

Ritual and Healing: Understanding Chottanikkara through Kerala's Tantric Traditions

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the Chottanikkara Temple in Kerala through the lens of Tantric traditions. This temple is dedicated to Chottanikkara Amma, who manifests as a unique Trikāla form (Saraswati, Lakshmi and Durga). The temple complex, which comprises both *Melkāvū* (upper shrine) and *Kīzhkāvū* (lower shrine), showcases Kerala's sacred grove culture. It also serves as a major site that integrates ecology, ritual orthodoxy, and popular healing. This paper draws from fieldwork, textual study, and oral narratives. It places Chottanikkara within the larger context of Kerala Tantra, which primarily follows the *Dakṣiṇamārga* while retaining aspects of *Vāmamārga* symbolically. Core texts such as the *Tantrasamuccaya* and *Īśānaśivagurudevapaddhati* provide a ritual framework. Alongside this, practices like daily *Guruti* at *Kīzhkāvū* address afflictions and mental disorders. The role of Tantris as ritual authorities also showcases Kerala's temple tradition. By examining rituals, legends, and lived practices of the temple, this paper argues that Chottanikkara is not only a site of worship but also a dynamic sacred space that mediates between textual authority and popular ritual creativity, sustaining both spiritual and social transformation.

Keywords: Kerala Tantric traditions, Chottanikkara Temple, Rituals, Healing.

Introduction

Kerala's temple traditions occupy a distinctive place within the wider Tantric landscape of India, blending ritual authority with local interpretations. Among these, the Chottanikkara Temple, situated near Kochi in Kerala, stands as a significant spiritual hub of devotion, healing, rituals and ecological harmony. This temple, dedicated to Chottanikkara Amma, who has a Trikala form (a form where three goddesses are embodied in the same idol), a manifestation of Goddesses Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Durga, alongside Lord Vishnu, is a very unique spiritual destination with a blend of different energy sources and profound legends. The famous sloka associated with the temple, "*Amme Nārāyaṇā, Devī Nārāyaṇā, Lakṣmī Nārāyaṇā, Bhadre Nārāyaṇā,*" invokes the four aspects of the deity, namely motherhood (Amme), the source of knowledge and wisdom (Devī), the giver of prosperity (Lakṣmī) and the protector (Bhadre) alongside Narayana, who is the Lord of sustenance of the universe. The Narayana here is because there is a smaller idol and a larger idol at Chottanikkara which both together have to be worshipped as Lakshminarayana, the smaller one being Narayana and the bigger one being Lakshmi. This encapsulates Chottanikkara Temple's spiritual essence. Beyond being a site of worship, the Chottanikkara Temple embodies the concept of sacred spaces that foster both individual and community transformation.

Kāvus, traditional sacred groves as it is known in Kerala, are revered as spaces embodying divine and

natural harmony. Chottanikkara, which has *Melkāvū* (upper shrine) and *Kīzhkāvū* (lower shrine), showcases this sacred ecological tradition. Sacred groves in general are revered for their biodiversity and spiritual significance, which are usually associated with deities like *Bhadrakālī*, *Ayyappan*, and *Sāsthā*.

Alongside this ecological dimension, this temple is also deeply rooted in Tantric practices. Tantra is defined as that which is a set of doctrines, systematic practices and metaphysical speculations (Santideva, 2000). Tantra has long been part of Kerala. Kashmir, Bengal and Kerala represent the three main seats of Tantra across Bharat. In Kerala, the *Dakṣiṇamārga* of Tantra is followed, which is closer to the Vedic rituals (Unni, 2006). This makes the Tantric practices in Kerala temples like Chottanikkara unique. Chottanikkara is a centre for both rituals and healing mental afflictions. It is a well-known place of healing for people affected by mental disorders, possessions, etc. (Smith, 2010). This draws people from different parts of the country to the temple. The rituals done for the same have gone through transformations

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over time, across different aspects. For instance, the frequency of *Guruti* poojas, which was initially only done twice a week, is now being done once a day. (Wahid, 2017) Other rituals, such as the three poojas, which happen daily, have not undergone many changes (Unni 2014) (COCHIN DEWASWOM BOARD, n.d.). These continuities and adaptations maintain Chottanikkara's role as a living and constantly evolving centre for Tantric practices. Through ongoing adaptations and evolutions, Chottanikkara maintains its role as a living and dynamic centre for Tantric practices, while preserving core elements rooted in its cultural heritage.

Methodology

This research uses qualitative methodology, combining ethnographic fieldwork with textual analysis to explore the Tantric practices at Chottanikkara Temple. The primary data collection involved is a combination of field visits, interviews, textual analysis and literature reviews. There were visits conducted to various *Bhadrakāli* temples across Kerala, including the Chottanikkara Temple. These visits allowed for direct observation of rituals. During the field visits, there were also interviews conducted with the temple authorities in order to gain insights into the various rituals, their philosophies and their changes.

A critical examination of foundational Tantric texts relevant to Kerala temple traditions was undertaken. The texts included primary sources such as the *Tantrasamuccaya* by *Cennas Narayana*, the *Īsānaśivagurudevapaddhati* of *Īsānaśivagurudeva*, and the *Prayogamañjarī* of *Ravi*. The analysis focused on identifying prescribed rituals, and comparing them with contemporary practices observed during fieldwork to understand continuities and adaptations. Along with this, a comprehensive review of existing literature, including academic papers, books, and temple-specific publications.

Historical and Cultural Background

This temple is claimed to be at least 1500 years old ("CHOTTANIKKARA_AMMA," n.d.). While there are many living traditions of the temple and great temple antiquity, there is still no archaeological, epigraphic evidence or any official records on how old the temple actually is.

The earliest origin story of the idol at *Melkāvū*, is of the hunter Kannappan and the smaller idol of Mahavishnu and the laterite idol (*rudrākṣa śīla*) of Lakshmi appeared outside his house. (Pillai, 2015) These were *Svayambhū* idols. *Svayambhū* means the one which is manifested by itself without anyone sculpting it, and

hence the idol has no form; it looks like any other stone. Years later, a Pulaya woman was sharpening her sickle on the stone (which was this idol) and blood started oozing out of it.(ibid.) It was discovered that there was a strong divine presence felt, due to which a *Deva Praśna*¹ was conducted by Edathu Namboodiri, and it revealed that both the idols have to be worshipped together as Lakshminarayana. *Deva Praśna* was not incidental but is part of the Kerala temple tradition, although not directly part of Tantra. Tarabout (2007) notes that *Deva Praśna* has become ubiquitous in Kerala, and it is of paramount importance for understanding changes in temple life.

During the *Deva Praśna*, which revealed that the idol is supposed to be worshipped as Lakshminarayana, it was also revealed that the idol has the presence of Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Durga. The white garment is owing to the presence of Saraswati in the morning, the red garment is for Lakshmi in the afternoon, and the bluish black garment is for Durga's presence in the evening. (Pillai, 2008). This changing of nature/form also corresponds to the lore of the Mookambika Saraswathi of Kollur. It is believed that Mookambika Saraswathi Devi is the one present at the Chottanikkara temple in the morning. The temple doors in Kollur only open late in the morning after she returns from her seat in Chottanikkara (Goyal, 2019). The different forms of Devi in the same idol cater to all kinds of devotees, differing in their inherent tendencies.

The idol in question, according to another legend, had allegedly shifted on its own to its current location. Even today, one can observe the original place, locally known as the *mūlasthānam*, on the south of the temple, where a *Pavizhamalli* tree stands tall. Such an association of trees with their origin story is a common practice in Kerala culture. (Nair, 2014)



¹ an astrological enquiry conducted in temples to know the will of the deity

Fig. 1 - The image of the *mūlasthānam* where the tree stands
(Courtesy- G. Tarabout, 1983)

Legend has it that the idol at *Kīzhkāvū* was installed by *Vilwamangalam Swamiyar*, guided by visions received from Devi. The idol was found in the temple lake and also consecrated according to the visions. Such accounts are consistent with numerous other Kerala temples such as where *Vilwamangalm Swamiyar* had visions of the divine (Namboodiri and Namboodiri 2003). These narratives, including his role at Chottanikkara highlight how they are an integral part of temple origin stories in Kerala.

The deities at the *Melkāvū* and the *Kīzhkāvū* are *Bhagavati* and *Bhadrakāli* respectively. (Wahid, 2017) Even though the idol of *Melkāvū* is supposed to be worshipped as *Lakshminarayana*, over time she has become *Bhagavathy* (a generic name given to Devi in Kerala). The deity at the *Kīzhkāvū* is a fiercer form of this *Bhagavathy* known as *Bhadrakāli*. In this temple, *Bhagavathy* is considered the chief Goddess while *Bhadrakāli* is her attendant given the meaning of names of *Melkāvū* (upper shrine) and *Kīzhkāvū* (lower shrine) where they are situated. Another instance is the way these two shrines face each other as though the *Bhadrakāli* at *Kīzhkāvū* is awaiting her orders. (ibid.). The *Kīzhkāvū Bhadrakāli* is famous for curing mental illnesses and one of the reasons the Chottanikkara temple being famous.

Tantra in Kerala Temple Traditions

While these legends place Chottanikkara temple in the broader context of Kerala temple traditions, the rituals performed there follow Tantra. As mentioned earlier, the Tantric practices at Kerala mainly follow the *Dakṣiṇāmārga* which is closer to the Vedic rituals. This sets Kerala apart from the Tantra practiced in Bengal and Kashmir regions. These regions of India follow the *Vāmamārga* of worship which included the orthodox Sakta cult of worship. N.P Unni in his book, 'The Tantra Literature of Kerala' taking reference from the book, 'Religion, Art and Culture' of Dr. Venkatasubramonia Iyer, states that, the Tantra practices in Kerala temple are both Vedic and Tantric in nature, but predominantly Tantric, and hence called Tantrika-Vaidika. Moreover, the Tantric practices at Kerala Devi temples do not include the Panchatattva or the *Pañcamakāra* which is practiced by the Sakta cult, nor its denotation or significance is taken into account. The *Pañcamakāra* are *Madya* (liquor), *Māmsa* (meat), *Matsya* (fish), *Maithuna* (intercourse) and *Mudra* (hand gestures). However, later, Unni in his book also states that once in a while there are also instances of *Vāmamārga*. Therefore, it can be said that even though the temples of Kerala mainly follow the *Dakṣiṇāmārga*, there are practices of *Vāmamārga* still prevalent in certain parts of the region. In some places, the elements of the

Panchatattva are symbolized through something else, while in some others, elements like *Madya* are actually offered to Devi (interviews by the author, 2024). At Chottanikkara, at the *Kīzhkāvū*, the ritual of *Guruti* which is performed every day symbolises meat and blood. This ritual is used as an *anukalpa* (substitute) to symbolize meat and blood. Therefore, at Chottanikkara, even though the exact practice from *Vāmamārga* is not followed, its elements are still symbolised.

However, the practice of *Guruti* does not imply that the traditions followed in Chottanikkara are entirely *Vāmamārga* or even something derailed from what is prescribed in texts like, *Īśānaśivagurudevapaddhati* of *Īśānaśivagurudeva* and *Tantrasamuccaya* of *Cennas Narayana*. These texts are considered as the guiding manuals for rituals in Kerala temples (Unni, 2014). The *Kriyapada* of *Īśānaśivagurudevapaddhati* quotes the *Prayogamañjarī* of *Ravi* and states that pujas should be conducted three times a day during the *Trisandhya* i.e. morning, noon and evening. It also mentions about *Naivedyam* (offering food to the deity)

त्रिसन्ध्यं पूजयित्वेशं नैवेद्यहवनान्तकम् । (3.48.2)

trisandhyam pūjayitveśam naivedyahavanāntakam /

The offering of *bali* during three times of the day in the temples, is also referred to in this treatise. This is a ritual which involves offering of cooked rice to the stone altars known as *balipīthas* which are located just outside the walls of the temple where devotees do the complete pradakshina (circumambulation) of the temple. This is done after the *naivedyam* to the principal deity. *Bali* offering is the ritual done in order to propitiate the guardian deities of the eight directions known as *Dikpālakas*, along with a few other deities (Unni, 2006).

While looking at the text, *Tantrasamuccaya*, we can observe the similarity in the way the rituals are performed and what is given in the texts.

सात्वाचम्य विधानतः सुरगृहं सम्प्राप्य सम्पूज्य च
द्वास्थावन्तरूपेत्य देवमाभिवन्द्यापास्य निर्माल्यकम्।
बिम्बाद्यं मनुविद विशोध्य सलिलैराराध्य पुष्पैर्लिपि
न्यासान्तं विदधीत दर्शितदिशासीनः स्वयं दक्षिणे ॥ (7.2)
*snātvācamya vidhānataḥ suragrhaṁ samprāpya
sampūjya ca
dvāsthāvantarupetya devamābhivandyāpāsyā
nirmālyakam /
bimbādyam manuvīda viśodhya salilairārdhya
puṣpailipi*

nyāsāntam vidadhīta darśitadīśāsīnaḥ svayam dakṣiṇe //

This verse in the *Tantrasamuccaya* touches upon the first ritual for the day that is the nirmalyam. It is said that the priest shall take his bath as per the ritualistic rites and come to the sanctum sanctorum (*garbhagrha*).

Thereafter, he should remove the previous day's puja items that are there, for instance the leftover flowers which are there and then splash water on the idol in order to purify. It is also pointed out in the verse that the priest must take his seat on the right of the idol during the rituals.

In the official temple site of Chottanikkara, the first on the schedule is Nirmalya darshanam at 4 AM where the devotees come and see Devi in previous day's *alankāra*.

In the *Tantrasamuccaya* in the 9th patala, there are details of how the annual festival of the deity is supposed to be celebrated. There are details of how the flagstaff is erected (if it is not permanently erected in the temple), and the ritual known as *Utsavabali* which is very specific to Kerala is offered twice a day (an elaborate version of the *Bali*). At the end of the festival, the portable idol is taken in a procession to a water body along with musical accompaniments such as percussion instruments and also ladies along with lit lamps in their hand. Thereafter, once the deity reaches the water body like a pond or a lake, the priest places this idol on a stool and a puja is done and the priest, holding the idol, should immerse inside the water three times such that the idol in hand is also completely immersed. This ritual of the ceremonial bath is known as *ārāṭṭu* in Malayalam. (Unni, 2006)

Tantris are head priests who have the final authority in Kerala temple rituals (Padmanabha Menon, 1995). They are usually selected based on heredity. However, it is interesting to note that the meaning of the word Tantri is the person who is practising Tantra, but in Kerala, the meaning has been constricted to the head priest. The Tantri is the presiding person in traditional rites for the installation of idols, the conduct of special rituals and festivals. (Unni, 2014). The Tantris oversee a lot of temples, and hence delegate the work to Santis (Nampis) in order to take care of individual temples. Tantri is also often considered to be the father of the deity. (Interviews by the author, 2024). Tantris are the ones who preserve the text based *Dakṣiṇamārga* rituals while also presiding over the rituals like *Guruti* and ensuring its continuity. They also preside over the annual events like festivals at temples.

Tantric Practices at Chottanikkara

In the official temple site of Chottanikkara, the first on the schedule is Nirmalya darshanam at 4 AM, where the devotees come and see Devi in the previous day's Alankaram (previous day's decorations on her). Thereafter, the doors will close and the priest will purify

the idol by splashing water as discussed above, while sitting on the right side of the deity. Continuing on the daily routine, there is a pooja in the morning known as the Ethirtu Pooja at the *Melkāvū*, which is the first pooja at the *Melkāvū*, after the Sivandhara (pouring of different liquids like water, oil, milk, etc. on the Sivalinga) at the Siva shrine. There are also *balis*¹, which occur three times a day, accompanied by musical instruments, and the Utsava Murti (portable idol) of the deity will go on a procession around the temple. This whole procedure is known as the Seeveli. The morning Seeveli happens after the Ethrutu pooja.

Thereafter, there is the Pantheeradi pooja at *Melkāvū*, followed by the *Guruti* pooja, which happens at *Kīzhkāvū*. This is followed by the Ucha pooja and Ucha Seeveli. Thereafter, the temple doors close and reopen at 4 PM. Then, there is *Dīpāradhanā*² at *Melkāvū* followed by the Athazha pooja (pooja in the evening). This is followed by the *Guruti Nivedyam*³ at *Kīzhkāvū* and then *Seeveli* at *Melkāvū*. This is then followed by *Guruti* at *Kīzhkāvū*.

The Tantris at the Chottanikkara temple are from the *Pulliyanoor Mana*, and they keep changing every year, but are from the same family. As stated earlier, they oversee the major rituals and are the authority during the *Makhom Thozhal* annual festival of the temple.

Healing and Possession Rituals

The *Guruti* ritual at *Kīzhkāvū* epitomises the transformative potential of sacred spaces. It is believed that, if women attend the *Guruti* on the Friday night, then they will be relieved of mental illnesses. (Subudhi et al., 2022, 25)

The ritual procedure of *Guruti*, as observed in the *Kīzhkāvū*, may be outlined as follows. Every night after the temple at *Melkāvū* closes, by around 8:45 PM, the priests come to the *Kīzhkāvū* and the ritual of *Guruti* begins. People gather around the *Kīzhkāvū* to witness the pooja. It involves 12 huge vessels known as *Uruli*, where turmeric mixed with water is kept initially. Thereafter, right before the puja, lime powder is added, which changes the colour to red and resembles the colour of blood. (resembling sacrifice)

There is also a banana tree fixed to the ground, and a lamp post is erected next to it. The priest then comes and does the *āvahanam* (which is inviting Devi to be present in the fire of the lamp post). Thereafter, the lamp post is regarded as housing Devi's presence and the *Guruti* pooja is done to the lamp post. Initially, the head

¹ As explained earlier, it is the offering of cooked rice at stone altars for the guardian deities of directions

² the ritualistic show of lamps to the deity

³ the mixture of turmeric with lime powder as an offering to the deity.

priest chants mantras and performs a pooja with Lotus, Ixora flowers and Tulasi leaves (Nair, T. G. et al., 2023). The red water is then sprinkled from the Urulis, one by one, onto the root of the lamp post. A thick mixture of lime and turmeric (symbolising meat) is put onto the root of the lamp post. This whole pooja will be accompanied by *melam*, which is rhythmic beats on the instrument known as the *Chenda melam*. The ritual's dramatic elements, including rhythmic drumming and symbolic offerings, create a cathartic experience for participants and observers (ibid.). This Pooja is considered a treatment for people who have been affected by mental illnesses (Smith, 2010).



Fig. 2 - Guruti puja at Kizhkavu (courtesy- Chottanikkara Devi Kshetram Facebook page)

The people affected with mental illnesses are requested to follow a regimen by the temple authorities. They are supposed to remain in Bhajanam¹ in the temple (Subudhi et al., 2022). The number of days of the Bhajanam depends on the severity of the case. (Wahid, 2017). Early in the morning, they are supposed to be given *panchagavya*, and later, they are supposed to eat the *padachoru* (cooked rice) given by the temple authorities. These they have during the duration of the time they were in the temple. The patient is first brought in front of the *Melkavu* devi to make sure the spirit that is causing the illness takes an oath to leave the body. Thereafter, the person is sent to the *Kizhkavu Bhadrakali* to be in charge of removing the illness. (ibid.)

During the ritual, these individuals often display intense physical reactions, such as dancing, shouting, vomiting, or even fainting. Despite the dramatic nature of the ritual, studies suggest that many participants experience significant relief and healing following the ceremony (Nair et al., 2023). In cases where there are spirits possessed by the patients, the priest takes one hair from the patient, twirls it around a nail, and hammers them

on the Palai tree (*Alstonia scholaris*). This is done in order to nail the evil spirit on the tree and this spirit is under the charge of *Bhadrakali* at *Kizhkavu* thereafter.

Conclusion

The Chottanikkara temple showcases the layered character of Kerala's Tantric traditions. The temple's ritual framework largely follows the *Dakṣiṇāmārga* prescriptions codified in texts such as the *Tantrasamuccaya* and *Īśānaśivagurudevapaddhati*, along with it, the current living practices reveal symbolic survivals of the *Vāmamārga*. The daily *Guruti* at *Kizhkavu*, though not quite a transgression of orthodox norms, preserves the essence of *Vāmamārga* through symbolic substitutes, thereby enabling a cathartic experience for devotees seeking healing and release from afflictions. In this sense, Chottanikkara operates as a liminal space where textual orthodoxy and popular ritual creativity converge.

The temple's unique representation of the Goddess as Saraswati in the morning, Lakshmi at noon, and Durga in the evening further reiterates the point that, just as the deity embodies multiple forms within one shrine, the temple integrates diverse strands of Kerala's Tantric heritage into a single living tradition. Beyond being a site of worship, it also emerges as a sacred space of transformation, where ecological symbolism, Tantric orthodoxy, and popular healing converge to address both spiritual and social needs. By negotiating between *Dakṣiṇāmārga* order and *Vāmamārga* energy, the temple demonstrates how Kerala's Tantric practices remain dynamic, adaptive, and profoundly relevant to the community it sustains.

¹ A practice where devotees stay at the temple premises from the time temple opens in the morning till it closes in the night (for a fixed number of days), observing fast by

eating only the food (prasadam) given in the temple, and by repeatedly chanting the deity's name which is known as japa.

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