

## Devastha Vili Ritual Performance and Cultural Identity among Latin Catholics of Kerala

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### **Abstract**

The Devastha Vili is a ritual performance tradition of the Latin Catholics residing along the coastal areas of Kerala during their Lenten season. The ritual is often performed at night, during collective prayer, chanting, processions and penitential observances, and is a part of the celebration of the Passion of Christ as well as an important sign of communal identity and cultural continuity. This study looks at the symbolic and performative nature of Devastha Vili as a religious practice, which is inscribed in the historical and cultural experiences of the Kerala-based Latin Catholics. The study is based on the ethnographic observations, interviews with ritual specialists (Aasaans), oral histories and secondary sources, and analyses it from anthropological points of view such as symbolism, liminality, collective consciousness and functionalism. The study proposes that Devastha Vili is a syncretic ritual practice brought about by the blending of missionary influence by the Portuguese, coastal folk practices and the cultural component of Tamil-Malayalam and the devotional traditions of the area. In addition to its religious meaning, the ritual serves as a way to maintain the subaltern cultural memory and strengthen the community bonds in an era of social marginality and quick modernisation. The study also brings to the fore the current dwindling of the tradition, and it stresses the importance of documentation and preservation of the Ritual Art Forms of the Latin Catholics of Kerala.

**Keywords:** Devastha Vili, Latin Catholics, Ritual Performance, Cultural Syncretism, Kerala Christianity, Subaltern Identity, Symbolism, Anthropology of Religion.

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### 3.0 Introduction

Religion offers a symbolic context to help communities make sense of suffering, morality, memory, and collective life. Rituals in religious communities are especially important as they help to maintain social identity and the continuity of cultures. Both anthropological and other studies have demonstrated that rituals are not just acts of belief but significant cultural performances that help to create meaning, belonging, and social cohesion within communities (Geertz 1973 and Turner 1969).

Devastha Vili is a unique type of ritual performance, which is held during the Lenten season among the Latin Catholic communities of coastal Kerala. The ritual is principally carried out at night by the prayer, processions, penitential chanting, fasting and devotional observance in memory of the Passion of Christ. The participants walk with wooden crosses and bells with prayers and songs in Malayalam, Tamil, Latin and Portuguese-influenced language through the village lanes. Although the ritual has been fading in many places, it still lives on in some parts of the coastal areas of Kerala, where ritual specialists, called *Asaan*<sup>1</sup>, traditionally officiate it (Lucy 2020 and Freeman 2003).

Studies on Kerala Christianity tend to give scant attention to the Latin Catholics even though they form an important and historically underprivileged group in the fishing ports of Kerala. The ritual, folk and other traditions of the *Latin Catholic*<sup>2</sup> communities in Kerala have received little scholarly attention to date, though a great deal has been written on the Christian traditions of the Syrian churches, missionary history and institutional church developments (Bayly 1989 and Menachery 1998). The research on the Devastha Vili focuses mainly on devotional dimensions and/or preservation of the local culture, and very few anthropological studies have explored the symbolic construction, performative dimensions and its role in maintaining the collective identity.

This study investigates the role of Devastha Vili as a ritual event, which helps to maintain the religious identity and cultural syncretism of the Latin Catholic community in Kerala. Based on ethnographic observation, oral history, and interviews with ritual participants and anthropological insights into symbolism, liminality, collective consciousness and functionalism (Durkheim 1912/1995, Turner 1969, Malinowski 1948 and Levi-Strauss 1958/1963), it examines Devastha Vili as a devotional practice and as a cultural institution. The study holds that the ritual reflects a convergence and interaction of Portuguese missionary influence, the Tamil-Malayalam cultural heritage, the folk traditions of the coastal region and the devotional practices of the people of Kerala and that it is a vehicle for the transmission of subaltern cultural memory and a sense of community among the Latin Catholic people of Kerala (Visvanathan 1993, Narayanan 2013 and Koilparampil 1982).

The study not only looks at the ritual structure and symbolism of Devastha Vili, but also considers the problems confronting the tradition in the age of modernisation, migration and new religious trends. The study's context of the ritual in general is anthropological frameworks of performance, identity and cultural continuity that enriches the burgeoning body of work on folk

Christianity, ritual studies and subaltern religious practices in South India (Bayly 1989 and Miller 2011).

### 3.1 Literature Review

Ritual has been an important field of study in anthropology due to its association with symbolism, social organisation, collective identity and religious experiences. Generally, anthropological studies on ritual treat ritual not as a repetitive religious practice but as a culturally organized performance, in which communities make meaning, reproduce social values, and negotiate sacred/social relationships (Geertz 1973 and Turner 1969). Clifford Geertz has made one of the most significant contributions to the anthropology of religion as a symbolic system that produces strong and sustained moods and motivations by articulating conceptions of reality. Geertz suggests that rituals can be seen as symbolic actions that serve to convey moral messages, to fashion social understandings, and to explain human life within the community. With respect to *Devastha Vili*, the wooden cross, black clothes, night processions, bells, fasting and communal chanting convey notions of suffering, repentance, devotion and solidarity. The ritual, in this sense, not only serves as a religious observance but as a symbolic model for the understanding of faith and social belonging of the Latin Catholic community (Geert 1973 and Sonia 2020).

Liminality and *communitas* were two terms Victor Turner developed to add to the anthropological understanding of ritual. Turner claimed that rituals generate spaces between the social structures, a liminal space in which the ritualists temporarily step outside of their everyday social norms, and find unity of feeling or emotion. These transitional times can create a feeling of *communitas*, a sense of equality, a sense of suffering, and a sense of participation (Turner 1969). This is a significant frame of reference to the nocturnal and processional nature of *Devastha Vili*, for when normal village spaces are turned into sacred ritual spaces.

The sociological approach of Émile Durkheim is also relevant to studies on ritual. For Durkheim, ritual was a process that enables societies to create and sustain collective consciousness. Durkheim (1912/1995) argued that collective ritual participation reinforces social solidarity and reaffirms shared beliefs and a sense of community. In *Devastha Vili*, the chanting, fasting, kneeling, movement and prayer of the group help to build emotional unity and social cohesion among the participants, which strengthens the sense of belongingness in the Latin Catholic community in Kerala.

Among functionalist theories of religion, particularly those of Bronislaw Malinowski, ritual is understood as a means of addressing emotional tension and psychological uncertainty in human life. Malinowski (1948) suggested that rituals enable individuals to cope with suffering, fear, crisis, and existential anxiety. The penitential dimensions of *Devastha Vili* including fasting, mournful symbolism, night vigils, and passion-oriented prayers may similarly be interpreted as ritual mechanisms for engaging with themes of suffering, morality, death, and redemption.

The anthropological studies of the Christianity of South India have tended to focus on Syrian Christian practices, missionary history, caste relationships and the church structures. Researchers have been studying the relationship between religion, caste, and social stratification in South India for a long time (see for example, Bayly 1989) and the cultural and devotional

changes of Christianity in Kerala. But little attention has been paid to the ritual and folk practices of the Latin Catholic communities of Kerala, especially along the coasts.

The historical marginalisation of the Latin Catholics in the caste-based social structure of Kerala and the development of their own devotional and performative traditions have been discussed by the previous works on the Latin Catholics in Kerala (Koilparampil 1982). Studies of folk Christian activities across the region, such as the ritual drama of *Chavittu Nadakam*<sup>3</sup> and devotional song traditions, show the syncretic nature of the coastal Catholic culture in Kerala (Freeman 2003). Sonia Lucy C. (2020) has highlighted that ritual expressions such as *Devastha Vili* are becoming less visible and are significant modes of asserting subaltern cultural identity and collective memory.



**Figure 3.1:** *Chavittunadakam*  
**Source:** Kerala Tourism (2021)

Another significant reference for *Devastha Vili* is the subaltern studies and anthropological texts on marginalised religious communities. In many cases, the use of ritual amongst subordinate communities provides opportunities to maintain oral traditions, local identities and cultural continuity in a context of marginalisation. The study of *Devastha Vili*, in this sense, is not just a devotional ritual but also a community-based cultural practice that helps Latin Catholics to keep their historical memory alive, which is under constant negotiation with changing socio-religious contexts (Viswanathan 1993 and Bayly 1989).

While there have been several studies on ritual performances, folk Christianity and subaltern religion in South India, *Devastha Vili* has been relatively under-researched. The ritual has not received much attention in the literature in terms of symbolism, liminal experience, collective consciousness, performance and cultural syncretism. The present study aims at filling this gap by exploring *Devastha Vili* as a ritual performance, which is a manifestation of religious

devotion, symbolic communication, cultural adaptation and subaltern identity among the Latin Catholics of Kerala.

### 3.2 Methodology

The methodology of this study is ethnographic in nature, based on a qualitative approach. This study was conducted through qualitative ethnographic approach, which studies Devastha Vili as a ritual performance among the Latin Catholics of the coastal Kerala. The research approach adopted was ethnographic, because ritual analysis and understanding of the cultural and social context of the ritual in its local setting is best done through the lived religious experiences, symbolic meanings and oral tradition of the people involved (Geertz 1973).

The study was done in the selected coastal areas of Kerala, where the Devastha Vili is still in practice during the Lenten season. The study concentrated mainly on the Latin Catholic communities linked to ritual performances in the region that is close to Arthunkal, Pallithod, Kattoor and other coastal localities, which have retained some traces of the tradition through their devotional groups and ritual practitioners (Koilparampil 1982).

The methods of primary data collection were participant observation, semi-structured interviews, informal conversations and oral narratives from ritual practitioners and community members. The emphasis of the visits in the *Lent period*<sup>4</sup> was the observation of ritual performances: night processions, chanting together, fasting, structures of prayer, symbolic actions, and ritual objects like the wooden cross and *Maramani* (wooden bell). Other observations focused on the spatial structure of the ritual, participant behaviour, the ways in which people participate collectively, and the emotional setting of the performance (Turner 1969 and Malinowski 1948).

Aasaan (ritual specialists), members of Devastha Sangams, elderly practitioners, church participants and local cultural activists involved with the preservation of the ritual tradition have been interviewed. Practitioners associated with the following were interviewed.

- ✚ Kattoor cheriyapozhi thrinayi
- ✚ Cletus arasarkadavil Aasaan and team
- ✚ Arthunkal velankanni silvester Pakkikkathayyil Aasaan and team
- ✚ Thykkal St. Francis Azizi, Thankchan Eerasseril Aasaan and team
- ✚ Ernakulam Elamakkara Lourd matha, Antony Binil Pongam thara Aasaan and team
- ✚ Arthunkal St.Reetha's , Joy Peter Aresseril Aasaan and team
- ✚ KreupAasaanam Cultural Sangham
- ✚ Pallithod School of Folk Arts

Through these interactions, valuable information was gathered about the ritual performance, symbolic interpretation, oral transmission, historical memory, and challenges faced by the tradition at present (Lucy 2020 and Freeman 2003).

Secondary data was gathered from anthropological literature, folklore studies, church histories, ritual studies, and archival documents and published works related to Kerala Christianity, devotional traditions of the coastal people and the subaltern religious practices (Bayly 1989 and

Menachery 1998). This study uses interdisciplinary analytical approach, combining anthropological, folkloric, religious, cultural historical and performance studies perspectives, to explore Devastha Vili as a social institution and ritual performance.

The analysis is primarily influenced by anthropological theories of symbolism, liminality, collective consciousness and functionalism of Clifford Geertz (1973), Victor Turner (1969), Émile Durkheim (1912/1995), and Bronislaw Malinowski (1948). They throw light on the ritual in relation to other theoretical accounts of religious symbolism, community identity and performative culture.



**Figure 3.2:** *Devastha Vili-Team*

*Source: Kerala Christian ritual heritage archives / Kerala folklore references.*

The study also has some limitations. In some areas, little detailed historical data was available due to the small number of active practitioners and the fading of oral ritual traditions. The knowledge of the ritual is largely oral, and archival records about the evolution of the Devastha Vili in historical times are scarce (Visvanathan 1993). In addition, some of the historical associations mentioned in oral traditions (such as those about links to older Jewish liturgical traditions) are still speculative and need to be historically substantiated. The study thus covers such stories with some care and pays special attention to ethnographic observation and local interpretations.

### **3.3 Historical Background**

The journey of the Portuguese coming to the Malabar Coast in the late 15th century and the *Padroado's*<sup>5</sup> missionary activities are closely linked to the history of Latin Catholicism in Kerala. Latin Catholicism eventually developed into a separate religious and cultural way of life

in a multi-cultural society of Kerala as a result of missionary activity, trade contacts and the establishment of the churches along the coast (Bayly 1989 and Visvanathan 1993).

Historically, the Latin Catholics of Kerala were known as Latin Mappilas and are a socially and culturally diverse Christian community. A substantial part of the community grew as a result of conversion movements of marginalized groups of people such as the caste groups, the fishing communities, and the Mukkuvars, Arayans, Valans, Dheevars, Ezhavas, Nadars and Viswakarmas. The Latin Catholics were a mainly subordinate social group as compared to the numerically more dominant Christian group of Syrians in the caste-based social hierarchy of Kerala. Such historical experiences of marginalisation had influenced the community to have unique ritual practices, devotional expressions and forms of communal identity (Koilparampil 1982).

Portuguese Catholic traditions and the coastal cultural practices had a great impact on the development of the Latin Catholic devotions in Kerala. Over time, catholic liturgical architecture that was introduced by missionary activity came to fit local linguistic and performative traditions as well as native devotional habits. This led to several aspects of the rituals among Kerala's Latin Catholics taking a syncretic form of European missionary Christianity in interaction with the Tamil-Malayalam cultural environment and coastal folk traditions (Narayanan 2013).



**Figure 3.1:** *Wooden Bell*

**Source:** *Kerala Christian ritual heritage archives/Kerala folklore references.*

devotional songs, and the symbolic objects used, including the wooden cross and the *Maramani* (wooden bell).<sup>6</sup>

It is in this historical context that Devastha Vili has developed as a unique form of ritual performance related to the Passion of Christ, to collective chanting, to penitence and prayer. The ritual was originally carried out during the Lenten Season in a night-time procession accompanied by ritual recitations, and it became a devotional practice of the community, which was maintained largely through oral transmission and local participation (Lucy 2020). The tradition is localised and performative, as evidenced by the leadership of the Aasaans, the use of multilingual

The symbolical resemblance found in the oral traditions connected to Devastha Vili in some instances suggest parallels with older West Asian or Jewish liturgical traditions, particularly in forms of collective sacred proclamation and penitential recitation. There are some local stories that make connections between the ritual and the Shema tradition of Judaism. There is, however, no clear historical link between the *Shema tradition of Judaism*<sup>7</sup> and Devastha Vili that can be definitely established since there is no adequate historical evidence and documentation. Such

statements are therefore taken with a grain of salt and are only regarded as a part of local oral memory and symbolic interpretation rather than authentic historical fact.

In time, Devastha Vili became more than just a formal ritual of the church; it became a performance of devotions that was localised in the everyday experiences of the communities of coastal Latin Catholics in Kerala. It was a way for communities to demonstrate their trust, to remember things and to develop a sense of togetherness in a changing social and historical context (Turner 1969 and Durkheim 1912/1995).

Today, although the ritual practices of Devastha Vili have largely disappeared in certain parts of the country, it is still alive in selected localities along the coast as an expression of religious devotion, cultural continuity, and subaltern community identity of the Latin Catholics of Kerala (Lucy 2020 and Bayly 1989).

### **3.4 The Ritual's structure**

During the Lenten season, Devastha Vili (parish) conducts a series of disciplines in penitence, a series of prayers, symbolic gestures and involvement of the community. Typically, there are three phases associated with the ritual; preparatory, performance, and post-ritual. These phases together constitute a sacred ritual space where the participants express penitence, commemorate the Passion of Christ and build up communal solidarity among the communities of Latin Catholics of the coastal areas of Kerala (Turner 1969 and Geertz 1973).

#### **3.4.1 Preparatory Phase**

Preparatory phase of Devastha Vili starts with the beginning of the Lent (Vibhuthi Thirunal/Ash Wednesday). This period is characterised by abstaining from food, fasting, admitting sin, praying and disciplining oneself.

During Lent, people traditionally do not eat meat or fish, and try to do more devotional activities. Fasting is not just a form of physical discipline, but also a symbolic gesture of repentance, humility and spiritual cleansing (Geertz 1973). Confession and reception of Holy Communion are considered to be important spiritual preparations for the ritual.



**Figure 3.4:** *Vibhuthi (Sacred Ash) which is used during Lent*

**Source:** *Adapted from online Christian Lenten ritual imagery and sacred ash symbolism references*

In the Lenten season, ashes are imprinted on the forehead in the shape of a cross with *vibhuthi* or sacred ash is used especially on Ash Wednesday. The ash represents repentance, humility, man's mortality and cleansing from sin. The cross is also a symbol of sacrifice, devotion and preparation for the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The ash represents repentance, humility, man's mortality and cleansing from sin. The cross is also a symbol of sacrifice, devotion and preparation for the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. During this period, the ritual specialists Aasaans are very significant. They arrange the participants, pass on the ritual information and enforce ritual discipline. Prior to the start of the night procession, the participants typically convene at the home of the Aasaan, where ritual paraphernalia like the wooden cross (Kurusu), the lamp, the prayer books and the wooden bell (Maramani) are set up (Lucy 2020).

The preparatory phase also contributes to enhancing the sense of community engagement. We experience emotional union and set the ritual tone for this season of lent through the sharing of fasting, prayer and devotional discipline. From this perspective, preparation is as well a significant symbolic and communal aspect of the ritual process (Durkheim 1912/1995).



**Figure 3.5:** Ash Wednesday Ritual- A priest draws a cross of ashes on a worshipper's forehead  
**Source:** <https://www.dreamstime.com/ash-wednesday-celebration-catholic-church-chunakhali-india>

### **3.4.2 Performance Phase**

Typically, the performance phase starts late night, after 11pm, and is different from normal social life. The participants line up in an organised procession under the leadership of the Aasaan, chant prayers and devotional songs. A participant carrying a lamp or torch, followed by another carrying a wooden cross, usually leads the procession. The group moves through village pathways while reciting prayers and devotional songs associated with the Passion of Christ.

The main element of the ritual performance is the collective chanting. Prayer is done in a rhythmic way, for example, Our Father (Swargasthanaya Njangalude Pithave) and Hail Mary (Nanma Niranja Mariyame) are recited, often by children cyncing with the adult. The use of Malayalam, Tamil, Portuguese and Latin in these chants is indicative of the multi-layered cultural heritage of Kerala's Latin Catholic tradition (Bayly 1989).

Symbols are very important in the structuring of the ritual. The cross is made of wood to represent the suffering, sacrifice, repentance and redemption of the Passion of Christ. In many places it is customary for the participants to kneel down in front of the cross as a sign of respect and reverence.



**Figure 3.6:** A wooden cross (*Kurusu*) is carried in *Devastha Vili* procession  
**Source:** <https://schoolwiki.in-Devasthu-vili.jpg>

The Maramani or wooden bell is also ritual and symbolic in nature. The sound that it makes is rhythmic and heralds the march of the processional and is a call to prayer and participation. The sound symbolically represents sacred ritual time, and also separates the ritual space from the social space.

There are also some symbolic elements in the ritual that are conveying the themes of suffering, repentance, humility, sacrifice and communal devotion. The black is used in the colours of the procession because it represents the grief and penitence of the Passion of Christ. By wearing black together, the participants are collectively expressing this communal suffering, and spiritual discipline.

The ritual is set during the night, further enhancing its symbolism. The ritual is done in silence and darkness, establishing a sacred space in-between the mundane and social sphere. For the Turnerian perspective, this is a temporary rite space in which the individuals involved can experience repentance, devotion and emotional solidarity together, not as individuals, but as a group (Turner 1969).

Together they chant the ritual, kneel, fast to create emotional unity among participants. The ritual strengthens the sense of community and collective consciousness of the coastal communities of Kerala in the Latin Catholic faith as a group (Durkheim 1912/1995).

### **3.4.3 Post-Ritual Meaning**

A spiritual awakening, moral introspection, and reaffirmation of the community that culminates in the completion of Devastha Vili. The ritual is believed to be a gesture of repentance and piety related to the sufferings and sacrifice of Christ in the season of Lent (Geertz 1973). The ritual serves not only religious purposes but also helps to maintain the historical memory and cultural continuity of the Latin Catholic populace of Kerala. Aspects of devotional culture which have contributed to a community's identity over generations are sustained by repeated performances, oral transmission, ritual songs and communal participation (Freeman 2003 and Visvanathan 1993).

The ritual also helps to establish emotional connections between the participants. Fasting, chants, prayer and participation in the processions bring the religious community together and a sense of belonging. The ritual serves to consolidate collective consciousness and social cohesion in Durkheimian terms, through shared emotional experience (Durkheim 1912/1995).

Devastha Vili is a reflection of the experiences of marginalisation of certain sections of the Latin Catholic community in Kerala at another level. Analogies of suffering, endurance, repentance and communal participation are themes that are resonant with the experience of historically subordinate coastal populations. Thus, the ritual practice is a form of religious belief and also a cultural continuity and cultural identity maintenance (Bayly, 1989; Koilparampil, 1982).

But with the process of modernisation, migration and the changing trend of religious practices, Devastha Vili has been on the wane in many parts of Kerala. Though this has been reduced, the ritual is still being used in some coastal areas and serves as a vital means of expressing the faith, ritual memory and subaltern cultural heritage of the Latin Catholic communities of Kerala (Lucy 2020).

## **3.5 Cultural Syncretism and Folk Influences**

The syncretic nature of Devastha Vili is one of the most important aspects of the ritual, which was not an imported ritual of the Catholic Church, but a process of adaptation and localisation that combined Tamil, Malayalam, Latin Church tradition and coastal folk traditions along with Portuguese missionary Christianity (Narayanan 2013 and Visvanathan 1993).

This process of syncretism was aided by the formation of the Latin Catholic community in Kerala in the past. The community, which mostly appeared through the process of conversions among the coastal fishing population and the marginalised caste groups of that time, is so much interwoven in the local cultural environment during the Portuguese missionary period (Bayly 1989). Religious expression by Latin Catholics slowly became infused with the vernacular languages, the folk aesthetics, the oral traditions, musical forms, and performative structures that were familiar to the people of the coast.

The multilingual character of Devastha Vili clearly demonstrates this syncretic formation. Linguistic influence can be seen in the ritual prayers and chants, which are in Malayalam, Tamil, Portuguese and Latin. Malayalam is the main medium of ritual communication, and devotional

elements in Tamil indicate regional cultural interaction. Some devotional elements and liturgical terms of missionary Christianity are influenced by Portuguese; some elements of liturgical worship are Latin, reflecting the church's heritage of Catholic worship. The parallel use of both these linguistic traditions in one ritual performance is an example of the process of vernacular culture adapting the religious traditions of the world.

The ritual also shares with the folk traditions of the coastal region of Kerala important performative aspects. There are strong associations to be drawn between Devastha Vili and Chavittu Nadakam, such as in the areas of collective performance, rhythmic recitations, dramatic expression, oral transmission, and musical structure (Freeman 2003). Devastha Vili is also a community-based culture with performative memory, rather than formal textual memory, being its survival mechanism, similar to Chavittu Nadakam.

Other links with the coastal folk tradition can be found in the processional movement, the communal singing and chanting, the use of lamps and bells, and the creation of ritual sites in public space. The features suggest that the wider devotional and folk ritual cultures of South India have had an impact on the performative aspects of Devastha Vili.

The Aasaan also points to the continuity of the oral and folk performances of Kerala. Like in other art forms, the Aasaan serves as a carrier of ritual knowledge, songs, performative discipline and collective memory (Lucy 2020).

Overall, from an anthropological perspective, the syncretic nature of Devastha Vili demonstrates the fact that religious traditions are not fixed systems, but dynamic cultural systems that are constantly formed, transformed and reformulated as a result of historical encounters and local experiences. The ritual is a synthesis of Portuguese missionary Christianity, Tamil devotional culture, Malayalam linguistic culture, Latin liturgical tradition and the aesthetics of the seashore.

It is important to note also that this syncretic nature of Devastha Vili reflects the cultural agency of the Latin Catholic communities of Kerala. Local communities did not simply import religious forms from outside but adapted and localised Catholic practices in their own ways, with their own cultural and historical experiences and performative traditions (Geertz 1973). In this context, Devastha Vili is not just a religious ritual but also a cultural expression that carries the essence of local culture in Kerala with a Christian devotional theme, which is found exclusively in the coastal area. Yet, even today, in the midst of the demise of numerous traditional forms of ritual, Devastha Vili is an important cultural repository that holds the oral traditions, devotional expression in multiple languages, performative aesthetics and collective memory of Latin Catholics of coastal Kerala.

### **3.6 Subaltern Identity and Cultural Memory**

On the one hand, Devastha Vili is a religious practice and on the other, a cultural vehicle used by Kerala's Latin Catholic communities to create, maintain and assert their collective identity, and to deal with the historical marginalisation. The ritual is a reflection of the historical experiences of a community that held a socially subordinate position in the caste oriented social order of Kerala, and in larger religious and social power structures (Bayly 1989 and Koilparampil 1982).

The conversion movements of the Portuguese missionaries on the Malabar Coast that led to the growth of the Latin Catholic population of Kerala resulted mostly from the conversion of coastal fishing communities and caste communities. New religions were introduced through the conversion to Christianity, but many of the converted individuals faced social marginalisation, economic hardships and restricted social mobility in the broader caste-based social framework of Kerala. The Latin Catholics were often found in a marginal social and institutional role when compared with the Syrian Christian population, which was dominant in the past (Visvanathan 1993).

Such events had a great impact on the development of special devotions and rituals for the Latin Catholic community. In this context, the Devastha Vili was not a merely liturgical practice, but a ritual enactment of the community that enabled the marginalised coastal groups to express their sense of community and continuity in cultural practices. Through the ritual, participants experienced a shared sacred space wherein they symbolically expressed suffering, repentance, endurance, and faith, with the other participants (Geertz 1973 and Turner 1969).

The oral and participative nature of the ritual is particularly evident in its subaltern dimensions of it. Devastha Vili is not as highly institutionalised as other worship practices, which were under the regulation of formal ecclesiastical authority, but have long persisted by means of local participation and oral transmission and through community-based organisation. The collective nature of ownership of the ritual is shown by the central role of the Aasaans, lay devotional groups, and the ordinary participants. Ritual knowledge, songs, chants and ways of doing ritual are passed from one generation to the next not through formal institutional systems, but through lived participation (Freeman 2003 and Lucy 2020).

In this regard, the ritual could be viewed as a subtle form of cultural resistance and identity preservation. The community continues to perform local devotional practices and maintains ways of remembering, expressing and cultural identity that may otherwise be lost when social marginalisation and cultural homogenisation set in. The ritual thus functions as a means of establishing continuity in history and value of the cultural heritage for the subaltern communities (Visvanathan 1993).

The theme of suffering, sacrifice, humility, and endurance in Devastha Vili is also symbolic and has a historical touch to it, and the coastal people are marginalised. During Lent, the shared sharing of the suffering of Christ gains a wider social dimension in communities, which have experienced exclusion and suffering. Thus, ritual involvement links personal pain to a shared past and group spiritual experience (Durkheim 1912/1995 and Malinowski 1948).

A way to think about ritual participation is as a mechanism by which collective consciousness and social solidarity is continually reproduced, following in the footsteps of Émile Durkheim. Devastha Vili is characterized by the participants' emotional togetherness, as they pray, fast, chant, bow and move in a processional. The ritual thus not only reinforces religious affiliation, but also the social integration of the community (Durkheim 1912/1995).

The ritual also helps to maintain significant cultural memory elements linked to the daily life of the shore-based Latin Catholic communities of Kerala. The employment of local languages,

folk devotional songs, moving through the village pathways and folk performative elements are all reflective of regional history and the lived experience of local identities (Bayly 1989 and Narayanan 2013).

Notably, the steady disappearance of Devastha Vili is indicative of the wider changes in subaltern ritual practices in modern society. Many devotional traditions, including oral traditions and community-based traditions, have been lessened due to modernization, migration, urbanization and growing institutionalization of religious practice. The young generation may have less knowledge of Devastha Vili (Lucy 2020) related ritual songs, symbols, and practice.

Despite these difficulties, the ritual has survived in some coastal areas where people in the community are actively involved in maintaining it as their cultural and religious life. In these settings, Devastha Vili serves as more than just a ritual; it serves as a living archive of subaltern history, oral traditions, and collective identity.

So Devastha Vili is a significant case study of how ritual performances play out in relation to relations of power, identity and cultural memory. The ritual is also a means by which marginalized groups practice devotional expression and maintain historical continuity, strengthen communal bonds and ensure cultural identity in changing social contexts (Geertz 1973 and Bayly 1989).

The continuity of this ritual heritage is being endangered by growing attenuation of the oral transmission and by the decreasing involvement of younger generations. Due to generational changes, some of the ritual songs, symbolic practices and performative knowledge systems of the Devastha Vili are likely to be lost over time.

The preservation of Devastha Vili is not only of religious importance, but also of great value to the community. It is an important aspect of TCH and provides a valuable insight into the historical experiences, folk traditions and lived religious cultures of Latin Catholic coastal communities. In this context, it serves as a devotional ritual, as well as a cultural history of collective memory.

It is crucial to document, ethnographically study, organise, and preserve the ritual tradition for future generations through community-based preservation projects. This is crucial in places where oral culture is the main vehicle for the transmission of culture, where there has been little institutional recording.

Finally, Devastha Vili shows how ritual performances remain robust cultural tools that help communities maintain memory, establish an identity, and maintain a sense of collective belonging in fluctuating historical and social contexts (Geertz 1973 and Turner 1969).

### **3.7 Decline of the Ritual Tradition**

Devastha Vili is still alive in some parts of the coastal region of Kerala, but is under threat from modernisation, migration, social change and changing religious practice. The practice used to be universal during the Lent period among the Latin Catholic community, and has been fading

in many locations over time. This is a general trend of oral, community-based and folk devotional traditions throughout Kerala (Geertz 1973 and Connerton 1989). Modernisation and changes in everyday life in the coastal regions are among the major reasons for this decline. Community relationships have changed due to occupational change, urbanisation, and formal education and mobility. The younger generation may not be as familiar with the ritual songs of Devastha Vili as well as the oral stories and the performative structure of Devastha Vili. The disintegration of tightly knit community life has had an impact on the passing down of ritual knowledge (Connerton 1989 and Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983).

This has been further facilitated by migration. The massive out-migration of the population of coastal Kerala to urban centres and Gulf countries has changed the demographic and social makeup of the Latin Catholic population (Kerala Census 2011). The old people and a few ritual specialists (Aasaan) are now maintaining the ritual as the younger generation leaves, leaving the ritual to be maintained by others.

The continuity of the ritual has also been affected by changes in the church institutions. Standardized Liturgical practices in the parish have been slowly replacing some folk devotions. The indicator of Devastha Vili is its reliance on oral transmission and participation of the community, which has made it less visible in formal institutional religious environments such as temples or mosques (Geertz 1973). However, despite such difficulties, Devastha Vili is still a significant reminder of Lenten devotion, community memory and cultural identity for a segment of the Latin Catholic population of Kerala. The ritual tradition is still maintained by the elder practitioners, Aasaan, together with some limited but significant involvement of the communities.

Devastha Vili has also come into focus in the discourse on intangible cultural heritage and subaltern religions in recent years. The ritual continues to carry devotional language in several languages and oral traditions, performative cultural practices that bear the historical experiences of the marginalised communities of the Latin Catholic origin of the coastal community of Kerala.

Hence, the importance of systematically documenting, ethnographic research, archiving and the community-based preservation programs for the preservation of this ritual tradition. The preservation of Devastha Vili is relevant not only for the continuity of the faith but also for the conservation of the cultural history, folk practices and collective memory of the coastal communities of Latin Catholic communities in Kerala.

### **3.8 Conclusion**

Among the Latin Catholic communities of the coastal Kerala, the ritual performances of the Devastha Vili tradition hold significance in the area of Lenten season devotional practices, symbols and collective memory and culture. This study goes beyond the interpretation of the ritual as a religious act, and examines it as an intricate social-cultural institution through which communities construct their identity, memory, morality and sense of belonging.

The study reveals that Devastha Vili is a symbolic system and performative system developed in the historical process through interaction between the Portuguese missionary

Christianity, Tamil-Malayalam cultural practices, Latin liturgical traditions and the coastal folk traditions. The prayers, movement, collective chanting and the inclusion of symbols and oral transmission of the ritual are all examples of cultural syncretism and close linkages with the native cultural life of the coastal Latin Catholics of Kerala.

Clifford Geertz's, Victor Turner's, Émile Durkheim's and Bronislaw Malinowski's theories have served as bases to examine Devastha Vili as a ritual communication of symbolic meanings, creation of collective consciousness, formation of the liminal sacred space and reinforcement of community solidarity. The study thus adds to the anthropology of religion by putting Devastha Vili in their wider context of the symbolic nature of rituals, the concept of liminality, subaltern identity, and performative culture.

It is important to note that Devastha Vili is an important medium of continuity and maintenance of histories of historically marginalized communities of Latin Catholics. The ritual reflects the oral tradition, collective memory and devotional and communal practices of the coastal communities of Kerala and their historical experiences. In this sense, it can be used, not only for devotional purposes, but also for other social and cultural functions, such as subaltern identity and community cohesion (Connorton, 1989; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983).

At the same time, the work identifies issues to the tradition of concern in the current day. The process of modernization, migration, urbanization and institutional changes of church practices have led to the decline of Devastha Vili in many areas. Less participation in oral transmission and a decline in young people's involvement in this ritual tradition is a risk for the continuity of this tradition.

Thus Devastha Vili is not only regarded as a religious practice but also it has a religious conservation value. The ritual is an integral part of the intangible cultural heritage of Kerala and gives clues to the history of the folk life and religious life of the people on the coastal areas. According to the frame work of intangible cultural heritage proposed by the UNESCO in 2003, the documentation, ethnographic researches, efforts of community based preservation, and cultural archiving are the major components of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage for future generations.

### **Endnotes**

1. Asaan is a trainer: The term is also used to denote a person who trains or instructs a group in specialized arts and practices such as dance, drama, martial arts, music, and other traditional performances.
2. Latin Catholic: The Latin Catholics, who numbered about 933,000 in 2011, are the second most numerous Christian denominations.
3. Chavittu Nadakam is a traditional folk dance drama of Kerala state and belongs to Latin Catholic community of the state, where the Portuguese style of theatrical performance has been integrated with rhythmic foot stamping, music, war drumbeats, and narration.
4. The Lent period refers to the forty-day season of fasting, prayer, repentance and spiritual preparation by Christians before Easter.
5. The Padroado system is a church and missionary system of patronage granted by the Papacy to the Portuguese Crown to organise and supervise missionary works, church administration and Christianisation in Portuguese colonies in the overseas territories such as Kerala.

6. Maramani is a traditional percussion instrument made of wood and is mainly used in ritual activities of the Christians in Kerala, particularly during the Lent and Holy Week period.
7. The Shema prayer is one of the most important statements of faith in Judaism, which starts with the words “Hear, O Israel” and expresses the Jewish belief in the unity of God, and is said every day in Jewish worship and prayer.

#### ***Declaration on the use of AI Assistance***

I hereby declare that limited artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used only for language refinement, grammar correction, formatting assistance, and organisational in preparing this manuscript. The core ideas, field data, interpretations, analysis, arguments, and conclusions are entirely my own original academic work. I remain solely responsible for its authenticity, accuracy, and ethical integrity. No AI-generated content was used as primary research data or as a substitute for fieldwork, ethnographic interpretation, or scholarly analysis.

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