive away the evil spirits). After the ritual of community ploughing the men go to their respective fields and plough. Finally, they all gather in the church for another round of prayer led by the priest/kooyilpiLLai.

**Processing the Seeds**

In the months of Vaikaaci and AaNi the fields are levelled, weeded and ploughed. On the eighteenth day of AaTi (July-August), which is regarded as auspicious, seeds are set apart for sowing. On this day the ritual of *naaLvitai eTuttal* (taking seeds on a day) is observed. The month of AaTi is said to be auspicious for agricultural activity as it is a rainy month and the reservoirs are full. It is believed that the seed kept aside in the month of AaTi will have multiple yields (*AaTi perukku*; *AaTi paTTam teTi vitai* (the month of AaTi is the right month to sow), goes the popular saying.

The ritual of *naaLvitai eTuttal* is as follows: on this day people take a basket of paddy to the church, where it is blessed by the priest after the Mass. The villagers take a handful of the blessed paddy and add it with the seeds to be sown. The rest of the paddy is left in the church as a *kaaNikkai* (offering). However, the actual timing of sowing, like that of ploughing, depends on the rainfall.

The Catholics carefully observe auspicious directions while engaging in activities considered significant. *cuulam*, a concept relating to inauspicious directions, is an important element in the native culture. They do not face the direction of *cuulam* while engaging in critical activities such as ploughing, sowing, harvesting, etc. *cuulam* is set each day and it is given in the Tamil calendar (see Chap. 6).
Seeking Rain

The area under our study is drought prone and people depend on the monsoon for their agricultural activity. Since the monsoon itself is a period of fluctuation and uncertainty, the villagers have evolved certain rituals as part of their culturally defined coping strategy. The ritual of seeking rain is, thus, carried out precisely to invoke the divine to give them rain in due time.

The ritual object of rain is basically rice. *mazaiccooru kaccutal* (cooking rice for rain) is the most prevalent ritual today, and we came across its observance in four villages. The villagers collect rice from every house except those of the ‘untouchables.’ The rice so collected is cooked and served to all after it has been blessed by the priest or *kooyilpillai*. In Keelauchani, a Catholic village, people make sweet rice called *poMkal*. The *poMkal* is prepared in front of the church and offered in the church during the Mass. After blessed by the priest, it is served to all gathered. In this ritual the cooked rice is viewed as *caami cooRu* (Lord’s rice) and partaking of it is also viewed as a blessing. The ritual cooking of *poMkal* is a symbol of prosperity and thus by this very act they anticipate prosperity which is ensured through rain.

*mazaiccooru vaamkutal*: In addition to *poMkal vaittal*, the young girls go round in the night collecting cooked rice from all the houses. With the rice so collected, they gather in front of the church and pray and sing (*mazai paaTTu*) to Maata (the mother of Jesus) for rain. After the prayer they make small balls of this rice and eat it without adding salt or curry as a symbolic act of penance.

The *mazaiccooru kaaccutal* or *vaamkutal* is a community activity. However, the ‘untouchable’ castes are excluded from these rituals. As V. Britto (1992) observes, it is
ironical that though the low castes are the main workers on the land they are denied the right to be part of this ritual pertaining to agriculture. This is by far the most glaring departure among the Catholics from the egalitarian teachings of the Bible and the Church.

The people firmly believe that the dead ancestors can be a positive influence. The Catholics approach them collectively requesting them to pray for the community and for its welfare: In the years gone by the women and the young girls collected rice from each household in the village and cooked the same as a collective exercise. The cooked food was eaten adjacent to the cemetery. They then fell on the grave of their relatives and cried. Today, most of the villages have given up this practice, and the young are unwilling to participate in such rituals which involve overt expressions of mourning and weeping.

Violations of moral codes, such as women failing to be chaste, are believed by both the Hindus and the Catholics to have an adverse impact on the collective life of the community (Kritinasamy 1981:222). For instance, when the monsoon fails, the elderly often say namma poNTu piLLaikal ellaam ozuMka iRuntaal namakku kusTTam illai (if our women and young girls are disciplined, we don’t face misfortune).

It is also widely believed that rains fail if koTumpaavi (a sinful person) enters the village. The villagers make an effigy of a fictitious person called koTumpaavi and drag it on the streets, while the elderly women and/or young boys beat their chest and cry aloud. This ritual is known as kuuttaan or koTumpaavi kaTTi azutal, during which (mazaikkaaka azutal, crying for rain) they keep reciting ‘koTumpaavi caava, eMkal kastaMkal tiira’ (let the evil person die and that we are freed from our suffering). Finally, the effigy is set afire near the village pond (see Pfaffengerber 1982:151).
Besides these native rituals the Catholics also observe some Christian rituals to seek to undo their sins, which they think cause the failure of rains. For example, they do penance. A Catholic priest, records a similar belief:

There has been no good rain for the last seven weeks. The dry crops suffer much and people are downcast. In their distress, they have arranged to fast next Friday to appease the anger of god caused by their sins, and to beg for rain and asked for a Mass for the same intention (Caritas 1927:5).

Collective Lamentation for Rain: Young girls draw koolam (rankoli), an auspicious sign, at three places in the village to symbolise the land that is prepared for cultivation. They then go to every house, say the ‘Our Father and the Hail Mary’ (Christian prayers addressed to god and Mary) and collect cooked rice. They sit around the koolam they have drawn and mazaikaka azutaarkal (cry for rain). The songs sung are ‘vaanattai nampiyallo, koolattai poTTuvaitein’ (believing in the sky, we have prepared our land for cultivation) and ‘koolam kalayalaie oru koLLa mazai peialaie’ (the koolam has not lost its original form, because the sky has not showered rain). After this ritual of crying around the koolam they gather in front of the church and sing a hymn to Maata and then they disperse (cf. V. Britto 1992).

It was observed that it is mostly young girls and women who perform the ritual of rain. Women in the indigenous culture stand as symbol of fertility and prosperity. Women are themselves a source of sacred power in Tamil thought; they are deemed to be filled with a supernatural potency that, under the right conditions, can bring health and prosperity to a family (Pfaffenberger 1980:209). Chastity is the right condition and it arises from virginity, and for a married woman, from faithfulness. Thus, chaste (kaRppu)
women are considered to have power (caktti) that can influence the gods. No wonder, they take an active part in the ritual of rain.

Though the ritual of rain varies from village to village, the commonality among the Catholics is the song and prayer addressed to Maata. The Catholics have transferred the association of the Hindu goddess with water, fertility and prosperity to Maata. Thus, the Tamil song to Maata expresses the Catholics dependence on Maata:

\[ \text{variyoor ciriyoor varumai niiMka mancu vaiamma, mazai poziya caiyamma; mazai taravenTum taaye eMkal, vaRumai teirvaye amma} \]

(have a heart for the poor and the needy and pour down rain; give us rain, and free us from poverty).

The Church, recognising this, has incorporated in its worship a special prayer and a hymn to Maata. The elderly persons in Oriyur narrated the concern of a Jesuit priest. Twenty years ago, seeing the sufferings of people without rain, a Catholic priest decided to conduct prayer. On the fourth day as they were praying the rosary there was a heavy shower. Since then, in addition to the native ritual of seeking rain, the Catholics have a Christian ritual.

Generally, the ritual of seeking rain goes on for three days, and it may continue for seven days in case the rain fails. As the researcher was in Keelauchani to observe the ritual of rain, it rained a day before the ritual was scheduled. However, the ritual was carried out as per the schedule as it was a vow made to the divine. It was carried out more as a thanksgiving, rather than as a request. The entire ritual of seeking rain shows the continuity with the native rituals and the incorporation of Christian elements and symbols in their support. Another example of this type of ritual concerns pest control.
Controlling the Pests

Catholic farmers who have to contend with pests believe that the holy water is a powerful deterrent to these destructive elements. Thus, sprinkling holy water in the field is one of the immediate steps taken against pests. Catholic priests have also encouraged the farmers to seek recourse to the divine in dealing with pests. About twenty years ago, a French missionary working in the erstwhile Ramnad District was known for controlling pests. People approached him in large numbers seeking his help. He used to write a prayer on a palm leaf in Latin *Scio Cui Credidi* meaning ‘I know (in) whom I have believed or faith.’ He instructed the people to plant a cross in the field along with the palm leaf with the above words inscribed on it. This is practised even today as a preventive measure.

Apart from observing the rituals believed to enhance agricultural output, the Catholics also seek the aid of persons believed to be the medium of the divine. In Maviduthikottai, like the Hindus the Catholics too consult the Hindu *puucaari* (priest) during the feast of the Hindu deity about their agricultural prospects. During the feast, the *puucaari* possessed by a Hindu deity is taken in procession on the streets to the accompaniment of drums and both the Hindus and the Catholics seek to know from the goddess the prospects of rain and the yield from the field. Interestingly, the Church does not openly object to such consultation with the Hindu *puucaari*. The Catholics consult the *puucaari* on general matters concerning the entire community and they neither visit the temple for this purpose nor worship the *puucaari* or the goddess.

Harvest

Harvest marks the climax of agricultural activity. While harvesting the Catholic farmers do not start from the direction of *cuulam* (inauspicious), but from *canimuulai* (the
auspicious north-east quarter of a field) and end on *polimuulai* (the auspicious boundary) of the field. They believe that it is through *canimuulai* that an easy entry could be made for good as well as for evil. As one informant said there is no difficulty in deciding on the *canimuulai*, as the crops always bend in the direction opposite to *canimuulai* which becomes ideal to start the harvesting. For the common people the ideal is perceived in terms of the right course of action, which in turn becomes a ritual.

Before storing the grains in the granary, in keeping with the tradition of offering the first fruit to the divine and as an expression of gratitude, a basket of paddy is offered to the church. After offering it in the church, a handful of paddy sprinkled with holy water is brought home to be put in the granary where the paddy is stored. Thus, people seek the protection of the divine in safeguarding the paddy from insects.

The period between sowing and harvesting is about four months. This period is not seen as the festive time. The end of the harvest signifies the start of the festive season among the Catholics, as among the Hindus. After the harvest season most marriages are performed and the month of Tai (January-February) is considered to be auspicious. As the saying goes, ‘Tai *piRantaal vazi piRakkum*’ (ways are opened with the beginning of the month of Tai). The most important festival in the month of Tai is the harvest festival and the feast of *Vanattucinnappar* (St. Anthony of the desert). St. Anthony is the patron and protector of the forest and the cattle. Next to *urr tiruvizaa, poMkal* is another native festival organised by the people and this brings together the Catholic community in celebration. Since it is a native festival in which the people play an active role it is loaded with indigenous elements.
**poMkal (THE HARVEST FESTIVAL)**

In their description of the festival of *poMkal* Dumont (1986) and Good (1983) have emphasised the transformation of the rice and that which marks the cosmic, calendrical and agricultural changes. As a harvest festival *poMkal* marks the end of agricultural activity and it is a time to thank god for the bountiful yields and pray for the prosperity of the cattle. It is also a festival denoting the change in the season, that is, the onset of summer. It is celebrated on the first day of the month of Tai when the sun enters Capricorn and takes a northward course. Thus, *poMkal* is a celebration that is related to both agriculture and a cosmological event.

On this day *poMkal* is prepared as an offering. Definitionally, it consists of the ritual cooking of the new rice obtained from the grains harvested in the year. The act of cooking *poMkal* represents the cosmic rite of passage, recapitulating the entire rice growing cycle cumulating in the boiling over of the pot. The harvest festival enacts and helps to terminate the main events of the agricultural year (Good 1983:236 and 237). Not surprisingly, this is a festival which is widely celebrated by the Tamils, including those living in the urban areas. In what follows we shall describe the celebration of this festival by the Catholics.

Since the seventeenth century the Catholics in Tamil Nadu have been celebrating the festival of *poMkal*. Recognising the cultural significance of this harvest festival, the Church had combined it with the feast of *Vanattucinnappar* and called it Anthoniar *poMkal* in Tamil. This feast falls on the 17th of January, a day dedicated by the Church to St. Anthony, three days after the Hindus celebrate *poMkal* (on the 14th of January).
However, in some Catholic villages (e.g., in Sengudi) it is celebrated on the 14th of January itself.

In 1972, the Church made a study of the poMkal celebration and it came to the conclusion that it is a cultural festival and could be celebrated by any, irrespective of caste or creed (Villavarayar 1972:1-16). However, while incorporating this native feast into Catholicism the practice of sun worship is given up, as sun is viewed not as a god but as a created element. Since the 1990s the Church has recognised poMkal as a Christian celebration and observes it on the 14th of January as per the Tamil Hindu calendar.

The Ritual Cooking of poMkal

The following description of poMkal celebration is based on the observations at Andavoorani, a Catholic village. The ringing of the church bell and the beating of the tappu mark the commencement of the poMkal celebration. The women come in procession to the church with their decorated pots, rice, and other ingredients needed to make poMkal. On entering the church they kneel down to pray before they start their ritual cooking of poMkal (see Photo 5.1).

The poMkal pot is a special pot and a key ritual object of the day. Some twenty years ago people used new mud pots, but now they use mud, steel or brass pots. The pot is decorated with koolam made out of rice flour. Sandal paste and kuMkumam are applied on the sides of the pot and the turmeric plant with its cluster of tubers is tied around the neck of the pot. All these mark the auspicious occasion in progress.

When all the people are gathered in the church compound the elders of the village (karaikararkal) invite the priest with sandal paste and kuMkumam and request him to
inaugurate the ritual cooking of *poMkal*. The priest lights the oven following which the others light their ovens.

The oven faces east, the direction of the sun, and it is a symbolic action of thanking the sun. Though Catholics do not worship the sun, the direction of making the *poMkal* is retained, recognising the role of the sun in agricultural operations. The direction east is also believed to possess many beneficial forces (Beck 1976:214).

The oven is lighted and women draw the sign of the cross over the pot before water and rice are put into it. This is a practice prevalent among the Catholics in their daily cooking, too. It is said to be a sign of acknowledgement of the fact that it is god who feeds them. The very act of cooking needs to be blessed by the divine and the food needs to be protected from malevolent forces. A similar practice is also observed among some Hindus who apply ash on the sides of the pot.

Water and a little milk is poured into the pot and to hasten the boiling a pinch of salt is added. The time when the water in the pot boils over is considered auspicious and people cry out aloud *poMkalo poMkal* (loud exclamation of joy on the occasion of boiling milk for *poMkal*). Some women *kulavaivaitaarkal*, some kneel down, while others stand with their folded hands as a mark of reverence to the pot which symbolises god’s blessings on the household. The overflowing of the pot is a visible sign and an assurance of a favourable year for the family members (see Photo 5.2). One hears people exclaiming ‘this year our pot boiled over not just once but thrice. I thank god for such assurance of his blessings.’
Once the water boils over, raw rice is put into the pot. Two kinds of *poMkal* are prepared: One, which is sweet, is called *carkarai poMkal*, and the other, which is plain, is called *vettu poMkal*.

The cooked *poMkal* pot is taken to the church, where at the entrance the priest receives the people and asks ‘*poMkal poMkucaa?’* (did your *poMkal* pot boil over?), to which the people respond ‘*nalla poMkucu caami?’* (yes, it did boil over) - (This is the customary way of greeting any one during the season of *poMkal*). The pots are placed at the altar and the Mass is celebrated in thanksgiving for the good harvest. After the Mass the priest blesses the *poMkal*, which is then distributed among the people.

Though cooking is done by individual families, the cooked rice becomes a collective resource and the village elders take charge of its distribution. While every household takes a small portion of the cooked rice, much of it is distributed among those who serve the village in different capacities like the *kooyilpiLLai*, the drum players, the Vannaan, and also to the destitute in the village, the widows, etc.

Besides the collective celebration of *PoMkal* each family does another round of cooking in their respective homes. The researcher observed the ritual cooking by a family: After her bath, the lady of the house cleaned the house and the courtyard, sprinkled water and drew the *koolam*. On the *koolam* she placed the oven facing the east and on it the decorated pot. After the cooking of *poMkal* the ashes from the fire are spread on the road. This is meant to remove *kaN tirusTi* (evil eye) and other harmful influences of the old year. This also expresses the idea of renewal and abundance. As *poMkal* is an auspicious event it is not celebrated during a mourning year.
Since the preparation of poMkal is considered to be an auspicious activity it is done by cumaMkali who are considered to be auspicious. The women who prepare the poMkal purify themselves by bathing before starting this ritual.

Raw rice is used because boiled rice can easily get contaminated in the process of boiling. Some twenty years ago, paddy was pounded at home and not cleaned in the electric rice mill in order to protect the rice from getting contaminated through coming into contact with electrical instruments (cf. Good 1983:227).

In the discussion of colour and heat in South Indian rituals Beck (1976:558) points out that the whole process of cooking of poMkal involves heating and subsequent eating of auspicious white substance. The colour white is thought of as cooling and pure and the ritual items used at poMkal, e.g., the raw rice and milk, are primarily white.

In one of the Catholic villages poMkal was celebrated but the traditional music - tappu was given up. The Hindus believe that smallpox is a visitation of Amman (Hindu goddess). When any person suffers from smallpox, the music - tappu is given up as it disturbs the Amman. The Hindus do not hold any celebration during those days. But the Catholics, though do not give up the celebration altogether, in keeping with the native belief, give up the music. Although the Catholics do not worship the Hindu deity, there is a recognition which manifests in their fear.

The Mass on the day of poMkal celebration is very much appreciated by the Catholics. Responding to the importance given to the Mass on poMkal day, a priest records way back in 1950's that the same people are not keen on attending the Mass on other days and especially Sunday a day of obligation (Caritas 1941:64). Thus, it appears that from the people's point of view the Mass as a Christian ritual assumes significance
when it is combined with a native ritual like poMkal, which has much wider significance for the people.

Though poMkal is recognised by the Church, it is observed that not in all the villages is the priest present or the Mass celebrated. In some villages the ritual is carried out with the help of the kooyilpiLLai. In some villages people deem it sufficient if the kooyilpiLLai initiates the ritual of cooking poMkal and blesses the cattle with a Christian prayer. Since the celebration has been observed from time immemorial even before the people got converted to Christianity, the presence of the priest is not regarded as mandatory. What is important from the point of view of the Catholics is that the celebration is carried out with a Christian prayer.

As a preparation for the celebration of poMkal the Hindus paint their houses with bold red and white stripes in the same way that the temple walls are painted. The Catholics have given up this colour combination, which is apparently associated with the Hindu temples. As a matter of fact most of them paint their houses in preparation for Christmas or their uur tiruvizaa.

The next important ritual in connection with agricultural activity is the maaTTu poMkal (cattle poMkal), the ceremonial boiling of rice performed on the second day of the month of Tai in order to ensure the prosperity of cattle. It is also a time to honour the cattle recognising in gratitude the contribution of the cattle in the agricultural operations. The cattle are washed and are decorated with colours with the designs of the cross standing out prominently. Around the necks of the cattle the people tie a piece of sugarcane, an edible root (panaMkizamku, the palmyra shoot) and a towel or veesTi.
On hearing the church bell and *tappu* people bring their cattle to the church compound. One of the elders ties a towel on *kooyil maaTu* (literally the cattle that belongs to the church, also meaning the bulls used by the priest). This is a symbolic act of honouring the cattle: while the village elder honours the *kooyil maaTu* the entire herd is honoured in the presence of the divine. The priest prays for the well being of the cattle and blesses them by sprinkling holy water. Then, the cattle are taken to a central place in the village and are turned loose. The young boys run behind to take control of them and take possession of the things that are tied around their neck. This act is considered to be heroic.

The Tamil Catholics keep cattle for milk, for dung, for draught ploughing and for pulling carts. Since the cattle are the cornerstone of agrarian productivity, the villagers desire the health and prosperity for their cattle as much they desire it for themselves. The Catholics observe the ritual of *tirusTi kaziccu poTutal* (casting off the evil eye) for the cattle, which is done at home in private: Some light camphor in front of the cattle, some perform *aalaatti* with turmeric water, while others make the cattle cross over the green weed *muTakattaan* (*cardiospermum)*.

When the cattle fail to increase or when they are sick the Catholics make a vow to god requesting the divine to increase the numbers and improve their health. One such vow is known as *vittu vilakkaraiam caital* (sell the diseased person or cattle in the presence of the divine and buy them back at a price). This practice is not confined to this day, though the researcher observed one such incident in Andavoorani on this day, and it took place in front of the church, after the blessing of the cattle:

A woman came forward with her cow and said ‘*naan en maaTTai vittu vilakkaraiam caikinRein*’ (I am selling my cow) for Rs. 100. A member of the gathering
responded aloud 'Adaikala Maata sannitikkumunnaal2001vatuvaruTilitinta kanRairupainootukkuvamkupavaruNunTa?' (in the year 2001, in the presence of Adaikala Maata who is willing to buy the cow for hundred rupees?). Among the persons gathered one came forward to buy, saying 'unTu' (I am ready to buy). The same question is asked thrice and the third time the last sentence is slightly altered thus 'aRutakiriamaaka vamkuvar unTa' (finality, as in a sale). The woman paid the amount and took back her cow. The money paid goes to the church.

*manju viraTTu* (bull race) is a typical Tamil festival celebrated during *poMkal*, both by the Catholics and the Hindus. *manju* is the decoration on the horns of the bull. This cultural event has assumed certain religious overtones in the way the Catholics celebrate it. Before the race begins the bulls are decorated and brought before the church to be blessed by the priest. The bulls are released one by one; the young men follow the charging bulls, some holding their tails. Some fail in the course of chasing the bulls while a few succeed in getting on the shoulders of the bull and ultimately bringing them under their control. Some bulls are so furious that they turn and attack the pursuer, often hurting him grievously. It is a dangerous race and yet there are people who are ready for such an event since great prestige is attached to the men who are able to control the bull. The bull has a towel tied between the horns and this is the reward to one who controls the bull.

Apart from *poMkal* there are other indigenous festivals celebrated by the Catholic Brahmins in Tiruchirappalli town. They are: (a) *kaarttikai viLakku*, a festival of lights, which is observed on this feast day by placing lighted oil lamps outside the house for three days. (b) *koluvaiPatu*, arrangements of dolls in the house for nine days, when the neighbours come and sing devotional hymns (Christian and Sanskrit) and distribute
sweets. Whereas the Hindus place the idols of their gods and goddesses along with the dolls, the Catholics place the statue of Mary and Jesus. (c) varalakshmi nonpu: on this day the Catholics cook *kolukattai* (steamed rice cakes). These are typical Hindu Brahmin festivals and thus naturally only the Catholic Brahmins have retained their celebration.

The Catholics in general celebrate *tiippavali* (the Feast of Lights); they make native sweets and burst crackers. These festivals are significant from the point view of cultural celebration, and carry no religious significance for them.

*Aayuda poojai* is another indigenous feast followed by some Catholics and mostly in the towns. This falls in the month of October. On this day they clean their houses and apply sandal paste and *kuMkumam* on all the tools, books, and other instruments and gadgets. The Christian statues and pictures in the family altar are garlanded and incense is burned. Some take their vehicle to the church to be blessed by the priest. Those who own factories, shops and business centres get them blessed by the priest. Enquiring about the significance of the *Aayuda poojai*, we found that the Catholics view it as a time of invoking god to bless the instruments used by them. The tools and desks are not conceived as divinities. Applying sandal paste and *kuMkumam* on auspicious occasions only means coming into the sphere of benign and effective power.

Thus, the Catholic villages have their own calendar of feasts with elaborate rituals which provides them scope for incorporating many native Hindu practices while giving up their specifically Hindu contents.
INDIGENISATION AND THE CRAFTSMEN

In India, traditionally, different caste groups have been engaged in specific trades and occupations. The Catholics who belong to different occupational castes have been observing rituals specific to their occupation and, to that extent, indigenisation among them is quite pronounced. The Catholic aacaaris (goldsmiths) observe the ritual of wearing the sacred thread, as they claim to hold a unique place in society from the point of view of their creation (Brouwer 1988:448). The taali, the marriage badge, is designed solely by them and to that extent the rest of the Catholic community depends on them for their essential craft items.

On an auspicious day and time in the month of AavaNi (August-September), the Catholic goldsmiths perform the ritual of wearing the sacred thread before the family altar. As a preparation, they bathe, fast and apply saffron and sandal paste to the white thread. The candles and agarpatti are burned. They recite the 'I Believe' (the creed of the Church), one 'Our Father' and ten 'Hail Mary' and wear the sacred thread. The thread is worn for a day and is then removed. A similar ceremony is carried out for the boy after the Church wedding. The whole ritual is Christianised by being performed with a prayer before the Christian divinity.

The Catholic Parayars observe a native ritual while making bricks. On nine bricks two halves of a coconut and flowers are placed, while camphor is burned on a betel leaf. Before performing this ritual they light candles and pray in the church. Thus, though they follow the native ritual without any alteration, they first invoke the blessing of the Christian divinity.
The construction of the house is viewed as an important occasion in the life of an individual. People take all available measures to ensure the successful completion of the house for a prosperous stay. Every house has its own seat of strength and on it the house is built; if not, the misfortune may fall upon the inmates of the house (Daniel 1987). Thus, the site, direction of the house, and the month, the day and the time on which the foundation is to be laid, are all carefully chosen on the instruction of a person well-versed in manaikaTTu caastaram (house-construction astrology). While most Catholics may not consult the astrologer while carrying out the life-cycle rituals, the astrological dimensions are given the greatest weight while building the house.

The foundation is laid on an auspicious day. The ritual begins in the northeast direction by making a square where the new structure will eventually stand. Around the square five bricks are placed. The first two bricks are placed horizontally and on it two bricks vertically and on it one brick horizontally. In the centre of the brick a branch of the margosa tree is placed after removing its bark, and it is decorated with flowers and kuMkumam. A member of the household pours a little milk and applies sandal paste and kuMkumam to the brick. After this ritual is completed the construction begins.

Most Catholics pay the aacaari (the carpenter) and permit him to carry on traditional rituals associated with the laying of the foundation. The Catholics bury a Christian medal (a metal piece on which the figure of a saint is engraved) in the foundation pit. A handful of kooyilmaNNu (sand collected from the churchyard) which is considered to be sacred, is also put at the site while building the house. In this ritual the
Catholics manage the conflict arising from the Hindu aacaari invoking the Hindu deity by placing the Christian medal. On their part, the Catholics only invoke their divinity while carrying out the native ritual, as Catholicism does not have a designed set of rituals for this purpose.

When the ceiling is done a light is kept burning all night. This is believed to keep the peey (devil, demon) away, as a house which is left in darkness becomes an easy entry for the peey. Furthermore, a pumpkin or an effigy of a person is hung on the house in order to ward off the evil eye.

It is ensured that the number of steps leading to the house is an odd one. The first step is referred to as laapam (gain), the next as nasTam (loss), and last step ends in laapam (gain). This is believed to bring wealth to the house.

Once the house is built and ready to be occupied Catholics follow another set of rituals. This is performed on an auspicious day and time. People perceive the house not as a mere dwelling place but a place that will influence the wellbeing of the residents. The house, like its inhabitants, shares the auspicious and inauspicious occasions.

On the night previous to the house-warming ceremony some Catholics get the aacaari to sacrifice a cock and sprinkle its blood on all four corners and at the entrance of the house. The purpose of this ritual is to ward off the evil. Since the wood that is used in the construction of the house is from the forest and the evil spirits reside in the trees of the forest, this ritual is performed to keep away these evil spirits from the house (Sivasubrahmanian 1988:164).

Some Catholics observe the ritual of bringing the cow into the house, as it is believed to be a symbol of prosperity and fertility. The urination of the cow inside the
newly built house is considered to be an auspicious sign. However, unlike the Hindus the Catholics do not worship the cow.

To mark the auspicious occasion the Catholics decorate the place with *maavilaittooranam* (mango leaves hanging over the door). On the day of the house-warming ceremony a pot of water, salt, and turmeric are first taken into and placed in the centre of the new house. On a new oven the milk is boiled and the sweet *poMkal* is cooked in the central part of the house. The priest blesses the house, sprinkles holy water all over the house, and prays for the wellbeing of the inhabitants. After the sanctification by the priest the milk and *poMkal* is served to all those present.

Since the house has great influence on the persons who reside in it, the Catholics share with the Hindus certain beliefs related to the house. The house itself is perceived as a person, and what is good for the house is regarded as good for the inhabitants and vice versa (Daniel 1987). For example, the coconut tree is planted as it signifies strength and vitality, but the drumstick tree is not planted facing the house as it is weak and breaks easily.

People often associate their fortune and misfortune with the house in which they live saying ‘*inta viiTTukku vantaneeram*’ (all because of the day we set foot in this house). Thus, some houses are considered as *raaci* (fortunate or lucky) and others are not. Some of them even go to the extent of changing the house or altering the house in the wake of misfortune. Problems believed to be due to the house are called *manaikkaTTu koolaaRu*.

We came across a case wherein the inhabitants of a house in Sengudi village had a serious debate on the *raaci* of their house in the wake of the sudden demise of their only son in an accident. This ‘ill luck’ was attributed to something being wrong with the house.
But, the man of the house refused to accept this and said that they had been living in the house for the past twenty years and that a number of auspicious events had taken place in the same house. Finally the house as the cause of death was ruled out on the ground that the house that is auspicious for the first several years with its first inhabitants would remain essentially auspicious (cf. Daniel 1987:146).

In Valghiramanickam village the Catholics reported that a house that faced the church did not experience the blessing of the deity: ‘caami paarvaila irukkakuTaatu’ (never dwell under the direct sight of the deity). The house should not also be located in the path of the church of the village. They pointed to a house that stood on the path of the church and said that the persons dwelling in that house had not progressed economically.

The construction of the house and the related rituals reveal that there is an interesting blending of the Catholic and the Hindu ideas. In her study of the Christians of Kerala, Visvanathan (1999:6) too finds that the merging of the Hindu and the Christian customs to be most evident in the construction of a house.

The rituals carried out by the Catholics are not a mere remnant of their past. Rather they are woven into the very fabric of their socio-religious world, and are modified and substituted with Christian symbols. Thus, there is both discontinuity to the extent that the object of worship is the Christian divinity and continuity with the retention of native rituals. This is further explored with the beliefs and rituals related to auspiciousness and evil in the next chapter.

The native rituals related to agricultural activity invariably take place in the sphere of the church. The prevalent practice in any village is that the temple becomes the meeting ground for community activities. Likewise the church becomes the meeting place for
community activities of the Catholics. Churches replacing temples as the focus of the socio-religious life of the community, the Catholics have reconstructed their socio-cultural system around the 'new' place of worship.

The foregoing description reveals that conversion to an 'alien' religion has not resulted in complete replacement of the native rituals, beliefs and practices. Instead every agricultural activity and allied activities are accompanied by a Christian prayer, sanctification with the holy water and the tolling of the church bell. These Christian signs and symbols have become an integral part of their native ritual procedure.

Conclusion

All the rituals described seem to suggest they are primarily cultural in the sense that both the Hindus and the Catholics observe them. Whatever differences highlighted are marginal to the overall ritual performances. We need to account why they are common to both the communities and why is it that there are marginal differences.

The unity in the rituals can be accounted in terms of the context in which these rituals are performed. This context is constructed by occupational needs. The Tamil Catholics under our study are largely rural and their occupation is agriculture and/or related arts and crafts. These occupations are studded with many rituals, which are religious in character. When Christianity took roots in India it did not alter the occupational pattern of the people drastically. Since occupations and rituals associated with them are marginal to the core of the religious practices, Christianity did not present an entirely different set of rituals for the Catholics to follow. Continuing with an old occupation and following a new religion, the Catholics faced a religious vacuum when
they sought for religious symbols and rituals to cope with the vagaries of nature. The natural option was to continue with the traditional practices.

In doing so, they could not adopt them in totality. Wherever these traditional rituals are tied to Hindu deities they replaced them with parallels from Christianity. For instance, Mary replaces Mariamma of the Hindus in the rituals of rain. However, there were some rituals which are not tied to any explicit religious symbols, such as those practices avoiding certain days, months and directions for sowing, harvesting, etc., and such rituals were adopted in totality.

When one considers the response of the Church to all these ritual practices, one observes a specific pattern. Initially, the Church considered these types of rituals as cultural and private to the Catholics as they were not practised in the sacred sphere of the church. The Catholics felt the need to relate some of these rituals to their newly acquired faith and began to Christianise some of these rituals. Subsequently they sought and got the services of the kooyilpiLLai for some of the rituals.

In the recent times, especially after the Second Vatican Council when the Church decided to integrate with the local culture of the believers, the Church has devised a new set of rituals for the occupational context of the Catholics. Thus, we find the poMkal celebration having become an integral part of the Catholic faith and practices with supporting Christian theology.

It is important to note that indigenisation is not limited to certain rituals and completed at one point of time. What emerges from the present study is that there is a ‘process,’ an unending dynamism, an urge and a need that enable the Church to integrate people and their beliefs and practices amidst differences.
Of course, these existential conditions are not without their predicaments. There are many such moments in the life and practices of Catholics. Let us consider the rituals performed by the Catholics at the time of house construction. When the foundation is laid, the builder has his set of rituals. Catholics too have a ritual, which is probably of a recent origin: The priest says a prayer and sprinkles holy water on the foundation pit. As Catholics, they would like to have the Christian ritual and at the same time they are not alien to the beliefs surrounding the rituals performed by the Hindu builder. They choose to have both the rituals performed and the Church does not object.

When they choose to have both the rituals, it is only to be expected that the Catholic privilege their faith, for which the Hindu builder does not have any objection. Thus, faiths seek to establish an equilibrium: While the Catholics grant a space for the Hindu rituals, the Hindus accept an adjustment in time sequence. This is not always and entirely a cultural process. It also depends on the status of person in the village: The owner of the house being the key person, his faith is granted the place of pre-eminence.

Finding the Christian parallels for traditional rituals was the effort of the Catholics in the initial stage. Now, inspired by new theologies and strengthened by the openness of the Church expressed through the Second Vatican Council, the clergy play a more active role in performing that role. More and more traditional practices performed in the domestic and social sphere are being brought into religious sphere.
Endnotes

1. *nalleer kaTTutal* is a ‘mock’ ploughing. All those having a pair of oxen and ploughs gather in a common place, which may or may not be cultivable land, and plough the ground superficially. Those not having these instruments of production also join the gathering as an integral part of the peasant community.

2. One woman reported that her dead mother-in-law appears in her dream before the time of sowing and instructs her on what kind of seeds to be sown and where.

3. According to the lady, ‘The year before had been a trying year; we faced lot of difficulties. I wish that all our difficulties are trampled upon as the people walk on the ash and we hope for a year of blessing.’

4. The number of threads worn varies with the man’s marital status. For example, an unmarried man wears three threads rolled together, called half pair; the married man wears six threads, called one pair; a man with children wears nine threads, called one and half pairs; and the man with grand children wears twelve threads, called two pairs. The father ties the thread for the son. For married men the father-in-law ties the thread the first year and then on they tie it for themselves.

5. Eliade (1959:54-56) presents a detailed cosmogonic myth related to building construction and blood sacrifice. ‘If a “construction” is to endure (be it house, temple, tool, etc.), it must be animated, that is, it must receive life and soul.’ Thus, blood sacrifice is perceived as life giving force and an important ritual connected to house-building.
5.1 Prayer in the church before the Ritual of poMkal

5.1 Thanking God as the poMkal Pot Boils Over