Chapter 4

THE RITUAL WORLD OF THE MUKKUVA COMMUNITY

4.1 RITUAL IN PERSPECTIVE

The notion of ritual has been central to research in the fields of religion and culture for many decades. This is because rituals, as symbolic actions, makes observable the worldview of a people, including their view of the realm of the sacred. Victor Turner uses the term ritual to refer to "prescribed formal behaviour for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings or power".1 The insight of Carl Jung on the role of the collective unconscious in the formation of rituals has helped to validate the 'ritual route' to study religion.2 Having a collective performative dimension, rituals are accepted as useful keys to grasp the cosmological/religious contours of a community.3

Generally ritual is regarded as action that is performed, and is distinguished from the conceptual aspects of religion such as beliefs, creeds, and doctrines. Durkheim tried to analyze religion as both beliefs and rites, thus giving analytic primacy to beliefs. However, a clear distinction between thought and action does not resonate with the experience of people not having a


3 A more elaborate definition, along similar lines, is given by Zuesse; according to him ritual refers to "those conscious and voluntary, repetitious and stylized symbolic bodily actions that are centred on cosmic structures and/or sacred presences". See Encyclopedia of Religion, s.v. "Ritual".

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speculative tradition. For them rituals constitute the medium through which both conceptual and
behavioural components get integrated. Ritual, as Catherine Bell puts it, "is a type of critical
juncture wherein some pair of opposing social or cultural forces come together. Examples include
the ritual integration of belief and behaviour, tradition and change, order and chaos, the individual
and the group, subjectivity and objectivity, nature and culture, the real and the imaginative
ideal". Thus rituals serve as a window on the inner dynamics by which people make and remake
their sacred world.

The term ritual is widely used in disciplines like cultural anthropology, sociology or theology,
but is not always uniformly understood. Some use it in a broad sense to refer to all 'culturally
defined sets of behaviour' irrespective of their explicit religious or social content. Sociology of
everyday life tries to understand rituals in a system of daily human interaction. All symbolical
dimension of human behaviour becomes ritual here. On the other hand, traditional theologians
tend to link rituals narrowly with liturgical ceremonies and religious cult. This chapter prefers
to take an intermediate position. Firstly, the cultural and religious horizons seem to interpenetrate
in the realm of rituals, thus making it difficult to stamp certain rituals as purely religious and
others non-religious. Secondly, rituals are viewed not only as means to express collective beliefs
and ideals of the community, but also, simultaneously, to generate and experience the same.

This chapter does not concern with the rites of passage in the life of individual Mukkuvar as
these are too subsumed into the sacramental framework of Catholicism. So the broad categories


Roy Turner, ed., Ethnomethodology, Middlesex: Penguin, 1974, etc.

6 Arnold Van Gennep, The Rites of Passage, translated by M.B.Vizedom and G.L.Caffee,
of occupational rituals, domestic rituals, and curative rituals are used as a framework. The approach involves three main steps; a) considering the observed features of the ritual in the context of everyday life; b) considering the explanations or interpretations of the rituals by knowledgeable persons in the community; c) working out broader associations with established viewpoints and drawing inferences.

4.1.1 Fishing as Ritual Performance

Anthropologists have classified traditional human societies, based on the methods in securing food, into different categories. Raymond Firth distinguishes four major types: (a) food gatherers, hunters and fishers, (b) pastoralists, (c) agriculturalists, (d) artisans. Fishing is fundamentally a hunting and gathering operation. Quite contrary to an agrarian context the psyche of a fishing community would display a gambling instinct. Fishing in the traditional way is a short-term operation that is usually complete in a day or two. There are days when the catch is plentiful, but also days when the net is empty. This naturally makes them firm believers in luck or fate or providence, leading to practices often interpreted superstitious. However these beliefs and practices help them to survive amidst risk and danger.

Fishing, for the Mukkuvar, is more than catching fish from the sea, whether for own consumption or for the market. For them it is the most central human activity that expresses their basic beliefs and concerns, their very identity and life orientation. The series of ritual acts meticulously performed in a fishing expedition has significance that is not confined to fishing alone. It acts as the interlinking thread of every aspect life. It is a sacred activity. In and through this they

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make and remake their world which encompasses every aspect including what is called religious. It is in this rich sense that fishing is termed a *Ritual Performance*.

There are basically two types of fishing operation, from a ritual point of view: the first is controlled mainly from the shore, and is done in shallow waters close to the shore. The second type takes the crew far out into the deep waters. *Kampaivala* (shore-seine) is a typical example of the former, while hook and line fishing as well as the use of various gill nets and trawl nets fall in the second category. Technological innovations like use of plywood or fibre glass *vallams*, and out-board engines, have transformed the latter type of operation in the recent past, though the age-old *katjumačam* continues to be popular.

Both types of fishing display rituals that are specific to the operation. *Kampaivala* is one of the important conventional methods of fishing, and is confined to the sea very close to the shore. It involves casting of the net using a *vallam* and then pulling it ashore by hand from the two ends. Two teams of twenty to forty people each are engaged in this operation. This is the most collective form of fishing operation which can accommodate both old and young people. Singing folk songs adds rhythm to the work. These features have helped to maintain the method of *kampaivala* practically unchanged over generations. This is very prevalent in the district of Thiruvananthapuram, mainly due to the sudden sloping of the sea bed.

*Eilamidal* is a ritual forming part of the *Kampaivala* operation. It is the rhythmic singing of folk songs or other rhymes by the crew members pulling the shore-seine net (*kampaivala*); it is also done when they push the boat out into the sea, or when they pull it ashore. (It is called *āmbayidal* in some places).
A sample of *eilamidal* at Vizhinjam is as follows:

**start** (in slow rhythm):

*eilavale, lovalamma, eilavale, lovalamma*

*lovalamma, eilavale, .....*

**chorus:** *eilavale*

**middle:**

*eilelayya, elavalayya, õvalayya, oveilayya*

*eilelayya, elavalayya, .....*

**chorus:** *eilavale*

**end** (in fast rhythm, when the net is close to the shore):  

*õvale,õvale, õvale...*

*õvale, õvale, õvale...*

(in unison, no chorus)

*Eilamidal* is a very valuable source material in understanding the religious world of the Mukkuvar. In the relative absence of historical documents or written literature, this *oral literature* of *eilamidal* makes available an unbroken tradition of the Mukkuva past handed down through generations with least corruption. Two reasons support this view: shore-seine constitutes a very traditional mode of fishing that has undergone little change; change is slow to come in this mode of fishing due to the big number of people, especially the elders, actively involved. Second, the same rhymes are being used in the Hindu fishing villages too with little variation. In the Tamilnadu Christian villages the rhymes have been consciously modified to give a Christian
flavour; so too among the Muslim fishermen. However, the tradition is preserved unchanged among the Mukkuvar of Vizhinjam.

"Mukkuvanu meen pattāl muthappayil kāṇgū" (while fishing is in progress, Mukkuvan sees only the float) is a popular saying. Persons and relationships all vanish while the catch absorbs him fully. This is evident in the ritual of chēluparachil at the end of every fishing operation, particularly the shore-seine or kampavala operation. As soon as the catch is pulled ashore the crew members stand around and review every aspect of the operation - the manner of work, the timing chosen for casting the net, the depth and direction, the coordination, etc. It is a sort of ritual evaluation, the Mukkuva way, and may take an aggressive turn if the catch is poor. The blame naturally falls on somebody or other. To an outsider it may appear a violent group clash where all aggressive and filthy language and gesture is liberally employed. In ten or fifteen minutes the 'exercise' is over, and the gang members are again busy in their routine work - sorting the fish for auction, cleaning the net, etc. The effect of chēluparachil is not allowed to carry over and affect their relationships; what happens in the sea is not to be carried ashore, they say. However, chēluparachil serves a tremendous social-psychological function by providing a ritual forum for catharsis, especially after an aborted fishing operation.

One cannot miss observing fishermen removing their turban from the head and tying it around the waist while launching the vallam into the sea. The turbans are again back on their heads once they cross the breakers. "Kadalamma does not like it", they say, and if the turban is not removed she will push the boat back to the shore in fury, they believe. Removing the turban is an act of paying homage to someone, according to the Kerala custom. One is not supposed to wear chappals on board, or carry any cash while going fishing; Kadalamma will take him for a rich

This aspect will further be analyzed in Chapter 5 below.
man if he has money in hand, and so will not be generous with him. (But this practice is slowly disappearing due to the changing pattern of work.) As the vallam reaches the front of the old church, the crew members pause for a while, bow and pay homage to the Amma (Cintāthira Māta, the patroness of the church).  

To get a good catch is the immediate goal of fishing, and so they do everything possible to ensure that. Some of the rituals connected with the launching of a new boat or the inauguration of a new craft or engine, are intended for this purpose. A new gear or engine is taken to the priest to be blessed, and there will be distribution of plantains and pachāru on the beach. Coconut is broken and distributed together with jaggery. One ritual never omitted is nīrakudam marikkal (overturning a filled up pot); as a new gear or engine is taken out from the house to the sea-shore, the one carrying it overturns with his feet a pot filled with water that is kept at the door. The one carrying it should not look back after that. In the south Indian culture a pot that is full and overflowing is the sign of prosperity and plenty, and to the Mukkuvar it is an auspicious act to ensure a bumper catch.

4.1.2 Some Occupational Beliefs

Belief in omen, good and bad, and rituals associated with it, are very powerful in the life of a Mukkuvan. Cat, dog, empty pot, woman, etc., are some key symbols here.

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9) The cult of Cintāthira Māta will be discussed in chapter 5 below.

10) The same ritual is used also in marriage ceremony in the community; the pot kept in the yard is hit with the feet and overturned by the bridegroom as the new couple enter the house.
*Woman* constitutes an ambivalent relationship to fishing and to fishermen. The sea is always feminine; she is *Kadalamma*. But fishing has ever remained a male centred activity. The sea shore is the occupational world of the menfolk, and so women are conspicuously absent from there. The exception is the presence of elderly fish vending women who come to buy fish at the landing centre. Women avoid the beach especially when fishing is in progress. It is taboo for women to enter the *vallam* and go into the sea, except on a Christmas day. *Kadalamma* may get angry and the *vallam* may capsize if women enter it, Mukkuvar believe, and they narrate many instances of such occurrence even on a Christmas day. 11 Women should not stand on the beach with their hair dishevelled; "*Kadalamma* does not like that". There appears to be an element of hostility in the relationship between *Kadalamma* and women. To see a woman like that on his way to fishing is bad omen for a fisherman. To see a widow on the way is considered still worse.

The Mukkuva women too are very conscientious about the taboos and prohibitions imposed upon them regarding the sea. Interviews with women informants reveal how powerfully they have internalized these prescriptive norms. This practice may be related to the community's norms of purity and pollution. Period of menstruation will be defiling to *Kadalamma*, they believe. If reverence characterizes the attitude of the menfolk to the sea, it is the sense of purity and pollution that seems to characterize that of women.

Another sight to be avoided on the way to fishing is an empty pot. This sight is common since women frequent the path with empty pots to fetch water. One can see these women suddenly hiding their pot aside if they happen to see a man on his way for fishing. If the pot is full, however, it is good omen.

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11 Such taboos exist also in fishing communities elsewhere, as ethnographic records reveal. See Firth, *Human Types*, p.48.
While walking to the beach for fishing one is not supposed to look back on the way. For the same reason no one should call a fisherman from behind when he is on his way to work. While the men are out in the sea, women and children back home are expected to maintain certain decorum; no crying or quarrel should take place in the house. If children happen to cry mothers would rebuke them saying their father is out in the sea.

Belief in śāpam (curse) is prevalent in the community, and pūcha śāpam (cat-curse) is the most common one. Cat assumes an important role in connection with fishing. A popular saying is "pūcha vēṭṭa pulikka vēṭṭa; nāy vēṭṭa nalla vēṭṭa" (a cat crossing the path is bad omen; a dog crossing the path is good omen). While going for fishing if a cat is seen crossing the path or coming in the opposite direction, it is considered bad omen. If it happens to be a black cat, the day's work itself may be called off. But the opposite is the case with dog; it is good omen to see a dog. Cat is not supposed to eat raw fish kept at home; if it does, "cat curse" (pūcha śāpam) may result. This is the reason why even the waste pieces of raw fish are not thrown to the cat. If there is no good catch for a few days Mukkuvar usually conclude that there has been cat-curse, and would resort to remedial measures.

Other śāpams also are believed to be operative in coastal life. Vījisāpam or nāvēru (= curse of calling or of the tongue), kampēru or kaṇṇupedal (= evil eye), gū dobravam (= harm by evil spirits), etc., are some common ones. Even if one gets plenty of fish no one is supposed to say 'plenty of fish'; this may result in his not getting fish any more. Such utterances usually lead to quarrels on the beach. Mukkuvar believe in the power of evil spirits, that they can do harm to human beings and bring them ill luck. If there has been an unexpected poor catch they often say
"meen kadathikajanju" (= some one has made the fish vanish, meaning that somebody has performed *mantravādam* (sorcery) against him.\(^{12}\)

These beliefs, however, are not limited to the fishing context alone; these are more or less present in every aspect of their life, both domestic and social. If individuals suffer from ill-health, or families suffer from misfortune, they easily conclude that it is due to *kamperu*, or *kadalpēdi* (sea-fright) or *mantravādam*. *Kadalpēdi* is often related to their belief in *peiy*, a term they use to refer to the spirit of the dead that can haunt and disturb a living person. If someone gets a fright in the sea, they say "*cheythan adichu*" (he is possessed by the spirit).

Fishermen of all age groups are in the habit of chewing betel leaves and spitting red liberally, whether on the beach or on the road. Some say it helps to keep them awake and alert for work at odd hours of the night. To many it is not a bad habit at all; it is a necessary ritual to protect them from evil spirits. While walking home after work at odd hours of the night evil spirits may disturb them; but a mouthful of betel juice in full force will keep them away, Mukkuvar believe.\(^{13}\)

4.1.3 Rituals Related to Death and the Life After

Death and rituals related to the dead assume great importance among the Mukkuvar, probably because of the ever impending danger of death over a marine fisherman. This section deals with important rituals related to death, burial and remembrance of the dead.

\(^{12}\) For detailed discussion on *mantravādam*, see below under section 2.0

\(^{13}\) The same practice (and belief) is found in fishing communities elsewhere; see A. Andrews, *Kadal Muthu*, p.95. Similar practices exist also among the early Christian settlers in North Kerala.
Death, for the Mukkuvar, is very much a community event. Singing and reciting prayers near the dying man is an age-old custom. The few elders who are experts are invited to the house for this ritual, but theirs is a vanishing tribe. During chiṟa kākkal which lasts for seven days, close relatives of the dead person stay in mourning; they don't go for work nor take bath during this period. If one who dies is a married man, the wife has to go through a series of rituals; mussionkayidal (placing the veil) means covering the head of the woman with a white cloth by the sister of the dead man, as the body is being prepared for burial. On the seventh day both thāliyūral and muranadathal take place; the brother of the dead man breaks off the tali (wedding necklace, the symbol of married state), of the woman. Then the sister of the dead man applies oil on the head of the woman and takes her for bath and gives her new clothing; this is called muranadathal.

An account by Thurston a century ago regarding the funeral rites of the Hindu Mukkuvar would throw more light on these practices. He writes:

The dead are as a rule buried.... The corpse is bathed in fresh water, decorated, and placed on a bier. The widow then approaches, and with a cloth over her head, cuts her tali off, and places it by the side of the corpse.... Death pollution is observed for seven days, during which the son abstains from salt and tamarind.... On the eighth day, or sometimes the fourteenth day, the final death ceremony is performed.... The eldest son is expected to abstain from shaving his head for six months or a year.\(^{14}\)

These customs are slowly disappearing, though. Some look upon these customs as evils to be done away with. There are also complaints that customs like thāliyūral may free the woman for a loose life, especially if her married life was not a happy one.

\(^{14}\) Thurston and Rangachari, Castes and Tribes of Southern India, Vol. V, p.116

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One can see influence of the traditional customs even in the manifest mode of religious practices. In fact many a Christian ritual has got incorporated into the traditional ritual configuration of the community. For instance, 'mass for the dead at any auspicious occasion' seems to be a prevalent practice. To call a priest to say mass for the dead is a universal Catholic custom, but at Vizhinjam the priest has to say three or four masses, often sung, almost everyday. Any special mass invariably means mass for the dead. A mass in honour of the dead ancestors is a must before any auspicious event takes place in the family, viz. marriage, moving in to a new house, or joining a new job. The idea of invoking the spirits of the ancestors and seeking their blessings thus indicate strong residues of ancestor worship from a tribal past.

The ritual of kuzhi othal (blessing of the grave) at Vizhinjam is also revealing. It coincides with the All Souls Day that is celebrated on November 2 in the Catholic tradition. Elaborate preparations in the cemetery begin the previous day itself; people are seen busy carrying wet sand from the sea shore or red mud, to re-make the graves of their dear departed ones, at a spot that is real or imaginary in the cemetery. On the day of the blessing (kuzhi othal) the cemetery bears a festive look, with green branches and flowers; each grave is lit up with candles and agarbathis, and the relatives squat around it patiently waiting for their turn. The priest, accompanied by a sacristan and a choir, moves from grave to grave to bless it with a few prayers and hymns. One tomb is blessed repeatedly as many times as there are coupons, each costing five rupees. It is not unusual to see the same grave being blessed over and over depending on the number of coupons the family members have bought.
The Mukkuva beliefs relate the fate of the dead with the concept of peiy, muni, etc.\textsuperscript{15} The souls of those who die a premature death, like death in the sea, are believed to wander on this earth as peiy, and may disturb the living relatives as bādha (possession by the spirits of the dead). Therefore prayers and masses and other rituals are offered for their speedy deliverance. This belief may explain partly why fishermen worry more about getting the body of those who die at the sea, than death itself, to ensure that the body gets due rituals at burial. Hindu fishermen at Panathura offer pūjās and rituals to the souls of the dead for days after death, aimed at preventing them from becoming peiy-piśāṣu (demon) and elevating them into the divine pantheon. Little shrines built around their houses are meant 'to settle the ancestors'. In the Catholic tradition such 'shrines' are transferred to the common cemetery, with little change in the basic belief system.

When fishermen are reported missing in the sea during rough weather (which is a frequent occurrence during every monsoon), people say he has been taken by kadal muni. In the words of a woman respondent,

\begin{quote}
Muni takes them to some far away mountain and keep there. He would teach them many techniques like the art of medicine and healing. They may sometimes come back to the village disguised as lata guru (wandering medicine man). I myself had one such experience....\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

That those who are dead continue to exist, either as peiy or as wandering medicine men or any other, is a deep belief in the Mukkuva mind. What is implied here is a belief in a mode of

\textsuperscript{15} While studying the Kallar caste of Tamilnadu Dumont observes that there are two categories of spirits in general, gods and demons. Gods are spirits that receive a regular cult, and are usually confined to a temple or cult place. Demons are believed to be wandering and not confined to a temple or cult place. There are two categories of demons: peiy and muni. Peiy have the appearance and stature of human beings, but are rarely seen; muni (literally, saint or ascetic) are gigantic figures with terrifying look, huge teeth and braided hair. The latter haunt trees or paths, and are more powerful than peiy. See Dumont, \textit{A South Indian Sub-caste}, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986, pp.449 ff. The Mukkuvar seem to share many aspects of the same belief system.

\textsuperscript{16} Personal interview with informant.
existence after life, and a hope that death is not the end of it all. This hope may be the driving force behind the relentless struggle of the fishing community in the face of the impending danger of death every moment.

4.1.4 Rituals as Response to Everyday Needs

The Mukkuvar resort to a wide range of ritual practices, connected with fishing and other aspects of life, thus vaguely revealing their belief system and worldview. Many of these are remedial measures to undo the effects of evil, or to ward off evil and to ensure good luck. These range from simple prayers and offerings in the church to invoking the divinities of non-christian temples/mosques, and resorting to mantraṇadām. Interviews with a wide spectrum of people made it clear that the rationale for most of these ritual practices lies in oblivion. Some key rituals and their significance will be discussed here.

Kamperu nokkal (checking for evil eye) is usually done in two ways. a) Some table salt, some mustard seed, the outer peel of onion, and some green chilly (3 or 9 in number) are bundled up in a paper and moved around the affected person in a twirling motion; then it is spit upon three times and thrown into glowing embers of charcoal. If it bursts and a foul smell emanates, then people conclude there has been kamperu. b) some chinese salt is taken and moved around the affected person in a twirling motion as in (a), and placed on glowing embers of charcoal made from three coconut shells having holes. The salt melts in the heat and spreads. People watch the abstract shape of the spread and judge if there has been a kamperu. Then the spread is taken to a cross-road and is left in the middle of the road to be trampled upon.
One common practice still prevalent connected with fishing is *erikkila adikkal* (beating with a twig of *erikku* plant). If a gear does not bring any catch for a few days the owner concludes that some evil has befallen, and so decides on this ritual. The fishing gear is kept in a room and beaten violently by a group of young boys/men in total nakedness, shouting *pō pīśāše* (go, you evil spirit), along with all imaginable filthy words.\(^{17}\) Pouring *vayampu* paste, mixed with `holy water', over the gear is another ritual used especially in case of *pūcha sāpam*. Traditionally the paste used to be prepared in coconut milk, which in course of time, got replaced by `holy water'. The grinding of the *vayampu* has to be done by a young girl who has not attained puberty.\(^{18}\)

*Nercha* (holy offering) is a common practice that takes on various forms. During the parish festival one can see an inflow of *salt and pepper nercha* at the statue of *Cintāthira Māta*. There are also other forms like *kaṇṭinercha*, (distribution of rice porridge), *mūḍāvinercha* (dressing up the statue of our lady with a new head cloth), as well as offering items like a token *vallam* made of silver.

*Nercha* is in no way limited to the church either; the christian Mukkuvar offer various *nerchas* both at the nearby Hindu temples as well as at the Muslim shrine. In order to recover something that is lost they readily offer *randu vedi* (*randu* = two; *vedi* = ritual firing of gun shots in temples by devotees, or as part of temple rituals) at the Amman temple in the Thajāthēru street. "I will

\(^{17}\) *Erikku* has an important place in many *mantric* rituals in the Hindu tradition; its wood or roots or flowers are prescribed in many rituals, especially to propitiate *Kāli*, *Bhagavathy* or *Gaṇapathy*. All the 27 stars (*nāḍ*) have a corresponding tree (*nakṣatra vṛikṣa*) in the *mantric* tradition; *erikku* is the tree for *tiruvōgam*.

\(^{18}\) In some Mukkuvar villages another ritual is resorted to, especially when there is no favourable wind for fishing. One person would tie the root of a particular tree on to his leg, and run at night, naked, in the direction in which they want the wind to blow. He would recite the Christian credal formula in the reverse while running.
teach you a lesson; I have offered a nercha at the Thaṭṭātheru temple", one may hear a Mukkuvan saying. They also offer 'oil and wig' (enpayum thriryum) at the same temple to receive favours. Fish vending women and cyclists, on their way to the inland markets, unfailingly stop at the temple and make their offerings; on their way back too, they make offerings of thanksgiving for the success of the day's business. According to the temple committee, a major portion of the cash collection at the temple comes from the Christian community of Mukkuvar.

The nercha extends beyond the temple to the Muslim shrine too. The two tombs of Muslim saints at Karimpaljikara, the southern end of Vizhinjam, preserved in an ancient shrine on the beach, together with the miraculous well nearby, is a sacred spot not only to the muslims but also to the Christian Mukkuvar. "Karimpaljikara uppa will show you" is an utterance one hears at times, exposing the way of taking revenge upon another. The 'bucket and rope' (pəjayum kayarum) nercha at the well is said to be effective for children's illness.

4.2 MANTRAVĀDAM - ITS ROLE IN MUKKUVA RITUALS

Protection against evil is one major preoccupation of Mukkuva households; for they believe their misfortune is largely due to the activity of evil spirits active all around them. Since Mantravādam is usually done in secrecy, rarely people admit to its use. This aspect makes the inquiry into this phenomenon quite difficult. But closer inquiry revealed that practically every Mukkuvan is under the sway of it some way or other.

19 The vedi nercha twice a week at the temple has been suspended after the communal clashes at Vizhinjam in 1995.

20 Personal interview with Muthukrishnan, secretary of the temple committee.
If one *vallam* gets a bumper catch while others return empty, the natural conclusion on the beach is that he has used *mantravādam*. "Mantravadathil meen paduthatha" (the catch is through *mantravādam*), they say. Similarly, if a fishing operation gets aborted they say the fish has been 'transported' (*meen kadathikkalanju*). *Mantravadis* are able to propitiate *Kadal Vairavan* and to stir up the sea to prevent a good catch, people believe. *Vairavan* is the protector or 'supervisor' of fish in the sea, according to an Arayan informant.²¹ Though usually done in secrecy, *eilass* tied to gear or to *vallam* is quite common.²² This is also worn by persons on the body for the same reason. Belief in the efficacy of *mantram* is a central part of the ritual world of Mukkuvar as its prevalent practice testifies.

*Mantravādam* is usually associated with Hindu religion; but as is practised by the Mukkuvar it can be as per the Hindu system or a unique Christian system. Hindu *mantravadis* in nearby villages are approached in times of need, or they are brought in to the house in secrecy. There are also many Christian Mukkuvar practising as *mantravadis*, in either one or both traditions. Mariadasan, 30, a practicing Mukkuva *manravadi*, has been using both systems. "To mix up both traditions is dangerous", says he; "one has to stick to any one tradition. I am planning to give up the Hindu line".

The difference between the two traditions is an interesting area to look into. The Hindu tradition is said to be based on the Hindu Purāṇas, and invokes Hindu divinities like Śiva, Vairavan, Kāli.

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²¹ The word *Vairavan (Bhairavan)* means frightful or terrible. It is the name of one of the eight *ugra* or *ghora* forms of Rudra-Śiva, specially worshipped by outcaste groups. See Margaret and James Stutley, *A Dictionary of Hinduism: Its Mythology. Folklore and Development 1500 BC - AD 1500*, Bombay, Allied Publishing Pvt. Ltd., 1977.

²² *Eilass* refers to *mantras* written on a copper foil and enclosed in a metal casket/case. It may be translated as *amulet* used in charms. In anthropological usage a charm which has a protective function is an amulet, while a charm that carries good fortune is a talisman.
Durgā, Mohini, Bhagavat and Mādan. It is more expensive also since the elaborate rituals prescribe numerous ritual materials and associated settings (pūjāvidhi). Eg. Kālam, sinduram, samprani, flower, paneer, coconut, jaggery, grapes, cock, toddy, etc. "The Hindu gods need to be fed sumptuously, and some may require even blood", says Mariadasan. Besides, it may also require tapam irippu (practice of austerity for a specified period) and recitation of the mantra for a specified number of times, eg. 108 times for four consecutive days, or 1008 times or 5008 times, etc. Each god or goddess may have its own special fields and requirements too. To get a bumper catch of fish Bhairavan is invoked, for he is believed to make the sea rough or calm, thus controlling fishing.Śiva is mentioned in almost all mantras irrespective of the specific divinity invoked. There is a general belief that Hindu mantra is more effective if the aim is to take revenge on somebody or to harm somebody. The fruit of mantra is referred to as nanmai (=good result); incidently the same term is used to refer to holy communion in the Catholic tradition.

Christian mantra is, on the other hand, is much simpler and less expensive. The material requirements are usually limited to a set of three candles and two agarbathis. It does not require tapam; one only needs to meditate and recite the mantra. Usually invoked are Christian saints like St. Antony, St. Michael, St. Sebastian, or at times the cross itself. The general belief is that Christian mantra can out-do the power of Hindu mantra.

Where have the Christian mantra learned the art from, one may ask. Davidson, 45, says he went to the forest and learned it from a forest dweller. Mariadasan learned the first lessons from

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23 Hindu fishermen pay homage to Vairavan before they enter the sea, whether for fishing or for a bath, according to Araya informants.

24 Appendix gives samples of some Christian mantras.
his elder brother, and later from a Hindu guru. Varghese says he spent a year under a guru in Tamilnadu. The learning, for most, has been from Hindu gurus. All believe firmly in the saying, *Guruvilla vidya kurjju vidya* (skill learned not under a guru is useless skill). There are also many books related to *mantravādam*, in Tamil or in Malayalam, in circulation at Vizhinjam. Christian *mantrams* are either kept in handwritten collections or are handed down by oral tradition.

A distinction is often made between *salmmantravādam* (done for good) and *durmantravādam* (done to do harm). In popular understanding the distinction does not seem to be very significant. However, there is a common belief that what is earned through *mantram* will be lost sevenfold; "*mantram kondu kijjyarthu ézhu madangu pōkum*". Because of this the general practice is to spend such money immediately to buy a plot of land, and never to keep it as liquid cash.

4.2.1 Christian *Mantravādam*?

Mukkuvar resort to *mantravādam* for either of the three reasons: to bring good luck, whether in fishing or elsewhere; to remove or to ward off evil, especially caused by gods of other religions (*maṟujāti daivangaḷ kūṭ iygal*); and to harm one’s enemy. Many admitted that they were victims of the third, though nobody would admit practising it that way.

There is a general disapproval of all *mantravādam* in the Christian community; hence the extreme secrecy with which it is practised. "*Mantram, whether Hindu or Christian, is always sinful. But since people already regard me as a mantravadi, and since this has become my profession, I cannot help continuing it*, confesses Mariadasan." There is a feeling of guilt implied in this

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25 Personal interview with informant.
confession, which may be true for most Christians who practise it or who use the services of practitioners. No wonder, initial queries about it always met with a plain denial "Oh no, we never practise it; Hindus use mantravādam, we are Christians!". Yet, in moments of utter helplessness Christians too find no other way.

The plate of St. Antony and the wheel of St. Michael are clear examples of Mukkuva attempt to synthesize the mantric tradition with Catholic practices in a way that becomes meaningful to the community.

4.2.1.1 St. Antony's Plate (Antoqiār chit)

This is a copper foil of square size, 3 1/2 x 3 1/2 inches, with a mantram written on it with a nail. The mantram is addressed to St. Antony asking for a particular favour, or, more often, to get a good catch. In either case it seeks protection from evil spirits, say Emili Vaidyan who has been practising it for many years. After writing, the foil is placed before the picture of St. Antony and prayed upon for 13 days, and then is handed over to the devotee. While writing, the big finger of the right foot has to be firmly pressed on the floor, insists Emili Vaidyan. If the foil thus prayed upon is kept in the house, it would keep evil spirits away, the Mukkuvar believe, or if it is tied to the net, it would ensure a good catch. Frequently the foil is enclosed in a metallic casket (eilas) to be worn by the devotee in his/her body. Emili Vaidyan refers to a prayer manual in Tamil, Antoqiār ātru samhāra mālai (St. Antony's prayer for the destruction of the enemy), as giving the basic pattern, but a close scrutiny reveals that the plate and the mantra are modelled after Hindu yantras.

26 Personal interview with Emili Vaidyan.
A close look at mantra I (see appendix) would reveal the following:

- the general structure is the same as that of any Hindu mantra
- invoked in the mantra are St. Antony (once), holy cross (twice), Lord Jesus (once)
- Śiva is mentioned four times in the mantra
- the divinities are invoked asking for leading all fish into the specified net of the devotee, and to protect the net.

Why is Śiva, a Hindu god, placed along with St. Antony and Lord Jesus in the mantra? Is it a deliberate act or an oversight? A plausible explanation would be that an existing mantra invoking Śiva was modified into a christian mantra for St. Antony; old elements might have escaped attention in the process.

St. Antony is considered a special patron by sea-going fishermen. "St. Antony has performed thirteen miracles (pūthuma) while Christ has only twelve to his credit; the thirteenth one is specially for helping us, Mukkuvar", says Emili Vaidyan.

4.2.1.2 The Wheel-Seat of St. Michael (Mikhēl mālakāyude iruppu cakram) [see fig. 6]

This consists of a diagram in the shape of a cross with blades between its arms, with 17 alphabets written in Malayalam in a designated pattern. To the untrained eye this may look like

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27 Śiva is essentially a non-Vedic god, but combines in turn various traditions; viz. the Indus Valley Paśupati, a tribal god of destruction, a Vrātya ascetic, the Agni of the Brāhmaṇas, and various other local divinities all grafted on to the Rudra of the RgVeda. See Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980 (1976), p.277.

28 Personal interview with Emili Vaidyan.
Fig. 6 CHAKRAM OF ST. MICHAEL
a jigsaw puzzle; but to the practitioner it is a very powerful mantra. If properly rearranged, the letters appear thus: vā ru ma ka ya ā ya tha vā, vā tha ja tha ra sa na vā, vā na sa mē khē la na vā, vā na la lu ru ma ru vā. Its meaning, as given by Panidasan, can be paraphrased as follows:

O heavenly person, you are the heavenly angel St. Michael
O holy person, make me also holy
You who are present in the pillar (wheel?)
By your holy cross remove from our path
All the evils of the wicked devil.

The cakram is also called mihēl mālakāyude kūdu vijju kūdu pāyunna vidya; it is the seat of Arch-angel Michael, built of letters in six angles, with a cross and four swords. St. Michael is believed to be sitting on it, hence the name. The wheel is ever rotating; it is alive. While rotating it cuts to pieces every enemy. So it is very powerful. This wheel-seat too, in its structure and symbolism, resembles yantra in the Hindu pattern.²⁹

4.2.1.3 Śatru Samhāra Māla [see fig. 7 and 8]

Most Mukkuva houses at Vizhinjam are adorned with a framed diagram of mystical lines and symbols, fixed over the outer door post. It resembles a yantra that is placed in a similar way in Hindu houses or shops, with the difference that the former are usually drawn on paper instead of a copper foil. (see figure) Inquiry with the householders show that they believe this diagram, if placed at the door of the house, would keep away all evil spirits. Some narrate stories of how they installed it at the advise of a friend or neighbour after some calamity like death or recurrent

²⁹ Personal interview with Panidasan, an active fisherman and a practitioner of mantravādam.
Fig.7 SATRUSAMHARAMALA: THE YANTRAM
illness occurred in the family. But hardly anybody knows the meaning of the diagram or how it operates.

The diagram shows a cross with jumbled alphabets written within, and pictures of three saints - St. Antony, St. James and St. Michael - and of Virgin Mary drawn around it. A picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus is placed in the centre of the cross. There are ten small patterns (or yantras) drawn around the cross; these resemble Hindu yantras, but an obvious variation is that the symbol of trishul has been transformed into a cross. [see fig. 7]

Efforts to 'read' the jumbled up alphabets in the diagram with the help of a mantravadi showed that there is repetition of a mūlamantram (basic mantra). Here the mūlamantram is an invocation of the Holy Trinity in the mantric pattern. The subsidiary mantras written in the columns of the cross are addressed to the three saints mentioned and to Mary as well as to the Heart of Jesus. There are four more mantras written at the four corners of the diagram, all addressed to the Holy Cross. Thus in total there are nine mantras around the cross, ignoring those in the small independent patterns. These mantras are written in readable language on the reverse of the sheet. [see fig. 8].

Directionality appears very important in the 'architecture' of this mantric diagram. The first mantra, written in the centre, itself refers to the four corners, eight directions, fifteen ends as well as the sky, the earth and the valleys, and asks for protection from all evil spirits coming from all these directions. This keppu (binding of the directions) is repeated in the next four mantras, specifically entrusting the charge of each corner to the three saints and to Virgin Mary - east to Antony, south to James, west to Michael, and north to Mary. The other four directions in
between are entrusted with the 'holy cross of the Lord'. After 'binding' the directions each mantra end invoking the Holy Trinity.\(^{30}\)

The complexity of this yantra is noteworthy, and its full meaning is yet to be deciphered. Its origin also remains obscure. That this infuses in the Mukkuva mind a very powerful sense of security and protection is a fact to be reckoned with.

4.2.2 Tantric Roots of Mantravādam

The discussion so far would lead to the following conclusions:

a. that mantravādam is still prevalent among the Mukkuvar, operating almost parallelly with official Catholic sacraments and rituals;

b. that there are practising mantravadis among Catholics too, besides many hindu mantravadis whom Mukkuvar go;

c. that many Christian mantrams are patterned after Hindu mantrams, even if addressed to Christian saints and symbols.

At this point it is necessary to look deeper into the cultural roots of mantravādam to get a better understanding of the powerful sway it has over the Mukkuvar.

\(^{30}\) The close link with the Indian tradition of āṣṭadikpālakas (regents of the eight cardinal points) is evident. Each cardinal point of the earth, according to traditional Indian geography, is being protected by a divine guardian or regent. Names of these regents vary. According to one list Indra protects the East, Varuṇa - West, Yama - South, Kuvera - North, Agni - South-East, Niruti - South-West, Vayu - North-West, Isara - North-East.
The *mantric* tradition in India goes back to very ancient times. Vedic chanting was part of the *hōma* sacrifice for Vedic Indians. Here *mantra* referred to any passage in the Samhitā portions of the Veda as opposed to the Brāhmaṇa or Upaniṣadic portions. But the term was also widely used in Buddhism as well as Jainism, and similar practices exist among the tribal groups in India.\(^{31}\) Scholars today accept the existence of pre-Vedic, or even anti-Vedic traditions of *mantric* formulas and rituals, closely associated with *Tantrism*. As a result, *Tantra* itself is often called *mantra sāstra*.\(^{32}\) The deep influence of the *mantric* tradition is evident not only in the various Indian religious systems, but also in ‘imported’ religions like Islam and Christianity.

*Mantra* is a sacred formula or a mystical verse, addressed to a deity to acquire super-human powers. It is composed of certain letters arranged in definite sequence of sounds; the relations of *vāra*, *nāda*, *bindu*, vowels and consonants in specified configurations manifest a particular deity. The central idea is that certain sounds uttered in the prescribed manner produce cosmic vibrations; this energy can be directed to serve specific purposes, good or evil, with the help of the deity. In a *mantra* this cosmic energy is believed to reside in pure form.

The efficacy of a *mantra* requires correct recitation according to *svara* (rhythm) and *vāpa* (sound), repeated a specified number of times and days. *Bija* (seed) are short, unetymological vocables such as *Hṝm*, *Kr̄m*, *Aim*, *Phaṭ*, etc.; each deity has his/her *bija* (e.g. *Kr̄m-* for *Kāli*, *Hṝm-* for *Māya*, *Rām-* for *Agni*, etc.).\(^{31}\) The *bija* is the microcosm of the deity and of the

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universe, and is one of the seven limbs of a mantra.\textsuperscript{34} A mantra is different from a prayer in the sense that in a prayer the worshipper chooses the words which would convey the real meaning of the prayer. But in a mantra the real meaning is the svarūpa (own form) of the particular deity which the face meaning may not convey.\textsuperscript{35} In mantric rituals 108 is a holy number; if all the desires are to be fulfilled, the māla (string of beads) used for the repetition of a mantra should have 108 beads.\textsuperscript{36}

Based on the purpose for which it is applied mantra is usually discussed under six categories (sat karmās): śānti (to heal sicknesses), vaśyam (to influence other people), stambhānam (to disable the enemy), vidvesaśam (to create enmity between two enemies), uccājanam (to drive away into exile), and māraṇam (to kill one's enemy). Each category has its own elaborate ritual system (ācāras) which are broadly considered under Dakṣiṇācāra and Vāmācāra. Use of pañcamakāra, i.e. rituals consisting of the five 'Ms' (madya-wine, māmsa-flesh, matsya-fish, mudra-cereals, maithuna-sexual union) is specific to Vāmācāra.\textsuperscript{37}

Keppu or Digbandanam (= binding the directions) is a central concept in mantric rituals; this refers to a preliminary meditation, meant to ensure spiritual safety during the time of the ritual from supernatural beings believed to inhabit the four directions. Mantras are sometimes

\textsuperscript{34} L.R. Chawdhri, Secrets of Yantra, Mantra, and Tantra, New Delhi: Sterling Publ., 1992, p.84.

\textsuperscript{35} The other limbs are: Rṣī, Chhandas, Kīṭaka, Śakti, Nyasa and Dhyana. See N.N. Bhattacharyya, Tantric Religion. Ch.11.

\textsuperscript{36} Woodroffe, Tantra Sastra, p.85.

\textsuperscript{37} Bharati, Tantric Tradition, p.145.

\textsuperscript{37} For a detailed discussion on the acaras, see Woodroffe, Tantra Sastra, 76 ff. Bagchi refers to three currents of Tantric tradition, Dakṣiṇa, Vāma, and Mādhyama; see Bagchi, "Evolution of the Tantras", in Studies on the Tantras, Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Institute of Culture, 1989, p.14 ff.
considered masculine, feminine or neutral. Usually masculine mantras end with hum, phat, etc. Feminine mantras end with tham or svaha. Neutral ones end in namah. The neutral mantras are said to lack the force and vitality of the other two.\textsuperscript{38}

Mantra is closely related to, and often used together with, yantra (also called cakra or mandala). Yantras are diagrams of geometrical patterns engraved or drawn on paper, metal, wood, stone or other substances, and used as religious/ mystical symbols, especially in the Tantric tradition. In worship a yantra is an abstract image of the deity, and so acts as a substitute for the deity’s iconographic image. When the deity is invoked by reciting the mantra and the prescribed japas and rituals, the yantra becomes ‘alive’ with the living presence of the deity. A yantra is considered a ‘dynamic’ symbol, while an anthropomorphic image remains ‘static’.\textsuperscript{39}

A yantra, being a linear configuration, has usually a centre and several concentric primal shapes like triangles, squares, circles, hexagrams, or rings of lous petals. A yantra should have written in it ten items or elements (daśangās). They are: jīvan, prāgnan, sakti, netram, srotam, yantragāyatri, mantragāyatri, prānapratīṣṭha, bhūtabījam, and dīkpālābījam. Each has its own symbol, eg. Sam, Soham, Hṝm, etc. There are specified positions and manner of writing these in the yantra; three methods usually followed are: sammukham (face to face - for good mantra), bahirmukhom (turned outward - for harmful purposes), and thiryangmukhom (written obliquely - for all other mantras). Forms and functions of yantras vary greatly. Some are used as visual symbols in meditation and daily ritual worship; others are used in astrology and temple rites, or

\textsuperscript{38} Kakar tries to analyse the mantric syllables from a psychological point of view, and suggests that the ‘bijas appear to be sural symbols for certain forms of inner psychological experience ranging from simple sensations to more complex emotional states’. See Sudhir Kakar, Shamans, Mystics and Doctors: A Psychological Inquiry into India and its Healing Traditions, New York: Alfred A.Knoff, 1982.

\textsuperscript{39} Encyclopedia of Religion. s.v. "Yantra", by Madhu Khanna.
are used in occult art and rituals. Occult yantras serve as mystical diagrams of magical power used in healing sickness, or as good-luck charms, or for exorcisms, or to ward off calamities. They are also worn as talisman or amulets for protection.

Both mantra and yantra are important ingredients of the Tantric tradition. What mantra does with sound, yantra does with visual images. The human body itself is a yantra in Tantrism. "that which is not in the body is not in the universe" is the Tantric Maxim.\(^{40}\) Mantra and yantra, to the Indian mind, are the effective bridge between the microcosm and the macrocosm, between individual consciousness and cosmic consciousness.

The basic conceptual foundation of Tantrism lies in Śakti, i.e., the power of the Supreme Being conceived as a Female Principle through which the manifestation of the universe is effected. Tantrism is often identified with Śāktism, a religious system that arose in the medieval period, mainly because Tantric ideas and practices have survived best in it.

Authors often speak of Buddhist and Hindu streams of Tantrism. In fact Tantric ideas and rituals, especially the idea of Śakti as the Primordial Mother or Devī has penetrated every religious system in varying degrees. It is argued that Tantras have evolved as the philosophy/theology of the masses, especially the lower classes, stressing empirical knowledge and everyday concerns, as against the 'pure knowledge' of the Vedas.\(^{41}\) In spite of later attempts to fabricate a Vedic Tantra, it has survived and continues to influence the Indian mind cutting across religious boundaries.

\(^{40}\) N.N.Bhattacharyya, Tantric Religion, p. 7.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., p. 3 ff.
That there was a sect of *Tantric* followers known as *Kerala Sampradāya* is proof enough of the spread of *Tantrism* in Kerala. Andre Padoux writes that Kerala was one of the main centres of *Tantrism* in ancient India.\(^{42}\) The main aspect of Śiva in *Tantrism* is that of *Vairavan*; many a powerful *mantra* still used at Vizhinjam is addressed to *Vairavan*.\(^{43}\) The tradition of *Sapta-matryoṣṭi*, (seven mother goddesses, who are worshipped at the ancient *Devi* temple at Vizhinjam), and that of *Ganesa* (in whose name is the ruined temple at Gaṇapathi Vilākam), are believed to be closely related to *Tantrism*. All these strongly support the view that *Tantrism* has played a vital role in the religious tradition at Vizhinjam. The widespread use of *mantravādam* as well as the primacy accorded to *Anuma* in ritual practices by the Mukkuvar have to be understood against this background.

4.3 CONCLUSION

This chapter was an attempt to look into the complex world of rituals that helps to sustain the everyday life of the Mukkuvar. In the case of people on the *margins*, the cultural and religious horizons interpenetrate deeply in the realm of rituals. Practice of religion, as inseparable from real life, assumes the form of a *drama* organized through various rituals. The assumption here is that rituals permit easy access to the cosmological/religious world of the Mukkuvar since they express the collective consciousness of the community.

The fishing operation itself is looked upon as a *ritual performance*; this brings to light *eilamidal, chēluparachil* and other ritual complexes. Some rituals are to pay homage to *Kadalamma*, while


\(^{43}\) Śiva in many of his epithets - *Rudra, Mahākāla, Sambhu* etc. - is worshipped in the Buddhist Tantric and partly in Jain Tantric disciplines. See, Bharati, *Tantric Tradition*, p.135.