

# **Where Blessing and Curse Merge with Life and Death**

## **Local Beliefs in Contemporary Lower Kuttanad**



**Thresy Vallikappen**

**Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the Degree of Master of Philosophy**

**Department of Social Anthropology**

**University of Bergen**

**June 2012**



# Contents

<b>Preface</b> .....	i
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	ii
<b>List of Figures</b> .....	iii
<b>Chapter I</b> .....	1
Introduction.....	1
<b>Chapter II</b> .....	16
The Practise of Human Sacrifice and Belief in Death Giving Way to Life.....	16
A life blend with land and water.....	16
Concentration of power and dependency on the Thampuran .....	19
Local spirituality .....	21
Blind belief in the ritual .....	23
The public secret .....	25
Continuation of the ritual .....	31
The gift of sacrifice – Death giving way to life .....	34
<b>Chapter III</b> .....	38
The Cycle of Blessings and Curses.....	38
The havoc formed by the floods .....	38
Proliferation of water-weeds.....	43
Spread of salinity .....	45
Pollution of land and water .....	47
Local developmental activities and the balance in nature .....	50
The gift and the cycle of blessings and curses – the continuation .....	56

<b>Chapter IV</b> .....	59
Changes in Landscapes, Life and Lifestyle .....	59
Education .....	61
Social composition and stratification .....	63
Coming in of ‘money’ .....	64
Emergence of new middleclass landlords.....	65
Agrarian relations.....	67
Paddy cultivation - a state of bewilderment.....	68
Labour shortage .....	72
The old food producers .....	76
A solution? .....	78
Continuation of “the gifts” .....	79
<b>Chapter V</b> .....	83
Conclusion .....	83
<b>References</b> .....	v
<b>Glossary</b> .....	xiv

## Preface

Lower Kuttanad is going through noticeable changes in its physical features, as well as, in the livelihood patterns. Every now and then, new developmental initiatives are enacted by governmental and non-governmental groups. The inhabitants place high hopes in all the developmental activities that are carried out in the region. The central governments are perceived to be very liberal in granting huge funds for the upliftment of the region. But almost all developmental agendas have proved to be utter failures up till now. The plight of Kuttanad remains the same with all its perils and troubles. The green paddy fields are shrinking and disappearing. The educated young inhabitants are losing hope in the region and are moving out in search of new living.

In the framework of the current dilemmas in Lower Kuttanad, an attempt is made in this thesis to make a look at an aspect mostly ignored and neglected by policy-makers while planning policies in this region, that is, the liaison that exist between the inhabitants and the region of Lower Kuttanad. With the focus fixed on the local beliefs in the region related with the land and the water, the present research tries to find the factors that tether the inhabitants together to the region of Lower Kuttanad. Such an understanding of the actual life in the region is expected to shed light on the real needs of the natives. I believe that appreciation of the sense of place of the inhabitants has to be strengthened, if a stable development is to be established.

The empirical work that is based on qualitative methods, analyses the many ways different groups of people comprehend and give meanings to place. Hopefully, the findings of this thesis may provide a novel way to consider life in Lower Kuttanad. I also hope, the present research will contribute to the anthropological discourse about people and landscapes.

## **Acknowledgements**

My thesis is an outcome of the support, encouragement and help extended by many people.

First of all I would like to thank Prof. Vigdis Broch-Due for supervising my project in an informative and helpful manner. She has allowed me to work confidently and has encouraged the process of independent writing and reflection. I also want to thank Dr. Bjørn Enge Bertelsen for his very informative lectures, and our seminar leaders Iselin Åsedotter Strønen, Tord Austdal, Margit Ystanes and Thomas Mountjoy for all their assistance. I also take this opportunity to thank Prof. Edvard Hviding, Head of the Department and all the employees at the Department of Social Anthropology, at the University of Bergen, who in some way or the other has helped me throughout my degree. I would like to express my gratitude to Lanakassen for the financial support. I thank all my friends and colleague students in Bergen for their friendship and anthropological exchanges.

An earnest appreciation goes to all my informants in Lower Kuttanad, who opened up their hearts and houses to me, for the duration of my fieldwork. Their genuine smiles and emotional interest in my research have encouraged me to write this thesis in the best and most honest way I could. I owe my sincere thanks to Elayamma and family at Champakulam for offering to share their home with me, and providing me with a roof over my head, during a houseless period of my fieldwork.

A special mention of thanks is extended to Dr. P.J. Cherian, Director of KCHR (Kerala Council of Historical Research) for all the help and support he has provided me. This dissertation would not have been possible without the encouragement and support of my parents and husband. I extend my heartfelt gratitude to Achacha, Amma and Ajay.

Although all of the individuals acknowledged above have helped me during my project, I fully take the responsibility for any mistakes my thesis might include.

## List of Figures

- Figure 1** - One of my informants catching fish from the river that flows in front of his house, using net, at Pulinkunnu in Lower Kuttanad.....18
- Figure 2** - Agricultural labourer women working under the supervision of their landlord at Champakulam in Lower Kuttanad.....20
- Figure 3** - The isolated habitats of labourers in the middle of vast stretches of paddy fields in Lower Kuttanad.....26
- Figure 4** - Labourer women working under heavy rains in the paddy fields of Lower Kuttanad wearing rain-coats and umbrellas.....33
- Figure 5** - A view of Lower Kuttanad in times of flood when the river, the road and the fields lay at the same level.....40
- Figure 6** - Partially submerged houses at the time of floods in Lower Kuttanad.....42
- Figure 7** - The view of a river filled with water-weeds (*pola*) making water transportation extremely difficult.....44
- Figure 8** - *Thozhilurappu* women clearing *pola* (water-weeds) from the water-bodies at Champakulam.....45
- Figure 9** - Water everywhere, but not a single drop to drink.....48
- Figure 10** - The newly tarred roads criss-crossing the length and breadth of Kuttanad...60

<b>Figure 11</b> - Vegetable gardens formed by reclaiming small portions of paddy fields.....	70
<b>Figure 12</b> - Filling of paddy fields for construction and other purposes by those who have lost interest in paddy cultivation.....	72
<b>Figure 13</b> - Women labourers, on their way to work through the green paddy fields, at Champakulam in Lower Kuttanad.....	74
<b>Figure 14</b> - Machines are replacing man. The use of tractors to plough the fields.....	76

## Chapter I

### Introduction

*“The past lives in art and memory, but it is not static: it shifts and changes as the present throw its shadow backwards. The landscape also changes, but far more slowly; it is a living link between what we were and what we have become. This is one of the reasons why we feel such a profound and apparently disproportionate anguish when a loved landscape is altered out of recognition; we lose not only a place, but ourselves, a continuity between the shifting phases of our life.”*

Dabble, 1979, *A Writer’s Britain: Landscape in Literature*

Landscape is not simply what we see, but a way of seeing: we see it with our eye but interpret it with our mind and ascribe values to landscape for intangible – spiritual – reasons. Landscape, can therefore be seen as a cultural construct, in which, our sense of place and memories inhere. Jackson sees landscape as a “*rich and beautiful book [that] is always open before us. We have but to learn to read it* (1984:8)”. Hoskins goes on to say, “*the landscape itself, to those who know how to read it alright, is the richest historical record we possess* (1955:14)”. This makes landscape, a mirror of our memories and myths encoded with meaning, which can be read and interpreted. A common theme underpinning the idea of the ideology of landscape itself, as the setting for everything we do, is that of the landscape as the repository of intangible values and human meanings that nurture our very existence. Hence, it can be argued that landscape and memory are inseparable, as landscape is the nerve centre of our personal and collective memories. In this context, the study of a region with peculiar geographic setting, where the inhabitants’ utmost dependency on resources, led to the formation of certain peculiar beliefs and rituals that still have a grip over their contemporary lives, become pertinent.



My fieldwork was done from June 2011 to January 2012 in Lower Kuttanad, the ‘granary’ of Kerala, the region where a considerable portion of rice was once produced in the State, where recent trends are increasingly showing signs of the disappearance of this ‘rice bowl’. As a region, where life is so much linked with key resources, the land and the water, Kuttanad is famous for its peculiar geographic features and paddy cultivation. An outcome of human intervention, which was formed by reclaiming swamps and relatively shallow backwaters for growing rice, the region comprises a number of villages having similar geographic, agrarian and living patterns. The water-bodies interweaving the length and breadth of this low-lying, waterlogged region once made this geographic area completely water-locked, leading to the evolution of a legendary existence, so unique to this region.

Lying on the southwest coast of India in the State of Kerala, Kuttanad is predominantly an agriculture belt of Kerala, where people are dependant on paddy cultivation and allied activities like fishing, animal husbandry, lime-shell collection, etcetera for livelihood. The area is also popular for its coconut cultivation, duck rearing and coir industry. This is the only region in the world, apart from Holland, where rice is cultivated below sea-level, which will be of great significance in view of the probable sea level rise caused by global warming. The cradle of communism in Kerala, this land area is also prominent for its agrarian unrests since mid 1900s. Almost detached from the rest of Kerala for a long time, the geography of this region had induced the inhabitants to be self-sufficient and evolve a very distinctive lifestyle, maintaining a perfect balance with the resources around them. But over the years, this region has come under the hold of intense and increasing changes and transformations, which has adversely affected its ecology as well as life and livelihood patterns of the inhabitants, leading to the disappearance of its popular physical features and the peculiar lifestyle. Being the ‘granary’ of the State, the problems in Kuttanad sequentially affects entire Kerala. As a region most noted for its political, economic and geographic characteristics, Kuttanad is quite a hot topic in news broadcasts as well as in the intellectual and academic circles. Still, almost all developmental activities undertaken and implemented so far have proved

to be failures, leading to the emergence of new dilemmas in the region. The present study is conducted against this background.

The key rationale behind the present research is to explore the intimate relationship between the inhabitants and the region, by focusing my study on the old local beliefs in the region that is found to bind them to their landscapes with a sense of place, that became formed through their intense dependency on resources as well as memories that connect them to a common past. As this research is done against the background of the failure of almost all developmental activities in the region, it is expected that the present study would illustrate a new way to approach the problems in the region, taking into account the mind-set of the inhabitants, which is anticipated to have constructive results in future developmental activities.

All through the six month period of my fieldwork, I stayed with a local family at Champakulam, a small village in this region and visited the neighbouring villages (Ramankari, Chennankari, Mampuzhakkary, Kainakari, Moncompu, Pulinkunnu, Kidangara, Nedumudi, and Kavalam) from there. The walks along the green paddy fields and the rides on the local canoes down the rivers that encircled the region, getting absorbed in the typical Kuttanadan life were dear to me all through my fieldwork period. Life everywhere was observed merging with the resources, the land and the water. Women labourers worked in the green paddy fields, half bend, with an old landlord or an overseer to supervise them, notwithstanding the hot sun and the heavy rains. Catching fish in the water-bodies that flowed around their habitats, in local canoes using nets or fishing rods was a regular sight. Men collected clay from the riverbeds. They used to plunge into the water and come up with loads of clay over their head. They bathed and swam in the water-bodies that zigzagged their region, and travelled even to the nook and corners, in their canoes. Almost all houses had local canoes or boats tied in front with strong coir ropes. The women washed clothes and vessels, or dressed the ducks and fish in the water that flowed around their homes with a manner they were so used to. Men climbed the coconut trees to pluck coconuts. The old ferry men ferried people across the rivers that paid them a few rupees for each ride. Drenched in water, women cleared the

water-weeds and children dressed in uniforms were often seen busy with their studies and school activities. The duck-men with their ducks, in the tents put up near the roadsides, were seen selling it and its eggs. Some were in the paddy fields feeding the ducks under the hot sun. Alongside this emblematic rural life of Lower Kuttanad, the new roads that networked the region were dynamic always with people and fast moving vehicles sounding their horns, as if announcing the approach of developments and urbanisation. These formed the common sights during my strolls in the field. The inhabitants had their own world to take care of, where they appeared to be quite busy, and as a researcher, I had made up my mind that my approach, should not in any way, trouble or obstruct their routines and lives. So I always moved with the tides. But the inhabitants were very obliging and forthcoming and I soon found myself in the track of my research. It is their accounts that form the foundation on which this present thesis is built.

Paddy field was the locus of my fieldwork, where my informants were mostly found and the site from which data was gathered. The paddy fields of Lower Kuttanad play a central role throughout this dissertation. Still, it is not the paddy field per se which forms the main contents and topics of this thesis, but rather it is where the root of the contents of this thesis lay. The focus of this dissertation is the old local beliefs that originated from the paddy fields of Kuttanad that is so much coupled with the local landscapes that fasten the inhabitants to the region and to a common past. Through the inhabitants' memories, beliefs, and narratives, a wider contextual and thematic field is opened up in this thesis, as the narratives does not only relate to local beliefs but also portrays the inhabitants' (both old and new generations') sense of place, attachments, mentalities, feelings, sentiments and emotions, their local religious beliefs, their livelihood patterns and the way their life is blend with the resources and life in the region. The condition of traditional occupations including paddy cultivation and people's attitude towards such hereditary occupations are also brought to our notice by their accounts. It also throws light on the demographic composition of present Lower Kuttanad, the manner of social grading as well as the changes in the relationship between the various social sections. What's more, their narratives depict the impact of developments, education, urbanisation and the coming in of 'money' in the region as well as the

migration patterns to places outside Kuttanad. Moreover the problems and difficulties inhabitants face in the region and the plight of the developmental activities is also revealed by their accounts; in short, the transformations that have transpired the region and the inhabitants en bloc have been covered. All of this together forms the chapters of this thesis.

The people-landscape relationship, viewed through the lens of old local beliefs that form the main subject of concern in this thesis, is explained using theories of gift and landscapes, giving importance to the sense of place of the inhabitants. An in-depth analysis of the data collected from the field, reveals how the notion of “the gift” is entwined with life and resources in Lower Kuttanad. The way in which the gift logic is embedded in the landscape moves the issues about “place” and “place-making” to the fore of my analysis. Symbolic and ecological concerns that have been for decades treated as separate domains of different kinds of scholars, have lately been merging together and are studied simultaneously, resulting in fresh discoveries as remarked by Shipton (1994). Hence research in this area is expected to facilitate a deeper understanding of the relation between land and people. The gift system in Lower Kuttanad has been analysed and explicated with the help of ideas provided by Mauss (1925), Davis (2000), Bataille (1988), Nietzsche (1889), Tausig (1995) and Sahlins (1996). Generalized theories are useful tools with which to grasp complex realities.

A number of anthropological studies exist on the relationship between people and landscapes, with focus on the diverse aspects connected with it. In this regard, there is literature related with political ecology, which touches upon a wide range of topics like ethno-ecology, environmental conflicts, natural resource management, and so on. Haenn (2005) for example, examines how ethno-ecologies played out in contests around conservation, and discusses the possibilities for a localized, alternative environmentalism in her study of Mexican conservation. Likewise, in his study of the new forest laws in Cameroon, Geschiere (2004) discusses how developments that tries to bypass the state and to reach ‘the local community’, can promote worrying forms of exclusion and xenophobia. The local politics at play in Mozambique at the time of elections is exposed

by Bertelsen (2003; 2004), relating politics to the local traditional beliefs of the region. Biersack (2006) in her study of the Porega valley in Papua New Guinea and Sivaramakrishnan (2000) in his research work of the forests of West Bengal, represent the adverse effect of developmental activities on the environment and its inhabitants, throwing light on the local politics involved in matters concerning political ecology.

In her analysis of tribal politics and discourses of environmentalism, Baviskar (2003) argues that the discourse of environmentalism is neither consistent nor complete, but consists of the interweaving of often contradictory political thought and action. In the same way, Katz (2000) in her researches conducted in Sudan on poverty and deforestation and Giles-Vernick (2000) in her research on migration and indigeneity in the Sangha river basin of equatorial Africa, also deal with areas related to political ecology, that are so much involved with the inhabitants of the region. Schroeder (2000) can be seen giving attention to gender in political ecology, in his analysis of the environmental policies, practises and its impact on gendered patterns of resource access and control, within a set of critical rural livelihood systems in the Gambian river basin.

Shifting our attention from political ecology, when we look at nature-culture dichotomies, numerous studies have come in this area also, such as that of Basso (1996) who in his investigation of the western Apache people shows how history is inextricably entwined with places. MacCormack (1980) explores this subject with a focus on how gender has been assumed to fit into the debate. She undermines the notion that nature is either a cross-cultural constant or a historical constant. The case study of Strathern (1980) regarding the Hagen people of Papua New Guinea highlands, illustrates nature-culture dualism as a distinctive western way of organising reality. Challenging structuralist notions of nature and culture as a universal (and gendered) binary, Strathern's cross-cultural study illustrates the extent to which the nature-culture dualism, as well as, discrete notions of 'nature' and 'culture', are distinctly western pre-occupations. Ingold (2000) offers a persuasive approach to understanding how human beings perceive their surroundings, in his work on the Cree people. It revolutionizes the way we think about what is 'biological' and 'cultural' in humans, about evolution and history, and what it

means for human being to inhabit an environment. At the same time, Bloch (1995) in his research shows the way the people of Zafimaniry attribute values to places. The dualism of nature and society in the age of post modernity is discussed by Palsson (2006) focusing on the practical and theoretical implications of anthropological attempts to go beyond it, in his study done in the context of Icelandic fishing. The over-exploitation of the north Pacific fur seal in the years between 1870 and 1911 is exposed by Castree (1997) in the milieu of nature-culture debates.

Jerking our concerns from nature-culture dichotomies and moving on to more anthropological studies related to the rapport between land and people, those connected with resource management are noteworthy. The studies made by Wilson (2005) and Murphree (2005) about the spread of community based resource management in Mozambique and Zimbabwe respectively, demonstrate the vital role communities can play in conserving nature and resources. The Kayapo Indians who are described as effective managers of tropical forests is upheld by Posey (1985), to show how this indigenous group manages their resources. The attempts made to secure the support of forest edge-populations, by linking conservation to the provision of socio-economic benefits, with a view to provide grounds for establishing more 'participatory forms of conservation planning are illustrated by Fairhead and Leach (1994) in their work. Dahlberg and Blaikie (1999) suggests an approach for using different types of data sources, for bringing together understandings of eco-system dynamics and people's interaction with the environment in a contested terrain, by investigating the environmental and socio-economic history of a village in north-eastern Botswana. At the same time, Ashley (1998) moves on to outline the community involvement in tourism in Namibia. Although much has been discovered on the relationship between people and landscapes, there is still a long way ahead to reach a complete understanding of this field.

Apart from the wide streams of anthropological works worldwide related with people and landscapes, when we make a review of the available literature on Lower Kuttanad, it shows that research on this region till recent times were essentially concerned with economic and political aspects. With several studies by the government,

agricultural universities, scientists and economics, Kuttanad might give the impression of a region that has been well-researched. Yet historical and anthropological studies of the region are truly scarce. Special mention is made here to the scientific studies of Dr. M. S. Swaminathan to mitigate the agrarian distress in Kuttanad. The study by V.R. Pillar and P.G.K Panikkar (1965) is an economic study of reclamation cultivation in the region. Joseph Tharamangalam (1981), Jose George (1992), K.C. Alexander (1973), Alex George (1987), A.V, Jose (1977), and Vishwanath Iyer analyse aspects of agricultural working class mobilization in the region. The study by K.T. Rammohan (2006) is primarily an exploration of the region through the lens of economic history. K.P. Kannan (1979), B.M. Kurup (2000) and A.N. Balchand (1983) have dealt with specific ecological problems.

An important lacuna in the writings and studies of earlier scholars is their tendency to ignore or play down the importance of the interaction between land and people. The importance of these scholarly contributions is not ignored. At the same time, the present study with its emphasis on the local beliefs that have powerful grip over the land-people relationship in the region of Lower Kuttanad is expected to generate a new knowledge of the region and a fine contribution to researches on the relation between people and landscapes in general.

The body of this thesis has been explained and analysed with the help of a number of theoretical and scholarly contributions that have already come in the fields of landscapes, memories, rituals, sense of place etcetera. A quick glimpse at a few of the included literature leads us to Coppack ((1994) who discusses the role of rural sentiments and landscapes in contriving sense of place. He writes about how changing attitudes about the past have created a sentimental and contrived vernacular landscape within the Toronto urban field, with special reference to Elora, Ontario. A theological study of the sense of place is made by Burton-Christie (1999) where she inquires about the issue of place and its influence upon the spiritual life of persons and communities. The focus of analysis of Graham et.al (2009) is the role of historical environment in shaping what

individuals think and feel about where they live – their sense of place and the connection that lay between historic environment, sense of place and social capital.

The study on culture loss and sense of place in Alaska made by Snyder et.al (2003) claim that property does not exist without people to make it meaningful. Their work builds on disciplined and inter-disciplinary perspectives on culture loss that have emerged during various attempts to assess natural resource damage. In her attempt to relate time and landscape Bender (2002) explains how people, differently placed, engage with the world around them and with the past embedded in the landscape. She emphasis's people's sense of place and belonging, and moves beyond the local to encompass a nested series of socio-political landscapes. In his study of land, cultures, symbols and metaphysics in tropical Africa, Shipton (1994) argues that land textures are extremely difficult to deal with. He tries to blend ecological and symbolic approaches to land tenure and the myriad of possible interactions it creates. While a study of prehistoric Ostergotland in Sweden is made by Sahlqvist (2001) to gain a reasonable compression of landscape history and territorial structure, Seigel (1999) investigates the evolution of social power in prehistoric Puerto Rico, with his focus on the ceremonial spaces that ultimately became contested places and places of contest. Cultural adaptations of indigenous populations and the cultural and ecological changes stimulated by non-indigenous societies in Amazonia forms the main area of discussion of Sponsel (1986).

Developments and related changes have been discussed with the support of a number of scholarly works like Taylor, et.al (2006) who have studied the effects migration of inhabitants from Guatemala to USA have on gender relations, ethnicity, land use and land distribution. The transformations in Latin American cities and rural landscapes due to globalisation of travel, technology, market and ideas are brought forth by Spalding (2011). She sketches how new migration patterns affect local livelihoods, cultures and natural ecosystems through alternative employment opportunities, growing economic disparities, and land cover change due to new forms of land use.



In his study of the Indonesian rain forests, Tsing (2005) writes about the ‘friction’ caused locally by globalisation. He explores the social links and the cultural practises that made deforestation a destructive business, and traces the role of the local, national and international powers at play in the region. Sivaramakrishnan (2008) scrutinize processes of local state-making in the forests of West Bengal, India, to reveal key tensions between development and democratisation through an ethnography, of political action. Through his writing, Roe (1991) has given an account of how to make use of previous development knowledge and argues that instead of calling for more site-specific learning to overthrow narratives that seem to be blueprints for development interventions across countries, the wiser course is first to examine ways in which these narratives can be improved or superseded.

To analyse the migration of inhabitants from my study area to places outside the region, I included the work of Norton (1973) who in his study of marital migration, analyses marriage records from six towns in Essex County, Massachusetts and determines the extent of migration at the time of marriage. In his research on migration and agricultural change in highland Ecuador, Jokisch (2002) examines the effects of international migration on agricultural production and land-use, whereas, in the study of the migrants from the rural areas of Norway, Rye (2006) analysis rural to urban migration, from the perspective of the rural migrants, rather than from that of the rural societies. The research done by Linares (2003) of the Jola of Senegal compares the dynamics of migration among the villages and explores variations along gender and generational lines, and argues that the movement of people from the countryside to the city has had a negative effect on local food production. Hill (1978) illustrates how in the food growing villages of Fanteland, where maize and cassava are produced both for sale and local consumption, a farmer is conceived of as neither an individual male nor female but as a husband and wife, who work as symbiotic relationships. The high incidence of spouselessness and the way outward migration of young persons, affects the life in Fanteland are discussed. The condition of unemployed educated youth, in the north Indian city of Meerut is exposed by Jefferey (2010). He uses a discussion of these young

men's predicament, to argue for an ethnographically sensitive political economy approach to the study of youth, culture and neo-liberal transformation.

I have also incorporated the ideas of Benjamin (1973), who chooses to engage with the historicity of urbanism, through the lyrical poetry of Baudelaire, to analysis how and to what extent urban experience is determined by historical conditions, and to account for the differences among modernities. In his writing on social imaginaries, Taylor (2004) sets out his idea of the social imaginary as a broad understanding of the way a given people imagine their collective social life. A number of themes, questions and concerns centering on the promotion of community-based natural resource management programmes and policies are discussed by Brosius, et.al (1998). This is studied against the background of the emergence of loosely woven transnational movements, based particularly on advocacy by non-governmental organisations working with local groups and communities on the one hand, and national and transnational organisations on the other, to built and extent new versions of environmental and social advocacy that link social justice and environmental management agendas.

These scholarly contributions have much in common, at the same time, differs substantially from each other. These theoretical contributions explain quite well, the dilemma in Lower Kuttanad, which is important for understanding the background of my study as well as to get an outline of the subject matter. The M.Phil course in the Department of Anthropology for Development, led by Professor Vigdis Broch-Due and Dr. Bjorn Enge Bertelsen, supported a great deal in the anthropological analysis of my field. Their lectures and course material related with gifts and landscapes assisted me to get a good grasp of my field.

In the coming thematic chapters, based on my research, an analytical discussion is made on the different ways used by the natives, to make sense of their region of habitation in Lower Kuttanad. These are elaborated through my informants' narratives of a past their memories could recall, escorted by my own observations in the field. The notion of "the gift" can be found plaited into the pages of this thesis. A glimpse at the

contents of each of the chapters in the thesis will be of help to get an outline of the subject matter.

Chapter two of this thesis introduces the local notions of sacrifices, life and death and discusses the inhabitants' spiritual connection to their land. An effort is made in this chapter, to bring the energy and vibrancy of their past to life, through the memories of my informants. The discussion addresses the old practise of human sacrifices in the breached mud-bunds of Kuttanad. The ways people talk and think about recent and distant events is tracked.

Chapter three sets the scene for a discussion of the darker side of the setting, where the cycle of blessings and curses in the region are analysed. The dilemmas allied with the region and its inhabitants that fasten them together as well as repel them, is brought forth by the accounts of my informants in Lower Kuttanad. By taking in, the history of the land, these responses of my informants are part of the problems of this precarious environment.

In the pursuit of improved living standards, we have, nevertheless allowed ourselves to become disconnected from nature, and tend not to notice when it is damaged or taken away. For all their history, the people of Lower Kuttanad have been shaped by nature, whilst shaping it in return. But in recent years, they are losing the stories, memories and language about land and nature. In chapter four, I move on to discuss the changes and transformations that have come up in the landscapes, life and lifestyle of the inhabitants and the region with the coming in of developments. There are, of course, many threats, which may come to undermine much of the remarkable progress. The discussions will provide a preliminary assumption, to what we can expect to find in Lower Kuttanad at present.

Finally the concluding chapter five is an effort to thread together all that I have incorporated in the body of this thesis. The main findings and results of each of my chapters are summed up and thoroughly analyzed.

In order to enter the 'life worlds' of informants, various methodological approaches are employed by researchers. There is no direct access to people's feelings or thoughts unless they are given social expressions. The contents of this thesis are all based in empirical data gathered in the field. My means of accretion of information was mostly conducted through participant observation which included interviews (both individual and group) and personal observation. Being a native of this region, I had access to almost everyone and everywhere. My identity as a Christian denied my access to many of the Hindu temples in the region, even though, that was compensated by my informants' sincere accounts. I worked hard to be able to gain my informants' confidence, as I had realised that without it, I would be completely lost. None of my informants were forced to discuss their problems or thoughts with me, but they still chose to do so. All of my interactions were therefore on a personal basis. The cooperation of my informants helped me to carry on my fieldwork smoothly. Group interviews were also done to get a broader understanding of important issues. Most of these interviews were conducted in a semi-structural manner. I had prepared certain questions in advance, but at the same time, I let my interviewees do most of the talking and directing the conversation in a manner suitable for them. Interview techniques were adjusted to the differing situations. Sometimes I used to be the one guiding the conversation along, in reference to my already prepared set of questions. I had a handy recorder that recorded the conversations, with my informants' permission and also a camera to capture life in the region. The meetings with my informants either took place at their homes or working place. I conducted interviews with inhabitants from all walks of life in the region, which helped to make my data analysis more productive. Even though the present study is on an entirely fresh topic relating to the region, my previous knowledge of the region and the local language were helpful in my interactions with the inhabitants that made data collection and analysis undemanding.

The topic of my research became more and more intimate throughout my fieldwork. Narratives, which can be described as 'stories people tell about themselves', described the situations, phenomenon and experiences made and articulated by my

informants. Narratives were tools used by my informants for making sense of events in their lives, and took the shape of short or long, relatively straightforward or confusingly complex phrases, statements or stories. My informants narrated various experiences at several occasions and some even talked of specific childhood events or concerns and hopes for the future. Hence the temporal tenses past, present and future were often mixed. Such time upheaval did not represent a problem, but rather opened up the possibility for understanding the historical and social relations in the wider (macro) context in which informants found themselves. Additionally, the topics raised and reflected upon within the inhabitants' narratives opened up new areas for me to probe into. Through narratives, both my informants and I were able to relate subjective experiences and meanings to a contextual reality. It functions as patterns for the upholding of future events, and influences, and shapes discourses to come. Although the topic discussed in this thesis (the relationship between people and landscapes) might be conceived as a universal problem, it is also individually and contextually formed, expressed, experienced and perceived. "It came as a revelation to him to learn, by way of medical anthropology, that humans live in bodies, whereas previously he thought they lived in communities (Frankenburg in Scheper-Hughes 1994:229)". As discussed above, narratives and the person who tells them, is always a product of both micro and macro relations. Macro relations leave their traces in the body, and although people embody societal structures, these structures are still expressed through their narratives (Good 1994). Through focusing upon 'the person' as a comparative category, we are therefore capable of gaining access to the individual's surrounding 'society', while additionally being as true to informants' experiences and own articulations of these experiences as possible.

Struggling to represent chaotic real life into academic, anthropologic framework is probably something which is experienced by everyone who 'returns' from the field, but when submerged in difficult anthropological questions, the problem might seem even more taxing. It is primarily when we try to transform the richness of human life and thoughts, waving green paddy fields, and the meandering rivers, the smell of clay and soaked coconut husks and the hardworking and seemingly happy people into sterile, computerized language which knows no colours, no smells and no emotions that most

difficulties are encountered. The conversation of the empirical field, when converted into a written text, can necessarily only give a glimpse of a 'world' that in all its complexities has become so dear, and so much a part of ourselves that even such a small peek by researchers might feel a betrayal upon those narratives which have been trusted in our care. As I want to tell my informants' stories of their struggle with the forces of land and water and the difficulties and problems they face in the region, a certain amount of analytical distance is necessary to put my points across within a valid anthropological and academic discourse. 'Translations' of 'real life' into text, everyday to academic, Malayalam to English language, will always falter as the text will never be able to catch individual variations or subjective forms and practices, which do not fit the theoretical 'formulas'.

I have also had to be concerned with a few ethically oriented tribulations in the 'writing phase' of this thesis. My data has not only needed taming to be able to make an anthropologically valid analysis, but has also required sensitivity concerning ethical aspects such as for instance mentioning of the caste of individuals (my informants) which has been omitted in this thesis even though general matters concerning castes and social positioning has been included. The names, ages, place of residence and narratives given in the thesis are real and unchanged but those informants who requested not to disclose their names has been omitted even though the information they provided were included in the thesis. Studies on the relationship between people and landscapes rather has a universal character but a study on such a relationship with special focus on the old local beliefs, as done in this thesis, is the first of its kind in this region. Hence a sincere effort is made in this thesis, to show the manner in which the life of inhabitants blends with the resources of Lower Kuttanad.

## Chapter II

### The Practise of Human Sacrifice and Belief in Death Giving Way to Life

“My *Thampran*, why did you not tell me early? Would I not have voluntarily sacrificed myself for your sake?” the *Pulaya*’s word reverberated as huge piles of mud and garbage rose up to his neck burying him alive inside the bund.’

- *Folklore from Lower Kuttanad*<sup>1</sup>

Human sacrifices are believed, by the inhabitants of Lower Kuttanad, to have been the ultimate way to save the paddy fields when the bunds breached in times of heavy floods. Surrounded by water on all sides, cultivation was done 2 to 2.5 meters below water level and when the mud bunds encircling the fields breached, there was no other way for the inhabitants, but to look helplessly at their fields getting submerged in water. A tear-jerking moment, when all their efforts, pains, hopes and dreams gets washed away and it was at this hopeless instance that the labourers were ready to make the supreme ‘sacrifice’, in order to save the crop, to serve their landlord (*Thampuran*) and to give life. “It is because of the death of many of the labourers that we are living now. It is their death that gave us life,” Sukumari an old agricultural labourer from Champakulam, raised her voice with pride as she told this to me.

#### **A life blend with land and water**

In Lower Kuttanad a lot of fields have got destroyed due to breaches of bunds at different times. But breaching was never a reason for the optimistic inhabitants to abandon cultivation at any time in their life.<sup>2</sup> Life in Kuttanad involved the boldness in

---

<sup>1</sup> Anandavalli – 58 – Agricultural labourer – Champakulam 3 September 2011 – Saturday.

<sup>2</sup> Raghavan chettan aged 82. Interviewed on 21 Thursday 2011 - Wednesday

taking risks and performing timely actions. When breaches happened, the entire people worked together, without regarding their caste, religion, or social positions, forgetting all their quarrels, to protect the field. Only then will there be 'life' in Lower Kuttanad. Otherwise there will be distress for all.<sup>3</sup> 'The paddy field was our life itself', remembers Nanu, an old agricultural labourer. Everyone's life depended on the paddy field and paddy cultivation. "Our parents were born in the field, they lived in the field and died in the field," recalls Raghavan who was born and brought up in this region itself.

Their attachment to the place was further strengthened by the fact that they were the 'creators' of this region. It is often said about this region that 'God created earth but man created Kuttanad'<sup>4</sup>. It was the low caste labourers who strived day and night to create 'Lower Kuttanad', 'the abode of food producers', from water with the help of the finance supplied by their landlords (*Thampurakkal*). With more of water area than land area it was with the inhabitants' efforts and interventions that the vast stretches of paddy fields that are seen now were reclaimed from the waters. They have a sound history of human toil over local resources and a long past of social evolution and formation. But what is important for us is that in course of time the paddy field turned out to be the life and life giver of the inhabitants in this region based on which they developed their own local beliefs.

Water-locked and geographically isolated, this region was one of the remotest in Kerala, reachable only with the help of *vallam*, a local canoe, till very recent past. Therefore it is reasonable to believe that the seclusion and peculiar geographic setting made the inhabitants to depend entirely on the resources around them for subsistence. "Our land gave us everything. Water gave us fish and land gave us rice and coconuts. Our land never left us go hungry. We could catch fish from the rivers that flowed in front of our houses" expounded Neeleswari, an agricultural labourer from Champakulam.<sup>5</sup> This created a sense of attachment to their region and love for it. The inhabitants experienced a

---

<sup>3</sup> Raghavan chettan a landlord and his labourer women, from Champakulam. Interviewed on 20 July 2011 Wednesday

<sup>4</sup> Nanuchon an agricultural labourer, aged 78, from Champakulam. Interviewed on 19 September 2011 – Monday

<sup>5</sup> Neeleswari – agricultural labourer – 48 – Champakulam 30 September 2011 - Friday



motherly love from the resources surrounding them. Life in Lower Kuttanad involved constant relation with the forces of land and water. In the cross-disciplinary study of prehistoric Ostergotland in Sweden, Sahlqvist (2001) claims that people's conception of the world which subsequently can be considered a fundamental base for interpretations of early cultural landscapes, has its origins in a familiarity with nature and in the different ways of taking advantage of its resources. The manner in which the people of Lower Kuttanad made sense of their place can be thus anticipated to be due to their long-standing familiarity with their land and waters. The more the physical involvement with the resources (the land and the water), the more was the inhabitants' attachment towards it.



Fig.1. One of my informants catching fish from the river that flows in front of his house using net at Pulinkunnu in Lower Kuttanad.

Ownership of fields and financing of cultivation which involved great risks had made the landlords (*Thampurakkal*) attached to the region, but in a way different from what was experienced by the labourers who were the 'sons of soil'. The high degree of dependency and labour on land and water made the labourers feel more attached to the place and its resources than the *Thampurakkal* both physically and emotionally. The challenges imposed by resources from time to time were jointly faced and overcome by

the *Thampurakkal* and labourers. Profit and loss, life and death depended on the timely actions undertaken by the inhabitants which required the energy of so many people. Their united efforts created a strong feeling of unity and intimacy among the inhabitants, especially among the labourers. The greatest challenge faced by them was posed by the forces of water in the form of floods. Floods brought great loss to the inhabitants by destroying cultivation and causing 'death'. As one of my informants expressed, "When floods come, death is happening to man as well as to his efforts"<sup>6</sup>. The risk factor was very high due to the temporary mud bunds that could breach at anytime.<sup>7</sup> Resources played an active role in the daily activities of the people and interacted with every component of their life. The challenges imposed by resources adapted the population to the region corresponding to Sponsel's (1986) account, of the ways in which a human population adapts to their surroundings, in his study of the Amazon ecology and adaptation. In a similar manner, the inhabitants' respect for, and the way in which they settled themselves within the bounds of this water-locked region, reminds us of Weeratunge's (2000) claim in her research on globalization and local business cultures in Sri Lanka and Pakistan, that traditional cultures are generally characterised by their respect for and ability to live within the constraints of nature.

### **Concentration of power and dependency on the Thampuran**

With all land in the hands of the landlords, *Thampurakkal*, the labourers and their families had nothing to own and they lived and toiled on their *Thampuran*'s land. The landlords were from upper castes and communities who included the Nayars, Namboodiris, Pattars and Syrian Christians and labourers who worked in the fields were drawn from the lower orders especially the Ezhavas, Pulayas and Parayas. With nothing to possess they depended on their *Thampurakkal* for practically everything. Gradually a personal bond of allegiance developed that bound them so strongly to their *Thampurakkal* that it was difficult for them to extricate the personal bond that was passed down in hereditary manner from one generation to another.<sup>8</sup> This virtual enslavement of the

---

<sup>6</sup> Raghu, mechanic in a workshop, aged 38, from Champakulam. Interviewed on 24 November 2011 – Thursday

<sup>7</sup> Suresh, a Social worker, aged 32, from Kainakari. Interviewed on 18 November 2011 - Friday

<sup>8</sup> Anandavalli – 58 – Agricultural labourer – Champakulam 3 September 2011 - Saturday

landless to the landlords matches the observations made by Seigel (1999), that the source of power and how power is harnessed in social contexts is fundamental in describing specific trajectories of social change and complexity, in his exploration of the contested places in pre-historic Puerto Rico.



Fig.2. Agricultural labourer women working under the supervision of their landlord at Champakulam in Lower Kuttanad.

With no awareness of the outside world, the labourers believed Lower Kuttanad to be their world and accepted life as it was in this region. The labourers worked all their life for the *Thampurakkal* and gifted all their energy to them and to the resources here. They had the same feeling of attachment and dependency to their *Thampuran* as they had towards their resources. The labourers are said to have been exceptionally loyal to their *Thampurakkal*. Their *Thampuran*'s field was more important than life to them that they were ready to offer even their own life for protecting the fields.<sup>9</sup> They only took pride in becoming part of creation of 'life'. Nietzsche (1889) tells about the joy of representation involved in giving without receiving. Death was the greatest gift the labourers could give to their *Thampuran*, to their land, water and to other inhabitants of this region who were

---

<sup>9</sup> Bhaskaran, a Communist Party member, aged 40, from Pulinkunnu. Interviewed on 2 November 2011 – Wednesday.

their dear ones.<sup>10</sup> “They are the unrecognized heroes of this region,” states Dasappan, “they gave all that they had without receiving anything in return.”<sup>11</sup> The nature of the labourers’ unselfishness in giving without expecting anything in return is in unison with Bataille’s (1988) gift of the sun.

### **Local spirituality**

Perhaps the incarceration by nature, their dependency and attachment to resources, the high risks and difficulties involved in life and occupation might have facilitated in increasing the inhabitants’ religiosity. But human sacrifice was not formally part of any religion. It was a practise, an ‘extreme’ practise, of the region, due to its peculiar set up. The belief was that when a human being is buried at the breached bund, the water would stop, and the fields would be rescued. But gradually the practise of human sacrifice became part of their religion. Their intimacy, dependency and attachment to land and water led them (especially the inhabitants who are Hindus) to personify and worship their resources as *Devi*, Goddess, and believe and consider the challenges imposed by resources as challenges imposed by *Devi* itself. This is in par with the study made by Shipton of land and culture in tropical Africa, in which he asserts that “religion, ritual and cognition on the one hand and adaptation, sustenance and production on the other, cannot be kept pure of each other (1994:347)”.

Land was worshipped as *Bhumi Devi*, the Goddess of Earth as it was all over India. Death in human sacrifice was believed by some as *Bhumi Devi* taking away her sons from the life of suffering like how in the Indian Epic, *Ramayanam*, Sita was taken into the depths of earth. According to Indian beliefs *Bhumi Devi* (Goddess of Earth) is the mother of Sita, the heroine of *Ramayanam* who is the wife of Raman the hero of the Epic. The story goes that when Sita got back to Raman after her abduction by Ravan, the villain in the Epic, Raman doubted her chastity and she had to submit herself to trials put up by Raman, in which her innocence was exposed. Not bearing the suffering her

---

<sup>10</sup> Murali, an agricultural labourer and member of the Marxist Party, aged 60 from Champakulam. Interviewed on 21 Thursday 2011 - Wednesday

<sup>11</sup> Dasappan, an agricultural labourer and member of the Marxist Party, aged 60 from Champakulam. Interviewed on 21 Thursday 2011 - Wednesday

daughter had to go through, *Bhumi Devi*, (Goddess of Earth) her mother, took her instantly into the earth. These beliefs connect them to a landscape where they see their history embedded.

Lower Kuttanad mostly has *Devi* (Goddess) temples where the idol is *Bhadhrakali*, Goddess of Sacrifice. As most of the idols in the local temples are that of *Bhadhra*, their concept of Goddess, (*Devi*) is that of *Bhadhra*, even when it comes to land (*Bhumi*) and *Bhumi Devi*. *Bhadhrakali*, the Goddess of Sacrifice, a very powerful *Devi* (Goddess) in Indian beliefs is supposed to be angry and get pleased very fast. So it was held that it was when *Bhadhra* (Goddess of Sacrifice) was angry that water breaches the bunds and enters the fields and destroys everything. She is also called as *Sakthi* which means ‘power’. Human sacrifice was believed to have been conducted to please the *Devi* (Goddess) and to quench her anger by offering her son (labourer) as sacrifice. Death was given as a gift to the *Devi* to get life in return, in the way how Mauss (1967) explains ‘gift’ as emblematic of balanced exchange. The placing of *Bhadhra* (Goddess of Sacrifice) as idol in the local temples and the human sacrifices in this region might have had some connection.

While all this was part of the local Hindu belief, my Christian informant Annamma, who is a labourer herself, explained, while sitting with her other Christian companions, “We Christians have no belief in *Bhumi Devi* (Goddess of Earth). But we respect the Hindu belief and believe that God blesses those who are true and sincere at work in the fields. In our church also sacrifice is being conducted during daily mass when Jesus Christ, the son of God is being sacrificed. In the Bible also there are a lot of instances where sacrifices were conducted.” She referred to the Old Testament where Abraham was asked to sacrifice his son Isaac by God. “And in Puthuppally Church,<sup>12</sup>” she continued as others agreed to her, “cock sacrifices are done even now. So we too have belief in sacrifice even though the context is different.” This belief in sacrifice

---

<sup>12</sup> A Church in the Kottayam District of Kerala. Kottayam is a neighbouring town in Kuttanad.

among the inhabitants might have been the motivation behind human sacrifices, decades back.<sup>13</sup>

Karthikeyan, a fisherman from Kidangara justifies that “Water is not only the life giver but also the one which sustains life on earth. If water is so sacred and precious, then the wetlands which hold water must be equally sacred and it should be protected as one guards his own life.”<sup>14</sup> Hence the old labourers regarded the paddy fields as a very sacred place in the past. They respected the paddy field as temple itself. *Vayal* the Malayalam word for ‘field’ means ‘temple’ in Sanskrit. They walked bare footed in the field like how they enter the temple and spoke about the field and the tools used therein with great respect. They never allowed it to get ‘polluted’ and never allowed ‘polluted’ women to enter in. Rice the product of their sweat was also considered sacred and was given as offering to *Devi* (Goddess).<sup>15</sup> Harvest was a time to know the mind of *Devi* whether she was pleased or angry with them.<sup>16</sup> “Those who steal rice from the fields and those who breach the bunds will not live upto the next harvest” was the local belief.<sup>17</sup> They believed that the *Devi* blesses sincere and hard work. They developed various beliefs, rituals and customs, giving divinity to the resources that they blindly believed, and which played a major role in shaping their thoughts and life. In the study of Ostergotland in Sweden, Sahlqvist (2001) exposes how a world view conjoins bits of experiences and invests the whole with meaning. Similarly, the inhabitants’ familiarity and experiences with the land and the waters surrounding them, made them formulate their own conceptions of the world around them in Lower Kuttanad.

### **Blind belief in the ritual**

The labourers’ blind belief in the practise of human sacrifice turned it to be a very sacred ritual at a point of time. Anandavalli, an agricultural labourer woman from Champakulam remembers an incident that happened in Mathikayal, which she had heard

---

<sup>13</sup> Annamma, Thozhilurappu woman, aged 56 from Pulinkunnu. Interviewed on 13 July 2011 Wednesday

<sup>14</sup> Karthikeyan, a fisher man, aged 53, from Kidangara. Interviewed on 26 November 2011 – Saturday

<sup>15</sup> Nanuchon an agricultural labourer, aged 78, from Champakulam. Interviewed on 19 September 2011 – Monday

<sup>16</sup> Kunjanpavan, an agricultural labourer, aged 73, from Mampuzhakkary. Interviewed on 9 September - Friday

<sup>17</sup> Mannan, a politician, aged 35, from Moncompu. Interviewed on 18 November 2011 - Friday

when she was young, “When the breach happened in Mathikayal they all tried a lot to stop the breach but it was not stopping so they did *puja* (ritual) and found out that human sacrifice has to be done”.<sup>18</sup> Their feelings of attachment, dependency and religiosity made the labourers ready to throw themselves into the breaches to stem the rushing water, as sacrifice to *Devi* so that others get ‘life’. Such sacrifices were made not under duress but out of a deep sense of personal loyalty and devotion, which the system had engendered. Their strong faith in *Devi*, their *Thampuran* and resources took away their fear of death.

“Many men have been ‘sacrificed’ in the bunds,” utters Radha. Some of the sacrifices were done even without the knowledge of the person who was to be sacrificed. Breach causes great loss to the landlords and so they would accept whatever way to prevent it, and they knew that human sacrifices have the power to stop the breach.<sup>19</sup> It is told that the *Thampuran* (landlord) used to decide the target labourer for sacrifice in consultation with his supporters which included also the temple authorities. This was done by pushing a *Pulayan* or a *Parayan* labourer into the unfinished or breached bund and burying him under a load of clay. In times of breaches it was the labourers who did all the work and the risk was more for them. Many have died jumping and falling into the breaches.<sup>20</sup> A number of ‘sacrifices’ have also happened at the time of large scale land reclamation activities in the 1800s, according to my informants. Death at the breaches, they say, was very common earlier and this points to Morton’s argument in his research on the Central Australian myths related with the transformation of subjects into objects, that, “men’s creation of the country is premised on death (1989:281)”. Gradually even accidents in the bunds were regarded as sacrifice.<sup>21</sup> The local rituals and customs augmented their feelings of attachment to the place and its resources.

The *Thampurakkal* (landlords) who in course of time became educated and who had more contacts with the outside world took advantage of their labourers’ ignorance in

---

<sup>18</sup> Anandavalli – 58 – Agricultural labourer – Champakulam 3 September 2011 - Saturday

<sup>19</sup> Radha, an agricultural labourer, aged 57, from Champakulam. Interviewed on 25 September 2011 – Sunday.

<sup>20</sup> Radha, an agricultural labourer, aged 57, from Champakulam. Interviewed on 25 September 2011 – Sunday.

<sup>21</sup> Neeleswari – agricultural labourer – 48 – Champakulam 30 September 2011 – Friday.

ways that suited them, which in some instances resulted in the practise of human sacrifice. In his work on the contested places in Puerto Rico, Seigel (1999) has written about the manner in which politically motivated individuals accrue power by controlling the rituals and ceremonies that are of fundamental importance for maintaining and reproducing society. Correspondingly the *thampurakkal* in Lower Kuttanad always made full use of the power, concentrated in their hands, to suit their interests. Since paddy cultivation involves great risk and co-operation it was very necessary for the *Thampurakkal* to maintain good relationship with all inhabitants and therefore to keep aside their feelings of caste and superiority. Both of them needed each other for survival as characteristic of balanced exchange that Mauss (1967) has discussed about. Nobody knows or remembers as to when and how the practise of human sacrifice began. But as Douglass (1970) suggests, material culture and symbolic meanings serve to reproduce the reigning cosmology within subsequent generations. None of my old informants have personally witnessed any human sacrifice but they have heard about it from their parents and grandparents whom they say have witnessed it in person. Some among my informants have experienced and witnessed accidents and accidental deaths at the bunds during breaches some of which they doubt to be murders even though there are no proofs of the same.<sup>22</sup>

### **The public secret**

The stories and reasons behind human sacrifices are varied which is a ‘public secret’ as Rajappan, one of my informants from Ramankari, told. Women, land and surprisingly enough, participation in the activities of the Communist Party in its initial stages which I will be discussing in detail later, are mentioned as three major secret reasons behind some of the human sacrifices. This is apart from the numerous other undisclosed reasons which still lie buried in the bunds until now.

The beauty of dark complexioned Kuttanadan labourer women is always praised by the poets of Kerala. Some of the *Thampurakkal* were very fond of certain labourer

---

<sup>22</sup> Raghu, mechanic in a workshop, aged 38, from Champakulam. Interviewed on 24 November 2011 – Thursday.



women. And to get them they used to kill the women's men (her father, brother, lover or husband) who were a hindrance for the accomplishment of their sexual desires, in the name of human sacrifice. "Some of the *Thampurakkal* were *Kama bhrandhanmar*<sup>23</sup>", exclaims Sulochana with an expression of deep hatred on her face while she explains the condition of women in the region. "The labourers mostly lived around the paddy fields but some of the labourers and their families used to live in the middle of the vast paddy fields owned generally by a single *Thampuran*, without any other house close-by". This again draws our attention to Seigel's (1999) discussion of the setting of community spaces to suit the interests of those who have access to power, in his work on Puerto Rico. "The location of such houses was not safe for women as it was convenient for those *Thampurakkal* who had sexual desires in women to get them, even though, there were some who allowed their *Thampurakkal* to have sex with them, so that they get certain benefits from them."<sup>24</sup>



Fig.3. The isolated habitats of labourers in the middle of vast stretches of paddy fields in Lower Kuttanad.

Kamakshi came up with a further reason for the 'sacrifice'. "Sometimes if an unfortunate labourer man fell in love with a woman from a landlord family, he also used

---

<sup>23</sup> Those who are mad about doing sex.

<sup>24</sup> Sulochana, an agricultural labourer, aged 60, from Champakulam. Interviewed on 14 August 2011.

to have a ‘heroic death’ in the bunds.’<sup>25</sup> Arranged marriage between landlord and labourer families never occurred. Some love affairs had taken place between the boys and girls of the two sections but seldom any ended up in marriage in the past, even though eloped love marriages are now becoming common than before. Earlier there was more fear as the landlords (*Thampurakkal*) had more power. They used to beat the boy with their *gundas* (thugs) and there was every chance for him to be the next prey for human sacrifice.<sup>26</sup>

With vast stretches of land under control, the *Thampurakkal* gave only small patches of land for their labourers to live or practically gave none. They had to reclaim small bits from the rivers to set up their huts. If a labourer tried to encroach the *Thampurak*’s property, then, for the next breach, he would be the target of sacrifice. Therefore everything depended on the will of the *Thampurakkal*. The labourers could never raise their voice against them. There were none to speak for the person who was to be sacrificed.<sup>27</sup>

The old loyalty of the labourers towards the *Thampurakkal* continued till the spread of communism in the 1900s which shattered the relationship between the two. Labourers’ participation in the Communist Party and its activities was a threat to the landlords’ existence. Many of those who participated in the activities of the Party got killed in the initial days and some became victims of human sacrifice, but “death ultimately gave way to ‘life’ for us, as it is always here in Kuttanad.”<sup>28</sup> Now the landlords stay at ‘our’ will,” Murali, who was an agricultural labourer in the past and now a member of the Communist Party from Champakulam, seemed to have a reason to raise his head and voice, with pride as he told this to me.<sup>29</sup> The landlords argue these stories to

---

<sup>25</sup> Kamalakshi, an agricultural labourer, aged 65, from Champakulam. Interviewed on 19 September 2011 – Monday

<sup>26</sup> Rajappan – agricultural labourer – member of Communist Party – 50 – Champakulam 24 September 2011 - Saturday

<sup>27</sup> Sarojini, a Nair woman who is a housewife, aged 45 from Kidangara. Interviewed on 26 July 2011, Tuesday

<sup>28</sup> The Malayalam movie, *Kannezhuthi Pottumthottu*’ directed by T. K. Rajeev Kumar depicts the practise of human sacrifice during the time of the spread of Communism in Kuttanad.

<sup>29</sup> Murali, an agricultural labourer and member of the Marxist Party, aged 60 from Champakulam. Interviewed on 21 Thursday 2011 - Wednesday

be cooked up by the labourers inspired by the Party. But they agree that accidental deaths used to happen in the bunds. Whatever is the truth of these stories, human sacrifice is believed to have been a solution to a big problem of the inhabitants, and hence integral to their social imaginary and the way the contemporaries imagine the societies they inhabit and sustain.<sup>30</sup> This is an important aspect in Taylor's (2004) discussion of modern social imaginaries where he writes about how people imagine their past and present societies.

The belief that some of the 'sacrifices' were done with false motives gave rise to the feeling among the inhabitants that spirits of those who were sacrificed without their willingness would return back and haunt the region. "The breach would be built but the victim might come back as ghost" says Gopalachon an old agricultural labourer from Ramankari. Some of the old landlord families are believed to have been haunted by the spirits of those who were sacrificed in the bunds. The Kadiyazhathu family of Moncompu was said to have been thus haunted. Their victim was a *moothaparayan* or a senior *Parayan* who was visiting the *Parayan* foreman of Kadiyazhathu family and had joined building the dyke upon invitation. The dyke was 'reinforced' by his blood but a series of disastrous events occurred in the family. The landlord's seven and a half years old grandson was drowned; his pregnant daughter fell down and suffered injuries; a cow was found dead in the cow-pen. The astrologer who was consulted advised that the scarified *moothaparayan* had to be 'appropriately seated' in an exclusive shrine to ward off further untoward happenings. This was done and even today people pray at the shrine of Valliya Kottungal at Moncompu.<sup>31</sup> On the one level geography is about place and sense of place, and on another level, it is about recognizing historical landmarks and the creation of symbolic landscapes is the argument of Park and Coppack ((1994) in their research in Elora, Ontario. These historical landmarks like Valliya Kottungal in Lower Kuttanad can be said to evoke their sense of place and further their attachment to the region. In their research on historical environment and sense of place, Graham et.al (2009) also writes about the spectrum of people's engagement with the historical environment and how such engagements assist in the formation of their sense of place.

---

<sup>30</sup> Rajappan – agricultural labourer – member of Communist Party – 50 – Champakulam 24 September 2011 - Saturday

<sup>31</sup> Prabhakaran, aged 62, from Champakulam. Interviewed on 4 November 2011 - Friday

Even though the labourers still pride that their ancestors sacrificed their lives courageously for others, with the spread of Communism, education and contacts with outside world, tremendous changes happened in their life and viewpoints that they became aware of their exploitation by the old landlords, their *Thampurakkal*. Now they are conscious that human sacrifices were an exercise of power: on the one hand the power of man over resources, but on the other, the power of landlords over their labourers. Even though many labourers had jumped into the breached bunds wholeheartedly to be sacrificed, it was always the loyal labourers and lower orders who sacrificed themselves and never the *Thampurakkal*. Sacrifices never gave any identity and recognition to the sacrificed or to their families. No matter how devoted and loyal the agricultural labourers had been, the land system in Kuttanad always kept a distance between the landlords and the labourers.<sup>32</sup>

From a community that had blind belief in the practice of human sacrifice and other offerings Kamalakshi, an agricultural labourer from Champakulam now says, “I will not make offerings of money to the temple. It will be taken by the corrupt temple authorities and the government. My *Devi* (Goddess) does not need any money. I would rather give money to the poor but not to the thieves.” Their thinking and ideas have changed drastically that they find logical reasons for each and everything that is happening around them. “The reason for the floods is the unscientific development plans undertaken in this region. The unscientific construction of roads is blocking the natural drainage resulting in floods and water-logging. The people are acting against the laws of *Bhumi* (*Devi*). This began with the reclamation of land from the waters, two hundred years back to produce rice,” explains Kalyani, an agricultural labourer from Mampuzhakkary, with authority in her voice.<sup>33</sup> Even though there has occurred great changes in the attitude towards sacrifice and offering among the people, still, their old local beliefs and religiosity lingers on in their explanations and talks and even in their daily life without them being much aware of the same. “The region is too much polluted,

---

<sup>32</sup> Anandavalli – 58 – Agricultural labourer – Champakulam 3 September 2011 - Saturday

<sup>33</sup> Kalyani, an agricultural labourer, aged 62, from Mampuzhakari. Interviewed on 29 November 2011 – Tuesday

especially the water, but *Devi* (Goddess) is protecting us from not getting ill and die, she is protecting us from all danger related with the resources and life” articulates Sharada, an agricultural labourer from Kidangara.<sup>34</sup> This explains what Taylor (2004) wrote in his account of modern social imaginaries, that present factors tend to influence our recollections of the past and past factors tend to influence or distort our experiences of the present.

At this instance I would like to bring to the notice that the beliefs in Lower Kuttanad resemble the Nuyooteco thinking in Codex Vienna (Monaghan, 1990) and that of the Duna of Papua New Guinea (Steward and Strathern, 2005). It is a common saying in Nuyoo that ‘we eat the earth’ (i.e. we eat the plants growing on the earth) and the ‘earth eats us’ (i.e. our bodies are buried in the earth when we die, where they decompose). So they believe that agriculture and human death are linked intrinsically like how it is in Lower Kuttanad. When the maize gets destroyed they believe that it is not the sowers but the earth deities who destroy the field as the inhabitants of Kuttanad believes in the anger of *Devi*. In their thinking the earth deities are associated closely with the wind and strong winds are the favoured mode of punishment by the deities for those who have broken agricultural taboos. Their myths state the connection between sacrifice and agriculture. In Nuyoo prayer is always accompanied by sacrifice. In their myths men make offerings of their bodies and obtain what is required for a successful harvest through the Earth’s permission to sow through a pact made with the Earth and Rain with the help of priestly figures. In their context forces of nature in the form of strong winds, drought and rapidly growing trees prevented humankind from growing corn while in Lower Kuttanad it is mostly the forces of water in the form of floods that destroys the paddy fields. And once this pact was made men were able to sow, and crops in abundance were produced. Like how it was in Codex Vienna and in their myths, the making of offerings moved the action of the story through a critical juncture, where human sacrifices were able to stop the water at the breach and save the paddy field, ensuring a successful harvest.

---

<sup>34</sup> Sharada, an Agricultural labourer, aged 56 from Kidangara. Interviewed on 30 July 2011 – Saturday

Likewise the Duna believed in dead ancestors, and a set of local ancestral beings called *tama* were said to live underground and to require sacrifices to be made to them at particular cyclic intervals in order to rejuvenate the environment, and to sustain fertility for the land and for the humans and animals living in it. Sacrifices were also made in general to appease disgruntled ancestral spirits to solicit their help. Sacrifices were occasions of both divinations of appeasement to affect curses. Beliefs about placement of bodies, living and dead, within the landscapes in these regions, reveal the ways in which the inhabitants situate themselves in relation to their environment and in Lower Kuttanad in relation to paddy cultivation that dramatically affect their environment.

### **Continuation of the ritual**

Even though real human sacrifices ceased, the people's utmost belief in 'sacrifices' seems to have instinctively remained in their minds that the practise later continued in the form of symbolic rituals, which continues even today, and happens to be one of the major highlights of the present study. In his work on Charles Baudelaire, Benjamin (1973) has clearly stated that rituals with their ceremonies and festivals remain handles of memory for a lifetime and trigger recollection of the past. In this regard, what makes rituals, ceremonies and festive days significant in Lower Kuttanad, is the encounter with an earlier life. The place of humans in sacrifice was later taken up by cocks and the practise of sacrificing cocks became popular in the local temples. However at a later stage even cock sacrifices ceased. But the practise did not stop. The 'sacrificing' continued in the form of the ritual *Kuruthi* in the local temples. *Kuruthi* which means 'sacrifice' in Malayalam is a symbolic sacrifice done in the temples where a red coloured powder known as *kunkumam*, denoting blood and sacrifice is offered to the *Devi* to please her by the devotees. My informants told me that sometimes vegetables like pumpkins, ash gourds and melons are offered to the *Devi* as sacrifice in the temples and the *pujari* (priest) cuts it and sprinkles *kunkumam* on it symbolizing blood and returns to the devotees as *prasadam* (blessing) from *Devi* after reciting some prayers. This ritual of *Kuruthi* is occasionally performed in the local temples. There are a few who still consider the *Kuruthi* ritual as a continuation of the old human sacrifice.

While some among the old generation still believes that life in Kuttanad is the gift of death and claims that the secret behind whatever success there is in paddy cultivation today is the *Kuruthi* ritual that is done in the temples here, the new generation remains least bothered about the old local beliefs and claims that no such beliefs prevail now; they does not seem to know even the meaning of many of the rituals that are still practiced in this region. In a similar manner as Burton-Christie (1999) notes in her theological analysis of the sense of place, the inhabitants (especially the youngsters in the context of Lower Kuttanad) are gradually losing the sense of what it means to dwell within a particular place and community, to become intimate with the landscape, and to enter into and be shaped by the stories and the culture of that place. The new generation seems to be having a new sense of place quite different from their parents and predecessors.

There are some who deny that human sacrifices were conducted here, “we haven’t killed anyone. We only know to love others”.<sup>35</sup> In the words of Taylor (2004) ‘once we are well installed in the modern social imaginary, it seems the only possible one, the only one which makes sense. This social imaginary is the end of certain kind of presence of religion or the divine, the end of society as structured by its dependence on God or the beyond in public space. But it is neither the end of personal religion nor necessarily the end of religion in public life. It is undoubtedly a decisive stage in the development of our modern predicament, in which belief and unbelief can co-exist as alternatives’. But even the old *Thampurakkal* and the higher orders agree to the belief that human sacrifices were once conducted in this region even though they haven’t witnessed any in person. While the higher orders are seen somewhat agreeing to it, the lower orders at the same time are found to remain firm in their beliefs of human sacrifice. This brings our attention to the work on rural sentiments in Ontario by Park and Coppack ((1994) where they exposes the ways contemporary societies reclaim historical landmarks, structures, and narratives for a number of purposes. Sentiment for the past is observed as becoming a striking amenity for the inhabitants, especially the lower orders of Lower Kuttanad.

---

<sup>35</sup> Celine, earlier an agricultural labourer, aged 62, from Champakulam. Interviewed on 2 July 2011, Saturday.

My analysis brought me to the understanding that it is not just in the rituals that we find ‘sacrifices’ re-occurring and ‘death giving way to life’ again. Even without the awareness of inhabitants this is very much experienced in the daily life of contemporary Lower Kuttanad. As Tausig (1995) mentions about how the old ways become exposed at the moment of their demise, the present research tries to bring the unobserved truth to light. This apparent fact caught my notice by my observation of the old inhabitants of the region, my informants, who still remain close with the local resources. When the labourers remain under water without oxygen, a state of ‘death’, to collect clay to create land to grow rice which symbolises ‘life’ the old idea can be seen floating up. When the old inhabitants who are still engaged in paddy cultivation say, “We are toiling here so that our children will get good education and a better life”, and, “let us die like this, so that they will live”, the parents are still in a way sacrificing their life for their children and here too ‘death’ is granting way to life. “We are almost dead, giving all our energy, labour and life to the landlords here,” mutter the remaining labourers from the muddy fields of Lower Kuttanad while working under the hot sun and the heavy rains. Their voices repeat and death continues to concede to life and the whole process can be seen continuing day after day, season after season, in this part of the world.



Fig.4. Labourer women working under heavy rains in the paddy fields of Lower Kuttanad wearing rain-coats and umbrellas.



This process can be seen happening not just in the case of people but in the region as a whole which includes both plant and animal life. When salinity spreads in the water-bodies and makes the *Pola*, the water plant that spreads the water-bodies here, to dry and disintegrate becoming organic fertilizer for other plant life here, death is giving way to life. Similarly, when flood come causing destruction and ‘death’, at the same time blessing the region with fertility and ‘life’, ‘death’ can be again seen as clearing the path for ‘life’. In Kuttanad, ‘life’ stands for rice, paddy field, paddy cultivation, good harvest, the state of having an occupation, and all of which is considered as a blessing. And conversely ‘death’ stands for everything my informants consider as curse, or the opposite of blessing. The *Thozhilurappu*<sup>36</sup> women are risking their life when clearing *pola* in the rivers that are highly polluted. This occupation has caused death to many among them due to diseases.<sup>37</sup> Here too sacrificing can be seen among the inhabitants to let others live. “We will live and die here as our ancestors” says Celine.<sup>38</sup> All this reminds of Tausig’s (1995) ‘devil pact’ in which the devil does not give without receiving. Similarly the labourers are often seen offering themselves to get ‘life’ in return, in Lower Kuttanad.

### **The gift of sacrifice – Death giving way to life**

In Lower Kuttanad ‘death’ is the most significant ‘gift’ the labourers offer to their *Thampurakkal*, to the resources, to other inhabitants, to the coming generations, and to their *Devi* according to their local religious beliefs, to get ‘life’ in return. The offering of this ‘gift’ has made them the unrecognized heroes, in the minds of contemporary inhabitants, no matter what the real cause of their death was. The accounts of my informants prove that it was never for recognition the sacrificed offered themselves, at a certain point of time. Like how ‘the sun gives without receiving’ as mentioned by Betaille (1988), the labourers sacrificed their lives for others and for the common good which was certainly the most extreme offering they made; the outcome of their true devotion. Similar to how the origin and essence of wealth comes from the radiation of the sun which is the source of life’s exuberant development, and dispenses energy and wealth

---

<sup>36</sup> Local government work providing scheme.

<sup>37</sup> Thozhilurappu women from Champakulam. Interviewed on 12 July 2011, Tuesday.

<sup>38</sup> Celine, earlier an agricultural labourer, aged 62, from Champakulam. Interviewed on 2 July 2011, Saturday.

without return, the labourers were the source of energy and wealth without much return for them.

In Lower Kuttanad it can be said that ‘giving without receiving’ implied ‘a particular theory of representation encompassing both the joy of becoming and of creation’ when we look at the context from Nietzsche’s (1889) point of view. The sacrificed labourer can be seen as becoming part of the creation of ‘life’. Human sacrifice can be said to be an expression of hope.<sup>39</sup> It was done with the good intention of protecting the paddy fields, upon which depended, the life of almost all the inhabitants.<sup>40</sup> Even today there are many among the labourers who believe that human sacrifice had the power to stop the breach. But with the spread of education and contacts with outside world the ritual slowly started disappearing and becoming part of the folklore in this region. Generation after generation the attitude towards death is changing. Now life has changed a lot that even if somebody dies it is said that people are too busy even to attend the funeral.

Claude Levi Strauss says that the very word obligation as in the obligation to give sets up the question that assails Bataille and also Mauss because of the singular and supreme contradiction within the gift as something spontaneous and generous on one side and calculated and self-interested on the other. Bataille says that gift is a profitless expenditure. Contrary to this Mauss puts the stress on the obligatory nature of giving in a way that makes it seem more like obeying a rule than giving per se. Bataille admits to the mixture of generosity and self interest in giving but argues on logical and sociological grounds that ‘we cannot give precedence to the principal of rivalry over the sovereign generosity that is at the origin of gift giving. Even if the giver feigns it, at bottom it is still generosity that overwhelms. Ultimately it was the one who overdid it who prevailed and whose sovereign character compelled respect. For Mauss gift has been understood as emblematic of balanced exchange. This is similar to the Utilitarian thought which finds gift as a mutually beneficial exchange, in which I get something out of this and so do

---

<sup>39</sup> Cherian Chettan, an agricultural labourer, aged 55, from Champakulam. Interviewed on 11 October 2011 - Tuesday

<sup>40</sup> Parameshwaran, a ferryman, aged 68, from Moncompu. Interviewed on 25 November 2011 – Friday

you. 'Life' is got as a return-gift for the gift of death offered in the context of Lower Kuttanad.

Taking ideas from Bataille and Mauss when we look at the milieu in Lower Kuttanad, a mixture of generous, obligatory and forced gifts can be found at various instances of gifting, where in all circumstances, it is the labourers or the lower orders who becomes the victims of oppression which is indicative of the local power play. When the sacrificer sacrifices himself wholeheartedly, out of his true devotion that the system had engendered, the gift that is offered can be viewed as the most generous one. The sacrificer is losing his life and is not getting anything out of it personally; not even his name is remembered. It is the rest of the society that benefits from his death. But at instances when the *Thampurakkal* sacrifices their labourers, without their willingness, for reasons other than mere faith in the practise, the obligatory and the forced nature of giving becomes evident. (Strauss, 1969; Bataille, 1988; Mauss, 1967) On the whole it appears that the paddy field of Lower Kuttanad is the stage where the resources and inhabitants conduct the act of 'gift' and 'gifting' through their supreme performance of sacrifices.

Death and life are sometimes conceptualized as polar opposites. But in the context of Lower Kuttanad 'what is lost' in death is inseparable from 'what remains'. What remains, is in some sense, the 'gift' of what is lost in death. And it is this 'gift' of what is lost that still binds the present to the past. The history of the region is written in their landscape which evokes the sense of place among the inhabitants. The continuation of paddy cultivation and the local rituals and myths are the markers of their historical memory which is deeply imprinted in them and finds expression in their words, thoughts and activities without them being aware of it. With the prolongation of old local beliefs in the daily life of contemporary Lower Kuttanad, 'sacrifices' are still being conducted and 'death is still giving way to life' in new forms under new circumstances and the inhabitants are still found 'gifting' their life, energy and resources to 'others'. Their life seems to be a mixture formed from their memories of their past life and that of their life in the present world. The dead and the living remain tied by ongoing relationships

through their historical memories that have a powerful effect on the present lives of the inhabitants and it is these memories of the 'gift' that are acting as powerful factors that evoke their sense of attachments to the region and bind them so strongly to the region and to its past.

## Chapter III

### The Cycle of Blessings and Curses

Outha, one of my oldest informants from Champakulam, had already reached his little dwelling on the other side of the paddy field when I found myself only half way along the flooded *varambu*<sup>41</sup>, still struggling hard to push my way against the forces of knee deep water that had already made me wet till my head. ‘*Molei*, koooy...you need to learn first how we walk on our land, before you write about our life here’<sup>42</sup> Outha laughed as he called out from his house seeing me crawling, still so far away.

#### The havoc formed by the floods

It was flood time in Kuttanad and *Karkkidakam*<sup>43</sup> had turned up with all its vigour. It was difficult to distinguish between the paddy fields, the roads and the waterways and the whole of Kuttanad gave the appearance of a vast sea of water studded with partially submerged houses and coconut palms. ‘Life here is like that, we are dipped in blessings and curses. We sometimes feel that there are more curses than blessings here!’ Outha stretched out his hand to pull me in to his house from his water-filled courtyard and offered me a chair as he explained their life to me. He began with one of the popular etymologies of Kuttanad which is derived from ‘*ketta nadu*’ meaning ‘the cursed land’. Life in Kuttanad seems to move in a cycle – a cycle of blessings and curses, imposed upon them by the resources surrounding them, around which revolved their life. These blessings and curses at times seem inseparable and intermingled. The rhythm of their life was determined by the resources (the land and water) that surround them.

‘We are like the lotus flowers, all the time rooted in water,’ described Chachappan with a smile as he led me to his house, passing his fields that lay ruined in the current floods. Flood is an annual feature during the monsoons in lowland Kuttanad, though its

---

<sup>41</sup> Ridge. *Varambu* is a term commonly used by the inhabitants in their daily life.

<sup>42</sup> *Molei* means child and koooy is a sound, the inhabitants usually make when they call out.

<sup>43</sup> Monsoons.

intensity varies from year to year. The ‘life’ of the inhabitants in Lower Kuttanad is paddy, and water is an important constituent of their ‘life’. Kuttanad is blessed with plenty of water. But though a water demanding crop, excess of water destroys paddy.<sup>44</sup> The conventional bunds are not strong enough to withstand the floods and therefore offer little protection. Large amount of money and manpower is spent every year, to arrest the flooding of the fields, the efforts that often become futile.<sup>45</sup> As a result, cultivation has to be confined to those seasons when there are no floods. Untimely rain always brings havoc to the cultivators resulting in considerable loss.<sup>46</sup> Hence the cultivators have to be eternally vigilant day and night, until the crop finds its way to the granary.<sup>47</sup> Crop loss affects the life of the whole population as paddy cultivation is the only major occupation here. Floods occur very fast in Kuttanad.<sup>48</sup> It is not necessary that it should rain in Kuttanad itself; even when it rains in the eastern hills the water will reach this low lying region in no time, through the rivers that flow into the region.<sup>49</sup> “Flood is a recurring, unavoidable curse when everyone suffers in this region,” Chachappan sighed, looking helplessly at his fields lying submerged, in front of his eyes. Paddy cultivation is a gamble in the monsoons. It is usually said ‘man proposes and god disposes’, but in Kuttanad ‘the cultivator proposes and the weather disposes’. It is weather that decides the future and fortunes of the region. In spite of facing all these risks, strains and tensions, the cultivators get only very little profit.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> Cherian, a new landlord, aged 55, from Champakulam. Interviewed on 11 October 2011 – Tuesday.

<sup>45</sup> Suresh, a Social Worker, aged 32, from Kainakari. Interviewed on 18 November 2011 – Friday.

<sup>46</sup> Vishwambaran, an agricultural labourer, aged 45, from Moncompu. Interviewed on 8 November 2011 – Tuesday.

<sup>47</sup> Suresh, a Social Worker, aged 32, from Kainakari. Interviewed on 18 November 2011 – Friday.

<sup>48</sup> Ummachan, a new landlord, aged 50, from Pulinkunnu. Interviewed on 13 October 2011 – Thursday.

<sup>49</sup> Mathai, an old inhabitant in this region, aged 62, from Mampuzhakkary. Interviewed on 17 November 2011 – Thursday.

<sup>50</sup> Ramadasa Swami, a Tamil Brahmin landlord from Moncompu, aged 75. Interviewed on 23 November 2011 – Wednesday.



Fig.5. A view of Lower Kuttanad in times of flood when the river, the road and the fields lay at the same level.

The colour of Kuttanad changes with the advent and exit of monsoons. The green paddy fields are turned into grayish water during monsoons. Movement and transportation becomes very difficult in times of floods as important highways in the locality get submerged under two to four feet of water. The bus service stops, schools close, there will not be any work and life comes to a standstill as the inhabitants get engulfed in misery.<sup>51</sup> ‘Here the paddy, the fish and the people grow in water’, Mathai my informant from Ramankari articulated. The intensity of floods differs depending on the lay of the land.<sup>52</sup> There are regions where it floods too much for even little rain.<sup>53</sup> And due to the peculiar nature of the wetland, the houses constructed here have a natural tendency to descend into the earth after a period. ‘Those who have money are raising their properties by filling it with clay taken from the river-beds or with the gravel brought from the eastern hills,’ reported Suresh, a young social worker from Kainakari. The roads are also raised in the same manner. But many of the inhabitants upheld the view that those practises are harmful as it decreases the water-area in the region, increasing the

---

<sup>51</sup> Shoshamma, an old Knanaya woman, aged 78, from Kidangara. Interviewed on 29 July 2011 – Friday.

<sup>52</sup> Celine who was earlier an agricultural labourer, aged 62, from Champakulam. Interviewed on 2 July 2011 – Saturday.

<sup>53</sup> Surjith, a youth, aged 28, from Champakulam. Interviewed on 3 September 2011 – Saturday.

flood tendency.<sup>54</sup> “If everyone starts raising their properties then Kuttanad will lose its natural physical features and the region will no longer be ‘Kuttanad’,” justifies Sathyan, an agricultural labourer from Champakulam.<sup>55</sup>

Extremely pathetic is the life of those whose houses get completely filled with water. They have to raise their cooking space to tables and beds and prepare food by standing in water all the time, increasing their chances of getting water-related illnesses.<sup>56</sup> “When floods come we live like frogs in water,” expressed Leela as she offered me a cup of tea prepared in her water-filled house. They experienced a lack of freedom – a restriction of movement, even within their own houses. Flood destroys everything inside and outside their house.<sup>57</sup> As the entire house gets damaged in the annual floods, the inhabitants, excepting the rich among them, seldom paint or maintain their houses.<sup>58</sup> “The rich in the region have houses outside Kuttanad also and so they stay outside, till the curse is over. We are left alone to suffer here,” remarked Devayani while washing her clothes in the flood water in front of her house. In times of great floods they sleep on the *verandas* of some far off schools or in their relatives’ houses. None of my informants were satisfied with the running of the government flood camps.

---

<sup>54</sup> Devasi, an old agricultural labourer, aged 71, from Champakulam. Interviewed on 11 November 2011 – Friday.

<sup>55</sup> Sathyan, an agricultural labourer, aged 52, from Champakulam. Interviewed on 28 November 2011 – Monday.

<sup>56</sup> Shoshamma, an old Knanaya woman, aged 78, from Kidangara. Interviewed on 29 July 2011 – Friday.

<sup>57</sup> Celine who was earlier an agricultural labourer, aged 62, from Champakulam. Interviewed on 2 July 2011 – Saturday.

<sup>58</sup> Celine who was earlier an agricultural labourer, aged 62, from Champakulam. Interviewed on 2 July 2011 – Saturday.





Fig.6. Partially submerged houses at the time of floods in Lower Kuttanad.

The discussion that seemed to penetrate deep into their misfortunes in the region, made my informants a bit uncomfortable and disappointed recalling all their hardships in the region, that they heaved a big sigh and concluded, ‘This is the land God gave us to live. We love our land, inspite of all hardships.’ ‘Life is better now and the floods not as threatening like before, as roads and individual properties have been raised by filling, and the risk is mainly confined to the paddy fields,’ voiced Sulochana, a middle aged resident from Moncompu as a concluding remark to our discussion. Floods have become so much a part of their life now that they have become accustomed to it. They know what precautions to take during the annual floods, to reduce damages and loss. Even when they are let down by the curses the flood brings, they knows well that the fertile agricultural plains of Lower Kuttanad, where paddy, their ‘life’ grows, is the gift of the same floods pointing to the instance when blessing and curse seem inseparable or intermingled. The silt deposited by the floods make the region more and more fertile every year making it fit for paddy cultivation. The flood also cleans the region removing pollution in water and land and also clears the *pola*<sup>59</sup> from the water-bodies making movement possible.

---

<sup>59</sup> Water-weed.

### **Proliferation of water-weeds**

‘*Ente kochei*<sup>60</sup>... flood is just one of the curses of this land, there are more that you will see in the coming days. It comes in a cycle, one after the other’, Lalichan my informant from Champakulam said with a grin as I accompanied him to the field. This statement of Lalichan reminded me of Slater’s (1995) argument in his study of the Amazonian nature that, the tendency to see the Amazon as a kind of Eden is not just often false and exaggerated but it obscures the people and places that actually exist there. Likewise Kuttanad is often popularly depicted as a paradise of nature in Kerala but the reality is far divergent on a closer analysis. It did not take long for me to notice the local labourer women labouring hard to clear *pola* from the rivers close by. *Pola* is a water-weed that spreads the water-bodies here. There are different varieties of water-weeds here like *Chelli*, African *payal*, *kulavazha*, *kandal*, *mullan payal*, *kora*, *kakka pola*, velvet *pola*, and so on. It is a nuisance to the people, ‘a real curse’, as my informants say. “We don’t know from where it came, it was here even when our parents were born,” muttered Radhika as she plunged into the water to gather them.<sup>61</sup>

*Pola* stops the flow of rivers, leading to stagnation, until heavy monsoons come or saline water intrudes the water-bodies in summer. It gives space for the growth of harmful insects, pests and snakes that causes various diseases and illnesses among people and crops.<sup>62</sup> It makes water dirty and polluted with an intolerable smell, “but we are left with no other option but to use the same water,” exclaimed Radha.<sup>63</sup> Similar to an unclean aquarium, the deep green colour of the water-bodies, they believe, is due to the degenerated weeds that lie in it. *Pola* is a great hindrance for movement and transportation especially in times of emergencies in places where saline water does not reach and where *pola* grows very thickly; a reason for the inhabitants to see the coming of roads as a great blessing. The *vallam* and boats will remain stuck surrounded by *pola*.

---

<sup>60</sup> *Ente Koche* means, My child.

<sup>61</sup> Radhika, an agricultural labourer women from Champakulam. Interviewed on 11 August, 2011 – Thursday.

<sup>62</sup> Celine who was earlier an agricultural labourer, aged 62, from Champakulam. Interviewed on 2 July 2011 – Saturday.

<sup>63</sup> Radha, a labourer from Champakulam. Interviewed on 11 August 2011 – Thursday.

“There are weeds in the paddy fields also”, groaned Sunnychayan a landlord from Champakulam with disgust.



Fig.7. The view of a river filled with water-weeds (*pola*) making water transportation extremely difficult.

Saline water is a good remedy for *Pola*. The Thanneermukkom regulator, a major developmental intervention of the government to increase rice production by preventing saline water from entering Kuttanad, has led to an increase in the weed growth during the summer months.<sup>64</sup> A major portion of the fund allotted for paddy cultivation, has to be now spent for the removal of *pola*, after the construction of the regulator, but with little effect as the weed grows very fast.<sup>65</sup> The machines to clear *pola* are not easily available due to high costs involved and so the inhabitants rely on manual clearing by the women labourers who are part of the recent *Thozhilurappu*<sup>66</sup> scheme of the government, and on natural cleansing by salinity or floods.<sup>67</sup> The inhabitants complain, “The authorities only

---

<sup>64</sup> Mathai, an old inhabitant in this region, aged 62, from Mampuzhakkary. Interviewed on 17 November 2011 – Thursday.

<sup>65</sup> Thomachan an agricultural labourer, aged 57, from Moncompu. Interviewed on 14 November 2011 – Monday.

<sup>66</sup> *Thozhilurappu* is a recent work providing scheme introduced by the government which to help the local women to get occupation during the off seasons when there is no paddy cultivation.

<sup>67</sup> Thomachan an agricultural labourer, aged 57, from Moncompu. Interviewed on 14 November 2011 – Monday.

come during election campaigns tricking us with offers but nothing gets done.”<sup>68</sup> In this context, the study of the sugar plantations in northeastern Brazil by Scheper-Hughes (1992) can be taken up where he proposes strike and reprisal at the time of elections as the only way to retaliate the inactiveness of the government. In spite of all the troubles posed by *pola* the women of the *Thozhilurappu* says with contentment, “it is because there is *pola* that we have an income other than paddy cultivation.” When the weed degenerates, it becomes an organic fertilizer for plantains and coconut trees. Some have started giving processed *pola* as food to ducks.<sup>69</sup> “It is also used to make decorative items,” Kunjanamma said as she illustrated the various parts of the *pola* to me with enthusiasm as my attention turned to the merger of blessings and curses in this region.



Fig.8. Thozhilurappu women clearing *pola* from the water-bodies at Champakulam.

### Spread of salinity

Arathi, my little informant from Champakulam, aged fourteen said, “*Chechy*<sup>70</sup>, you won’t drink even a glass of water from here when the salt water comes.” The

---

<sup>68</sup> Sarojini, a Nair woman, aged 45, from Kidangara. She was a housewife and Mohan, a Kooli, aged 49, also from Kidangara. Interviewed on 26 July 2011 – Tuesday.

<sup>69</sup> Radhika, a woman who sell ducks, aged 35, from Moncompu. Interviewed on 3 August 2011 – Wednesday.

<sup>70</sup> Sister.

nearness of the region to the Vembanad *kayal*<sup>71</sup> and the Arabian sea on the west, and the dwindling of the flow of the rivers in the region into the *kayal* in summer, from about the month of December, lead to the entry of saline water from the Sea into the water-bodies in Lower Kuttanad that lies at a lower level, due to tidal action. This produces a scarcity of fresh water for irrigation in the fields. The salinity in the northern parts of Kuttanad goes beyond the limits of tolerance for rice cultivation from January onwards and it spreads rapidly to the southern parts. The surface water remains saline till the first floods of the succeeding monsoon in June.<sup>72</sup> The heavy monsoon floods the rivers, and flow with great force into the sea and stops the saline water entering the region from the west.<sup>73</sup> “Compared to olden days saline water now rarely comes to Kuttanad with the construction of the Thanneermukkom regulator,” Celine an old agricultural labourer from Champakulam remarked as she tried to evaluate the past and present. But if it comes, the whole summer crop gets completely destroyed.<sup>74</sup> The regulator was constructed across the Vembanad *kayal* to increase rice production by preventing saline water from entering the paddy fields of Kuttanad. But it happened to be an utter failure. The closed regulator prevents easy flow of water resulting in stagnation of regional water-bodies, thereby increasing pollution and illnesses.<sup>75</sup>

The region did get an additional crop due to the prevention of saline water which was indeed a blessing but it denied fish growth in the region, leading to a steep rise in fish prices, depriving the poor of their traditional protein source and the opportunities of employment for the fishermen leading to their impoverishment, particularly since alternative employment opportunities do not exist for them.<sup>76</sup> Now it is only when the shutters of the regulator, that remain closed most of the time, are opened for repairing that saline water enters the *kayal* and the regional water-bodies. This mostly happens in

---

<sup>71</sup> Lake or backwater. The Vembanad *kayal* is brackish due to its nearness to the sea.

<sup>72</sup> Suresh, a Social Worker, aged 32, from Kainakari. Interviewed on 18 November 2011 – Friday.

<sup>73</sup> Vishwambaran, an agricultural labourer, aged 45, from Moncompu. Interviewed on 8 November 2011 – Tuesday.

<sup>74</sup> Celine who was earlier an agricultural labourer, aged 62, from Champakulam. Interviewed on 2 July 2011 – Saturday.

<sup>75</sup> Thomachan an agricultural labourer, aged 57, from Moncompu. Interviewed on 14 November 2011 – Monday.

<sup>76</sup> Devasi, an old agricultural labourer, aged 71, from Champakulam. Interviewed on 11 November 2011 – Friday.

the month of January.<sup>77</sup> All water then becomes saline and there will be lack of pure water for drinking, cooking, bathing and washing. The rich have private ponds where water is less salty; in the meanwhile the poor have to depend on rain which is uncommon in summer. This hardship continues till the monsoon comes in June. “Six months we are in water and the next six months we don’t have a single drop to drink,” says Devasi a labourer from Champakulam. “Six months we have happiness and the next six months it is distress,” Kunjamman also had the same opinion.

The cycle continues blessing and cursing the inhabitants. Water, that seems to be a curse when saline, turns out to be a blessing at the same time, when it destroys *pola* that spreads and obstructs movement and life in Lower Kuttanad. “Saline water is good for plantain trees in the region” claims Radhika, a resident from Moncompu.<sup>78</sup> “*Devi* blesses and curses us using the resources as her instrument,” asserts Paru, one of the oldest agricultural labourers from the region. Floods, salinity, and *pola* are seen as three of the challenges imposed on the inhabitants by the resources here.

### **Pollution of land and water**

“Lower Kuttanad is a blessed region” according to my informants, “with plenty of water and fertile land, fit for paddy cultivation, offering employment opportunities for everyone.”<sup>79</sup> But the region remains more as a curse to the inhabitants, pointing to the paradox of life in this region. Kuttanad is surrounded with water but there is no pure water.<sup>80</sup> Lack of pure drinking water is another of the big ‘curses’ of this region. “Water, water everywhere but not a single drop to drink” is commonly said about this region. The use of chemicals, fertilizers and pesticides in the paddy fields is polluting the waters; the polluted water from the fields are pumped out or it flows naturally into the water-bodies adversely affecting the health and life of the inhabitants who work on land and water, as

---

<sup>77</sup> Celine who was earlier an agricultural labourer, aged 62, from Champakulam. Interviewed on 2 July 2011 – Saturday.

<sup>78</sup> Radhika, a woman who sell ducks, aged 35, from Moncompu. Interviewed on 3 August 2011 – Wednesday.

<sup>79</sup> Ponnann, an agricultural labourer and member of Communist Party, aged 42, from Champakulam. Interviewed on 14 October 2011 – Friday.

<sup>80</sup> Kunjuamma, wife of an old landlord, aged 78, from Champakulam. She is a housewife. Interviewed on 19 October 2011 – Wednesday.

well as other plant and animal life in the region. With increase in population and access to pipe-water, dumping of garbage in the water-bodies has become common.<sup>81</sup> This is in addition to the waste dumped by resorts, house-boats and hospitals in the region.<sup>82</sup> All this increases the suffering of the many that still depend on the water-bodies in the region.



Fig.9. Water everywhere, but not a single drop to drink.

The troubles caused by dearth of pure water in the region came up in almost all discussions I had with my informants. “Now the water here is too much polluted,” Chandamma, an old *nottakaran*<sup>83</sup> from Champakulam, remarked with distress. But still

---

<sup>81</sup> Ummachan, a new landlord, aged 50 from Pulinkunnu. Interviewed on 13 October 2011 – Thursday.

<sup>82</sup> Sarojini, a Nair woman, who is a housewife, aged 45, from Kidangara. Interviewed on 26 July 2011 – Tuesday.

<sup>83</sup> Nottakaran is the supervisor of the old landlords, in times of paddy cultivation.

the inhabitants are forced to use it due to lack of pure water.<sup>84</sup> “Little relief is experienced during the monsoons when the floods purify the water-bodies,” added Kurunnappan who was also a *nottakaran* in the past. “The fear for *Devi* and respect for land and water among the inhabitants made people value their resources in the past, but now with changes and developments nobody cares about the region,” stated Pennamma from Mampuzhakkary. “It is the inhabitants themselves who are bringing the curse upon themselves and then blaming the resources,” grumbled Paru a very old agricultural labourer desperately.

The water schemes, according to my informants, are not implemented properly by the authorities who are least bothered about the water they supply. The common pipes of those householders, who cannot afford a pipe of their own, are not at all reliable. In summer the scarcity of water reaches the zenith.<sup>85</sup> The rich who are always in a better position have money to bring fresh water from the neighbouring towns of Alappuzha and Changanassery in boats for their use.<sup>86</sup> “Rain is the only hope for us, but there is no rain in summer,” said Kamala, an agricultural labourer from Mampuzhakkary, sadly. “It is a blessing to get pure drinking water through pipes and lucky are those who get pure water at their door-step,” Gopalan stated.<sup>87</sup> The pollution of the land and the waters is making the inhabitants feel more, that the blessed region is a curse.<sup>88</sup>

“Pollution is preventable by environmental sanitation, personal hygiene, better nutrition, immunization and health education in which both the Government and the inhabitants have equal roles to play. Together it is possible to transform the curse into a blessing,” Suresh spoke out with a ray of hope blinking in his eyes.<sup>89</sup> In their study on place attachment and behaviour, Vaske and Kobrin (2001) illustrates how an attachment

---

<sup>84</sup> Sarojini, a Nair woman, who is a housewife, aged 45, from Kidangara. Interviewed on 26 July 2011 – Tuesday.

<sup>85</sup> Sarojini, a Nair woman, who is a housewife, aged 45, from Kidangara. Interviewed on 26 July 2011 – Tuesday.

<sup>86</sup> Kunjannamma, an agricultural labourer aged 53 from Ramankari. Her family owns land. Interviewed on 21 October 2011 – Friday.

<sup>87</sup> Gopalan, a member of Communist Party and an agricultural labourer, aged 48, from Pulinkunnu. Interviewed on 3 October 2011 – Monday.

<sup>88</sup> Rajan, an agricultural labourer, aged 56, from Kidangara. Interviewed on 4 September 2011 – Sunday.

<sup>89</sup> Suresh, a Social Worker, aged 32, from Kainakari. Interviewed on 18 November 2011 – Friday.



to a local natural resource can influence environmentally responsible behaviour in an individual's everyday life but in contemporary Lower Kuttanad where dependency on and attachment to resources are increasingly being seen as decreasing day by day, it becomes ambiguous as with whom this responsibility lies now. This turns our attention to the suggestions made by Brosius, et.al (1998) about community-based resource management as a way to involve the inhabitants in the management of resources, which may endorse interest among them towards their resources and traditional occupations. At this instance it is advisable to keep in mind the local inhabitants' attachments and relationships to the region while planning and implementing policies. In his study assessing the environmental psychology as a way to understand the relationship between people and natural landscapes, Williams (2004) argues that knowledge of the relationship between people and natural landscapes, and how individuals perceive, experience, and create meaning in the environment, is highly significant in the management of natural resources.

### **Local developmental activities and the balance in nature**

Our attention has to be now turned to the development activities in Lower Kuttanad. In the study on the role of sense of place in natural-resource-based recreation and tourism, Farner et.al (2005) sets light on the fact that individuals' attachment to places which is highly relevant in the management of public lands is not usually given any importance by the policy makers, which can be seen as true in the case of Lower Kuttanad. The developmental activities in Kuttanad have helped to some extent increase the area and production of rice and improve the life conditions in the region. However, on a closer analysis, these positive aspects turn out to be only marginal. A major complaint levelled against the developmental policies and programmes undertaken in the region (majority of which were failures) was that none were planned taking into account the opinions, needs and statements of the local inhabitants who work on the land and the waters. "The unscientific developmental policies destroyed Kuttanad," raged Raghavan an old landlord from Champakulam who declared himself, to be bankrupt due to continuous crop failures. There used to be a naturally balanced cycle between people and resources in Lower Kuttanad. As said by my informants, it is when the order of that cycle

became disorder, curses began to happen.<sup>90</sup> “Changes in the methods of cultivation changed the tempo of life in the region as a whole,” Kunjamma said as she waited for her son to bring her umbrella since the weather soon became cloudy.<sup>91</sup> Earlier the cultivators knew their resources well but now even their predictions are going wrong.<sup>92</sup>

There was a natural balance between the resources and the people in the past. Agriculture was a combination of growing crops and animal husbandry till recent past.<sup>93</sup> The animals consumed the organic wastes in the region as food and in turn gave milk, meat and eggs. Population increase leading to land fragmentation led to the disappearance of domestic animals due to lack of space for growing them, resulting in pollution increase. Earlier the fields used to get naturally fertilised during the annual monsoons and floods. The rivers from the mountains cleaned the region in cycles but the construction of bunds and dams has hindered its natural course.<sup>94</sup> The face of Kuttanad is changing with changes in landscapes, occupational patterns and life of the inhabitants that are the result of new developmental policies. “Nature acts, but waits”, warns Chandamma an old agricultural labourer. The use of artificial chemicals in the place of the old organic manure is polluting Kuttanad adversely affecting the health of local people and animals, unlike in the past when natural fertilisers produced a healthy crop and a healthy population.

Kuttanad now remains as a flop chapter in the pages of development history of the Kerala State. The unplanned construction of roads, cutting the whole region into small fragments and other land reclamation activities stopped the swift flow of water in many areas resulting in stagnation, leading to unfavorable effects on people and the place. In this context the in-depth analysis of development narratives made by Roe (1991)

---

<sup>90</sup> Celine who was earlier an agricultural labourer, aged 62, from Champakulam. Interviewed on 2 July 2011 – Saturday.

<sup>91</sup> Kunjamma, an old agricultural labourer, aged 63, from Moncompu. Interviewed on 7 October 2011 – Friday.

<sup>92</sup> Thomachan an agricultural labourer, aged 57, from Moncompu. Interviewed on 14 November 2011 – Monday.

<sup>93</sup> Kunjamma, an old agricultural labourer, aged 63, from Moncompu. Interviewed on 7 October 2011 – Friday.

<sup>94</sup> Mathai, an old inhabitant in this region, aged 62, from Mampuzhakkary. Interviewed on 17 November 2011 – Thursday.

becomes important, in which she points out that failure in development programmes is due to failure in taking into account the previous developmental efforts in the region and the local knowledge. “Kuttanad is supposed to be a lowland region filled with water according to the laws of nature,” rationalizes Mathamma an agricultural labourer. But people reclaimed land and locked the waters, obstructing its natural flow compelling water to force its way into the human-made obstacles in its course leading to breaches and floods; the frequency of which is increasing tremendously. “We are responsible for everything; the resources should not be blamed,” Madhavan my informant from Mampuzhakkary told with resentment, gazing at the newspaper that he was reading which contained a report on the new development package for Kuttanad, at the local tea-shop. “Blessings and curses are created by people,” Pappunni said thoughtfully as if trying to find an explanation to the flopped developments that were occurring around them in the region.

It was interesting to see that inspite of all failures in developmental activities so far, the inhabitants are still found to accept and co-operate with all the new developmental activities initiated by government and private agencies wholeheartedly considering it as a blessing even though more often it ends up as a curse. This is in contrast to the attitude of the people in Guatemala who are against the developmental activities of the government due to fear of environmental degradation as exposed by Kemman (2010) in his research in mines of Guatemala. The inhabitants of Kuttanad still truly hope that the government would do something to eradicate their problems and make the land and its resources a blessing again thereby attracting people to return back to the resources with pride.<sup>95</sup> “If we work hard, the land will bless us with wealth and benefit,” says Rajamma a labourer from Champakulam. The authorities on the other hand find it an opportunity to amass large amounts of money into their personal pockets, from the funds allotted by the central government for the upliftment of Lower Kuttanad. So practically nothing gets done in the region and the problems, the so called ‘curses’ of Lower

---

<sup>95</sup> Celine who was earlier an agricultural labourer, aged 62, from Champakulam. Interviewed on 2 July 2011 – Saturday.

Kuttanad continue without any solution, inspite of the numerous studies and researches conducted by government and private agencies.<sup>96</sup>

The inhabitants of Lower Kuttanad have now become so much used to living here that inspite of all hardships they have a smiling face. The people have also become inured to crop failures, saline water, *pola*, the smell of degraded coconut husks, fish oil on the body of *vallam*, the clay getting dried up in the sunlight, and the smell of the limestone; all of which have become part of their very life in the region and symbolizes their sense of place.<sup>97</sup> In his research on the American landscapes, past and present, Jackson (1994) describes sense of place as something we create in course of time, as a result of habit or custom that is reinforced by what might be called a sense of recurring events. Life in this fairly 'locked' region till recent times can have certainly created a peculiar sense of place among the inhabitants that links them so intimately to the region and to its resources which can be seen as the underlying theme within the lines of this thesis. On the one hand as the inhabitants remain entangled by the senses that attach them to the region on the other hand, they have been affected by the tides of change that have recently swept the whole of Kuttanad with the creeping in of urbanisation and developments. What can be experienced and witnessed now in Lower Kuttanad is another big transformation period in which dependency on resources are decreasing day by day with greater contacts with the outside world.

Floods, salinity, *pola*, pests, breaches of bunds, and heavy rain were the challenges placed by the resources before the inhabitants who had almost succeeded in coping with and overcoming all such challenges as a result of years of experience and knowledge passed down from generation to generation. The inhabitants of Kuttanad are always praised for their valiance in 'overcoming the restraints imposed by nature' in the region. My informants say "we grew up seeing the paddy field and the life that revolves around it. Our 'world' was what we saw in this water-locked Kuttanad. We never considered the discomforts in life here as discomforts. We thought life is like that. We

---

<sup>96</sup> Rajan, an agricultural labourer, aged 56, from Kidangara. Interviewed on 4 September 2011 – Sunday.

<sup>97</sup> Ponnann, an agricultural labourer and member of Communist Party, aged 42, from Champakulam. Interviewed on 14 October 2011 – Friday.

never considered anything as curse but everything was a blessing. But it is with contact with the ‘outside world’ that we began to think of our land as a ‘curse’. Now when we compare the past and present, we see blessings and curses, now and then.” In his explorations of the Indonesian rain forests, Tsing (2005) gives a clear account of how global connections create ‘frictions’ in the local world and give grip to universal aspirations similar to what can be found happening in Lower Kuttanad as the inhabitants hope for developments and urbanisation, without being much aware that is leading to their very disappearance.

The problems only increased with passage of time, acquiring new forms. In her attempts to expose the link between time and landscapes, Bender (2002) asserts that landscapes that are created out of people’s engagement and understanding with the world around them are always temporal, as they are always in the process of being shaped and re-shaped, and there will not be a record but only recording of such landscapes. In the same manner, now new blessings and curses have come up in the place of the old in Lower Kuttanad. Environmental pollution, sanitation problems, deficiency of pure drinking water, illnesses, decrease in the variety and number of fish, animal and plant diseases, problem of rodents, lack of means of transport and communication, increased cost of cultivation, decrease in the price of rice, labour problems, electricity deficiency, lack of modern technologies, lack of financial support from governments, indebtedness, revenue recovery, political conflicts, and so on are the new forms taken by the ‘curse’.<sup>98</sup> It was these challenges that were seen by them as their problems or as their ‘curses’. It is the life of the inhabitants itself that is seen in the cycle. Some of my informants preferred using the word ‘non-blessing’ instead of ‘curse’.<sup>99</sup>

The texture of life in Lower Kuttanad is fast changing even though a fusion of urban and rural lives can be still seen. While the old believed, they could experience the gift of blessings from *Devi* when they worked hard and took up challenges and risks

---

<sup>98</sup> Kunjamma, an old agricultural labourer, aged 63, from Moncompu. Interviewed on 7 October 2011 – Friday.

<sup>99</sup> Celine who was earlier an agricultural labourer, aged 62, from Champakulam. Interviewed on 2 July 2011 – Saturday.

boldly, the new generation only wants to leave the land in which they can see more of curses than blessings, to earn money in easy ways, and settle somewhere outside of Kuttanad.<sup>100</sup> The attitudes of the inhabitants are also changing. This is indicative of the changes in the sense of place of the inhabitants with the changing times. The *Thozhilurappu* women, who were mostly the old and middle aged agricultural labourers in the region said, “We will not let our children to suffer in this cycle of curses.” With the changes in their attitudes and decrease in their dependency on resources, the old local beliefs also appear to be on the verge to fading, which brings us to the analysis made by Snyder et.al (2003) of culture loss and sense of place, in which they argue that property is a manifestation of social relations and any loss in culture is socially mediated. Thus any loss in the culture that is happening in Lower Kuttanad can be argued as caused by the inhabitants themselves. Now they say, “We are blessed when we have money, food, health, a high social position<sup>101</sup>, land, hardworking family members, a good concrete house, vehicles, a fetching occupation, and children abroad; having paddy fields to cultivate and good harvest are only secondary now, an additional benefit.”<sup>102</sup>

‘Lower Kuttanad is ‘blessed’ with resources’ is what can be heard from almost all my informants. The inhabitants who are basically religious in their outlook regard the resources as a ‘gift’ of their *Devi*. Their reverence for *Devi* made them consider their resources also as sacred, and sometimes as *Devi* itself. Their life revolved around these resources, according to a timetable fixed by the seasons of the year, like a cycle. “There is a time for floods, a time for *pola*, a time for salinity and paddy cultivation has to be squeezed in between; hence chances for loss are high,” says Josekutty a landlord from Champakulam. The religiosity of the inhabitants played an important role in their relation with the resources around them. Anything that happened in relation to the resources was regarded as related to *Devi*. The manner in which the inhabitants of Lower Kuttanad make sense of their world, is similar to the way Ingold (2000) states of the diverse ways

---

<sup>100</sup> Vishwambaran, an agricultural labourer, aged 45, from Moncompu. Interviewed on 8 November 2011 – Tuesday.

<sup>101</sup> Today money is more important than caste. But if one has money and is from a high caste it will be additional bonus.

<sup>102</sup> Gopalan, a member of Communist Party and an agricultural labourer, aged 48, from Pulinkunnu. Interviewed on 3 October 2011 – Monday.

the constituents of the natural world figure in the imagined, or so called ‘cognized’ world of cultural subjects in his study of the Cree people.

The tendency of religious outlook was more in the past even though traces of it are still found among the older generation that still make them to see resources as instruments used by *Devi* to bless and curse them. Hence blessings and curses were also seen as gifts from *Devi*. As Davis (2000) points, the spirit of gift is carried not by names alone, but by whole situations. Settings, phrases and gestures allowed giver and recipient to understand that a gift relation had been established. Rather than considering the curses as punishments, the inhabitants’ religiosity made them pray in times of both blessings and curses and accept both as gifts from *Devi* or the divine. As pinpointing to the connection that is believed to exist between prayers, curses and blessings Tomlinson (2004) says about the chain prayers of the Fijians to thwart curses. Politically motivated a few of my informants claimed that the ‘curses’ are the curses of the old labourers who were sacrificed in the bunds and of the other labourers who passed away after suffering a life of exploitation under the old landlords. This is somewhat in par with the analysis made by Kratz (1989) of the blessings, curses and oaths as genres of power performed by the Okiek in Kenya.

### **The gift and the cycle of blessings and curses – the continuation**

Gifts are generally exchanged between people according to most studies of gift in Anthropology. Here the gift is bestowed on the inhabitants by the resources or the ‘divine’, according to their local beliefs even though the inhabitants are also seen as offering gifts in return for the gifts offered to them. In this chapter the stress is given to the feelings and response of the inhabitants to the gifts bestowed on them in the form of blessings and curses and the way their life is affected by these gifts. In the same way as Komter and Vollebergh (1999) in their study of gift giving and emotional significance of family and friends mentions that the nature of the feelings in gift giving varies according to social relationships, the nature of feelings involved while receiving gifts also varies systematically with the closeness or distance of the relationship between giver and recipient, which is a new approach brought in the study. The intimate relationship the

inhabitants have with their resources plays a significant role in their acceptance of the gift, be it, blessing or curse.

In return for the gifts bestowed upon them by the resources or *Devi*, the inhabitants in turn offer their energy in the form of labour to the resources. “There is a give and take policy here between us and the resources. We give our energy to the land and the water here, and they in return gift us with blessings in the form of good harvest, wealth, health and everything good. The blessing depends on our sincerity. Insincere work leads to curse,” explained Kuttappan. Apart from labour, they offer gifts of their produce in the form of paddy, coconuts, vegetables, fruits and flowers to the *Devi* in times of festivals and rituals in the local temples. The practise of offering coconuts and paddy at the idol of *Karumadikuttan*, a local deity in the region is an example. But of all the gifts the inhabitants offered, nothing could be weighed against their supreme gift of human sacrifice. Even though such extreme gifts are no longer presented, the *Kuruthi* ritual continues to be offered in the local temples. This brings our attention again to the sense of place of the inhabitants. In his study of people’s attachments to places, Low (1992) proclaims place attachment to be a symbolic relationship formed by people giving culturally shared emotional meanings to a particular space of piece of land that provides the basis for the individual’s and group’s understanding of and relation to the environment. Thus, place attachment is more than an emotional and cognitive experience, and includes cultural beliefs and practices that link people to place. All these gifts of the inhabitants have become part of the cycle of life in Lower Kuttanad.

The challenges continue even today. The cycle of blessings and curses occurs one after the other and often seems inseparable. On the whole it appears as if blessings are gifting curses and curses are gifting blessings which shed light on the claim made by Nietzsche (1887) that the earth to be a lunatic asylum for so long where man has been harbouring too much horror. In spite of the continuity of the cycle, the inhabitants never gave up at any point in time, which might have been due to the high religious values they held and the intimate feeling of attachment they had towards their region, and also lack of availability of other opportunities before them in this remote water-locked region. This



reminds of the scrutiny made by Sahlins (1996) of the pleasure-pain principle of human actions, in which he supports the notion of the cyclic motion of life with ups and downs, pointing that life, which is the pursuit of happiness has to be chronically unhappy. Mauss (1967) repeatedly stresses a combination of interest and disinterest, and of freedom and constraint in gift. Likewise, the 'gift cycle' in Lower Kuttanad seems to contain a combination of blessings and curses. The whole issue of what causes a 'curse' rather than a 'blessing' and how to enjoy the latter and avoid the former is an extremely complex issue in Lower Kuttanad. But it is expected that successful management of a natural resource-curse can be attained through a combination of policies and institutions. The inhabitants still carry hope in their minds that the so called 'curses' in the region can be converted once into blessings, and blessings alone.

An analysis of the accounts given by my informants and my own personal observations exposes how much the life of the inhabitants is linked with the resources in the region. Their sense of place that was formed as a result of years of toiling, and struggle with the forces of land and water is also brought to light. The life of the inhabitants can be seen blend with the land and the water here. It is the life of the inhabitants itself that becomes visible within the cycles of blessings and curses. The way the inhabitants cope with the cycles of blessings and curses due to their dependency on resources is uncovered throwing light on the problems they face in the region that have become part of their life and conception of the region. The role of the religiosity of the inhabitants also becomes evident. The inhabitants' perception of their life in the region has been given importance especially on the way they view their land and water and how they link themselves with their resources. The notion of 'gift' that lies in the background of the present ethnography is also interesting. The memories of the past sufferings and triumphs continue to bind the inhabitants together to the place and to its past.

## Chapter IV

### Changes in Landscapes, Life and Lifestyle

I was enjoying the pleasant ride along the water-bodies that interlaced Lower Kuttanad, experiencing the beauty of the quiet life, on Govindan's small *vallam*, hearing the rhythmic splashing sound of water as he rowed and the birds' twittering on the trees that arched our way from both sides, when suddenly his *vallam* entered the river that flowed parallel to the AC road.<sup>103</sup> The sharp horns of the fast moving vehicles pierced my ears and broke the serenity of the quiet 'world' in which I was, a few seconds ago. Breaking my daze Govindan, my informant from Moncompu who was an old ferryman said, 'I have told my son, when he called last week from Dubai, to send money so that I can buy a motor for my *vallam*, to go fast!'

As a native, I myself have noticed the drastic changes that have swept Lower Kuttanad in terms of landscapes, life and lifestyle in the past few decades - the transformations in the region, where the resources (the land and the water) and the inhabitants once lived in a perfect linkage. Circumstances leading to more frequent contacts of this once remote water-locked region with the outside urban world have brought tremendous changes both among the inhabitants and in the region. While the new generation are seen easily adapting to the winds of change, the old generation are found rather baffled to cope with the changed situations. The mixture of feelings of the inhabitants when realizing that they are increasingly being part of a 'world' that is disappearing before them is getting exposed. At present there appears to be a synthesis of rural and urban life in the region where the majority of the inhabitants are rather found happy with the developments that are coming up in their life and region. "We know we are disappearing, but we are happy to see developments in the region," Rajan, an agricultural labourer from Moncompu uttered as he crossed the newly tarred road in front of his house to reach his paddy field that lay on the other side of the road.

---

<sup>103</sup> AC Road or Alappuzha-Changanassery Road is the road that connected the two towns (Alappuzha and Changanassery) in the region.



Fig.10. The newly tarred roads criss-crossing the length and breadth of Kuttanad.

The old intimacy the inhabitants had towards their land and water is fast disappearing with the decreasing dependency on resources. Now a new and dynamic society is said to have taken the place of the decadent and stationary one of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with little personal ties and attachments to the resources.<sup>104</sup> This progression did not happen overnight; it had its own pace and track. According to my informants the spread of communism in the early 1900s was a revolutionary episode in Lower Kuttanad that set fire to a chain of events that altogether changed the life in this region.<sup>105</sup> Among them the most important was the spread of education among the lower orders, the root cause that altered the conventional practices and attitudes of this predominantly agrarian society.<sup>106</sup> “Once the obstacles to education were removed, the inhabitants made full use of the limited opportunities that were locally available and succeeded in their efforts,” articulated Kuttychan an old *nottakaran*<sup>107</sup> from Champakulam. Education connected them to an entirely new world with new

---

<sup>104</sup> Vasavan, an agricultural labourer aged 61 from Champakulam. Interviewed on 14 January 2011 – Wednesday.

<sup>105</sup> Neelakantan, an agricultural labourer aged 58 from Champakulam. Interviewed on 14 January 2011 – Wednesday.

<sup>106</sup> Dineshan, a new landlord aged 56 from Champakulam. Interviewed on 15 September 2011 – Thursday.

<sup>107</sup> Supervisor in paddy cultivation.

opportunities.<sup>108</sup> Leaving behind the paddy fields and the life of curses and blessings, they went outside to make ‘money.’

## **Education**

The realization I got from my informants about the relevance of education among the inhabitants gave me a good start to explore the transformations; including its causes and impact in the region. “Comprehending the benefits of education, the parents are now keen in giving good education to their children who are themselves enthusiastic about getting educated, to lead a ‘comfortable life’,” remarked Graceamma an agricultural labourer.<sup>109</sup> The young generation, having grown up seeing the life of suffering of their parents, is showing a natural tendency to move away from traditional occupations which they believe will pull them back into the cycle of curses.<sup>110</sup> “There is no point in showing loyalty to land and water now which gives us nothing but poverty and suffering,” says Anthonichan, a native of this region who is now settled in the neighbouring town of Changanassery with his family.<sup>111</sup> “It is not proper to blame the land and the water for our suffering; on the contrary it is rather the authorities that are making life conditions worse here due to their inefficient ways of governance,” Chinnachan an old landlord was a bit offended by Anthonichan’s statement. More frequent contacts with the outside world have made the inhabitants more aware of the fact that they are part of a wider world where life is much faster, easier and luxurious. ‘Why should we stick on here when all circumstances are favourable for us to get education and good jobs outside?’ asks Cheriachan who had come to visit his parents from UAE where he works as a mechanical engineer.<sup>112</sup> Many of the youngsters have moved out to neighbouring towns of Alappuzha, Changanassery and Kottayam for educational and occupational needs. They claim that they experience a more dynamic world in the towns where they are equals and

---

<sup>108</sup> Chellappan, a new landlord aged 60 from Champakulam. Interviewed on 16 September 2011 – Friday.

<sup>109</sup> Graceamma, an agricultural labourer aged 65 from Champakulam. Interviewed on 18 September 2011 – Sunday

<sup>110</sup> Kamalakshi, an agricultural labourer, aged 65 from Champakulam. Interviewed on 19 September 2011 – Monday.

<sup>111</sup> Anthonichan, aged 30 and an engineer working and settled in the neighbouring town of Changanassery. Interviewed on 19 September 2011 – Monday.

<sup>112</sup> Cheriachan, aged 32, from Champakulam. Interviewed on 10 September 2011 – Saturday.

free from the social barriers of caste, inferiority and superiority.<sup>113</sup> Improvements in transport and communication facilities and technological advancements are making movement and contacts with the urban world easier and the young generation is making best use of these opportunities.<sup>114</sup>

Better education, economic prosperity and greater exposure to outside influences have radically transformed the young generation's customary habits, ideas, beliefs and attitudes towards social stratification, modes of living and inter-personal relationships that has impelled them to adopt an urban lifestyle, opening up their chances to improve their social status and position.<sup>115</sup> "The educated youth consider themselves as part of a new social order, the 'educated employed' and are not ready to engage in any of the traditional occupations", informed Panchimmayi, wife of an old landlord from Champakulam. "The negative value attached to the occupation of 'agricultural labourer' has now influenced the new generation to quit the field altogether", notified Chochayi an old landlord.<sup>116</sup> Linkage with the outside world has taught this new social order to become self-sufficient in new ways without depending on the resources.<sup>117</sup> "Who will work under the hot sun and the heavy rain when there are other easy ways to make money in air-conditioned rooms?" asks Kuttappan, a labourer from Champakulam supporting his son who is a computer engineer in the Gulf. As the inhabitants justify on these changes, few among them fear the loss of old traditions though at the same time feeling that change is inevitable. Whether the inhabitants desired it or not, life in Lower Kuttanad is now highly influenced by the urban world. "Interrelation with the world outside Lower Kuttanad, with advancements in transport and communication facilities in the region are rendering the people in this region to imitate the life of the towns which is leading to the loss of everything traditional and customary," accounts Philomma, wife of an old landlord from Mampuzhakkary with an expression of grief on her face, when I asked her what they meant by the urban influence. In her ethnography describing the changing landscapes of the Kalimantan region of Indonesia, Tsing (2005) has depicted

---

<sup>113</sup> Surjith, an electrician aged 28 from Champakulam. Interviewed on 3 September 2011 – Saturday.

<sup>114</sup> Raja an agricultural labourer aged 53 from Champakulam. Interviewed on 4 September 2011 – Sunday.

<sup>115</sup> Rajan an agricultural labourer aged 56 from Kidangara. Interviewed on 4 September 2011 – Sunday.

<sup>116</sup> Chochayi an old landlord aged 58 from Champakulam. Interviewed on 5 September 2011 – Monday.

<sup>117</sup> *Thozhilurappu* women from Champakulam. Interviewed on 13 July 2011 Wednesday.

how global connections give grip to universal aspirations. The way she explains the way in which global connections are forged in remote localities is akin to that of Lower Kuttanad. This urban influence they say is visible in the physical landscapes of the region as well as in all facets of life of the inhabitants which forms the main area of discussion in this chapter.

### **Social composition and stratification**

My six months of stay in the region which enabled me to mingle freely with the inhabitants, helped me to get an idea of the demographic composition of this agrarian population, which is highly important while considering the changes that have come about in the social landscape of Lower Kuttanad. For a better understanding I divided the population broadly into two: the agrarian old generation who are above the age of forty and the educated young generation, below the age of forty. An analysis of the educated young generation, brought me to the awareness that some of them are settled abroad leading a ‘very comfortable life having money’ according to my informants; some others are settled outside Kuttanad in the neighbouring towns and leading a ‘reasonably good life’ and not part of the cycle of curses and blessings; yet another group lives in Kuttanad but works outside, having a regular income, but ‘not so well off’; and lastly there are those living in Lower Kuttanad, engaged in petty jobs<sup>118</sup> in the region itself, who are often seen unemployed, doing nothing during the off seasons rather than taking up traditional occupations. “They are usually poor who are finding it very hard to make both ends meet. Drawn mostly from the lower orders they are part of all the hardships in the region,” the *Thozhilurappu*<sup>119</sup> women from Champakulam pointed out to me.<sup>120</sup> The inhabitants generally regarded the former two groups as ‘the blessed’. This calls our attention to Jefferey’s (2010) study of the educated unemployed in the North Indian city of Meerut in which he has clearly exposed the condition and experiences of the youth in the region. Among the agrarian old generation who are the only leftovers of what is conventional in the region, there are a section that has completely left paddy cultivation

---

<sup>118</sup> The petty jobs in the region include work in the rice mills, or as masons, painters and metal workers in the construction sector, auto and taxi drivers in the transport sector, mechanical works, tourism, sales people, nurses, beauticians, or as *coolies* or daily wage earners.

<sup>119</sup> *Thozhilurappu* is a local work providing scheme implemented by the government.

<sup>120</sup> *Thozhilurappu* women from Champakulam. Interviewed on 13 July 2011 Wednesday.

and other traditional occupations; another section that partially depends on paddy cultivation and related occupations; and a third group that still depends entirely on cultivation and other hereditary occupations.<sup>121</sup> All of them together form the populous of the land that is now under the clutches of change and transformation.

### **Coming in of ‘money’**

Having obtained an intimation of the demographic composition of the region I tried to link education and society, the two notions that I became acquainted with, in the initial stages of my query about transformations. “Education helped to bring money”, exclaimed Ousep an agricultural labourer who admits to be a happy father who has two educated children successfully settled abroad. ‘Money’ has now emerged as a major factor in the life of inhabitants in Lower Kuttanad.<sup>122</sup> “Since illiteracy and lack of money were reasons that perpetuated social discriminations in the past, the young generation from the lower orders, realizing the key to success that lies with education, made full use of the educational opportunities, secured good jobs and acquired money which enabled their families in Lower Kuttanad to rise up in the social and economic ladder”, explained Divakaran who himself has educated children working in the neighbouring towns.<sup>123</sup> This new young population that has become moulded in the region with no personal attachments and intimacies to the resources but having a tremendous influence on those left behind in the region is paving the way for the disappearance of everything long-established. “The achievements of children bring ‘blessing’ to their families in Lower Kuttanad,” Prabhakaran from Champakulam exclaimed to me.<sup>124</sup> “Children are like paddy. Everything will take some time as paddy grows. Harvest depends on the quality of paddy,” explained Jeenamani, a very satisfied mother from Champakulam who has children abroad. The tides of change brought about through the acquirement of education and wealth by the young generation completely shuffled the agricultural population. A class of new middleclass landlords who are mostly the parents and family members of the

---

<sup>121</sup> Shoshamma an old Knanaya Christian woman aged 78 from Kidangara. Interviewed on 29 July 2011 – Friday.

<sup>122</sup> Sarojini, a Nair woman who is a housewife aged 45 from Kidangara. Interviewed on 26 July 2011 – Tuesday.

<sup>123</sup> Divakaran, an old labourer who now works as a kooli, aged 56 from Champakulam. Interviewed on 28 July 2011 – Thursday.

<sup>124</sup> Prabhakaran a new landlord aged 58 from Champakulam. Interviewed on 23 July 2011 Saturday.

successfully educated, having ‘money’, has recently come up drawn from the various orders of society, making differentiation on the basis of caste difficult. “Unlike earlier, when there used to be a rigid social hierarchy with Namboodiris<sup>125</sup>, Pattars<sup>126</sup> and Syrian Christians<sup>127</sup> topping the layer, followed by Nairs<sup>128</sup> and Ezhavas<sup>129</sup> and much below them, the Parayas and Pulayas<sup>130</sup>, now the border line between them is often fuzzy”, explained Mohan, a native of this region.<sup>131</sup> “More than caste, it is money that now determines one’s social position; even though birth in a high caste and family adds to what money can secure”, explicated Laila an agricultural labourer from Kidangara.<sup>132</sup>

### **Emergence of new middleclass landlords**

The awareness I got from the accounts of my informants of the jumbling up of the remaining population with the spread of education and money induced me to focus my attention to those left behind in the region, especially to the disappearing agrarian old generation who are still engaged in traditional occupations. Since they are the major victims and witnesses of the major transformations in the region and are now the main but fading link that connects the new generation who left the fields back to the region and its past, the focus of my study is placed mainly on them, the agrarian old generation of the region, even though, the influence of the educated young generation is never ignored

---

<sup>125</sup> Namboodiris who were numerically a tiny fraction, were traditionally the caste that owned most land in Kuttanad, who also occupied the highest position in the caste hierarchy. But in course of time they lost of all their wealth and are now mostly impoverished and left Lower Kuttanad. Their children are mostly educated and only a few now depend on paddy cultivation.

<sup>126</sup> Pattars were Tamil Brahmins who had migrated to Kerala and were considered as high in terms of birth and social position. They were money lenders and owned vast stretches of land in the past. But now most of them are impoverished and most of them have left Lower Kuttanad. They too have highly educated children and it is only a few among them who depend on paddy cultivation now.

<sup>127</sup> Syrian Christians owned and still own vast stretches of land and are wealthy. They are considered as equal in social and economic status to the Namboodiris and Pattars. Most of them can be seen still engaged in cultivation even though they have other means of income as they are engaged in various means to generate wealth and have highly educated children also.

<sup>128</sup> The Nairs were positioned below the Namboodiris in the caste hierarchy in Hinduism in Kerala and were advantaged by superior caste and land-holding status. Even though they owned land they also worked as overseers in paddy cultivation at one time. But now most of them are impoverished. They remained above the Ezhavas.

<sup>129</sup> The Ezhavas were not considered as ‘untouchables’ but lowly by the higher castes. Even today the Ezhavas continue as labourers. They are popular as toddy (a local alcohol) tappers. Even though they are not very high in caste they are wealthy and are ready to work hard to earn money.

<sup>130</sup> Parayas and Pulayas were the lowest of all the castes and were regarded as the untouchables in the past. Most of them still remain poor and degraded.

<sup>131</sup> Mohan a *coolie* aged 49 from Kidangara. Interviewed on 26 July 2011 – Tuesday.

<sup>132</sup> Laila an agricultural labourer aged 49 from Kidangara. Interviewed on 27 July 2011 – Wednesday.



or neglected in the study. With this conception in mind my further analysis of this agrarian old generation brought me to the understanding that the new middleclass landlords among them are one of the milestones of the recent transformations in the region. With educated children abroad or outside of Kuttanad settled in successful positions, this new middleclass have a stable financial position, which is increasing prompting them to quit traditional occupations or to regard it as secondary.<sup>133</sup> Among them are found those who left traditional occupations and those who partially depend on it. Entire dependency on traditional occupations is not often seen among them. This newly rich section of the society is seen leading a comparatively affluent life, even though their stay in the region makes them part of the cycle of blessings and curses imposed by the resources of the region.

As if keyed up by the newly acquired wealth and social positions they are said to be in a mad race to gather wealth. “As landownership is always associated with high status in contrast to physical labour in the fields, they are keen in expanding their land area (as the value of land is increasing with developments and population growth) inside and outside Kuttanad in order to maintain their newly acquired social position”, expressed Kunjanpavan an old agricultural labourer from Champakulam.<sup>134</sup> “The land sold by the old *Thampurakkal* (landlords) whose life conditions deteriorated after the communist regime and the ensuing events, is also bought by this newly rich lower orders”, informed Ammini an agricultural labourer with a silent pride that apparently flashed on her face.<sup>135</sup> Only a few among the old *Thampurakkal* still stick on in the region with the same occupation inspite of most of them losing their old grandeur.<sup>136</sup> “Paddy cultivation will end soon and the Land Utilisation Act<sup>137</sup> will be modified and so it is clever to buy as much land as possible now, when there is money,” articulated

---

<sup>133</sup> Gopalachan an agricultural labourer aged 78 from Mampuzhakkary. Interviewed on 8 September 2011 – Thursday.

<sup>134</sup> Kunjanpavan an agricultural labourer aged 73 from Mampuzhakkary. Interviewed on 9 September 2011 – Friday.

<sup>135</sup> It is also seen as an opportunity to show their vengeance towards their old landlords. Ammini an agricultural labourer aged 50 from Champakulam. Interviewed on 13 September 2011 – Tuesday.

<sup>136</sup> Manikantan an agricultural labourer aged 59 from Champakulam. Interviewed on 13 September 2011 – Tuesday.

<sup>137</sup> The Land Utilization Act prevents inhabitants from using the paddy land for purposes other than paddy cultivation.

Mathamma a new landlord from Champakulam while supervising the construction of his son's new house in the region. This statement concurs with the claim of Jokisch (2002) made in his study of the impact of migrants on agricultural production and rural landscape in Ecuadorian Andes that long term loss of labour and infusion of funds by the migrants homeward, carries significant implications for rural landscape and agricultural change. Another study that seeks our notice here is the one conducted by Taylor, et.al (2006) on transnational migration and its effects on Guatemalan lives and landscapes, that shows migrant remittances being used only for personal advancement and very little money and effort being invested in works that benefit communities or neighbourhoods, which is very true as far as Lower Kuttanad is concerned. Along with these new middleclass landlords and the remaining old *Thampurakkal* in Lower Kuttanad are those who still depend entirely on traditional occupations with no successfully educated children abroad or outside Kuttanad and who are mostly poor and financially backward.<sup>138</sup>

### **Agrarian relations**

Looking at all these social groups from the paddy fields of Kuttanad, cultivation becomes a confluence of all of them and the transformed circumstances. The old attachment and intimacy to the land and the water and their traditional occupations is now mixed with caste feelings, the impact of education, urban contacts and the newly acquired wealth and social positions which has a tremendous influence on paddy cultivation and the present landlord-labourer relationship. "The traditional *janmi-kudiyam*<sup>139</sup> relationship is increasingly being replaced by an employer-employee relationship", Sabukuttan, an absentee landlord from the neighbouring town of Alappuzha told.<sup>140</sup> "With more money in more hands, there are no particular castes called landlords and labourers now", supplemented Josappan who has his ancestral property in Lower Kuttanad, but who is now settled in Alappuzha. "Irrespective of social divisions, those who have money own paddy fields and the others work in the fields", Kuttappayi an old agricultural labourer

---

<sup>138</sup> Komalan an agricultural labourer aged 56 from Pulinkunnu. Interviewed on 17 September 2011 – Saturday.

<sup>139</sup> Landlord-labourer.

<sup>140</sup> Sabukuttan an absentee landlord from Alappuzha.

explained to me.<sup>141</sup> Among those who work in the fields, the important dividing line is between those who work in their own fields only (who are comparatively well off) and those who sell their labour to others (who are usually poor).<sup>142</sup> From the accounts of my informants I came to the understanding that even at present, the relation and feelings between those owning fields and those working on it, remains as intensely reviled as at the time of the spread of communism in the early 1900s.<sup>143</sup> “When it comes to labour problems, now even the new landlords are acting as the old landlords,” mutters Thara an agricultural labourer from Champakulam while plucking weeds in one of the new landlord’s fields. My labourer informants opened up to me that the landlords only want the requisite number of ‘hands’ to perform the critical operations of paddy cultivation in a time-bound schedule and has no further concern for them. “If we had any other option we would not have worked in the fields for the *muthalali*<sup>144</sup>,” says Sulochana a labourer from Ramankari with an expression of anger towards the landlord for whom she worked. But for cultivation to continue there has to be land, its lord and the labourer. Under the changed circumstances the future of the paddy fields and other traditional occupations seems unpredictable and the inhabitants themselves remain mystified by the changes.

### **Paddy cultivation - a state of bewilderment**

Trying to cope with this ‘new age’ when all their predictions about weather and cultivation are going wrong, with untimely floods and weather uncertainties, the old agrarian population who always knew the land and the water so precisely, now seems to be under the grip of confusion and bewilderment and feels the land on which they stand slipping beneath their feet. “The paddy field where our life lies is disappearing and our future remains uncertain,” Leelamma an agricultural labourer exclaimed with a fretful look. Enchanted by the winds of change some among them says they are remaining in traditional occupations due to their inability to obtain a modern sector job despite wishing to do so, or due to the costs of moving being unacceptably high (including the cost of

---

<sup>141</sup> Kuttappayi an agricultural labourer aged 70 from Moncompu. Interviewed on 17 September 2011 – Saturday.

<sup>142</sup> Madhavan an agricultural labourer aged 67 from Champakulam. Interviewed on 17 September 2011 – Saturday.

<sup>143</sup> No violent and armed conflicts are happening in the region. The conflict is mainly based on wages, the use of machines instead of labourers and caste feelings.

<sup>144</sup> Capitalist landlord.

giving up the relative security of remaining at home) in relation to the expected wage premium. The potential migrants discount the higher modern sector wage by the probability of remaining unemployed.<sup>145</sup> “We don’t know any other job than paddy cultivation,” says Gopalachan, an old agricultural labourer from Champakulam. At the same time, due to long settled habits some others do not cherish a change from their hereditary work and continue in their traditional occupations.<sup>146</sup> There seems to be a sort of attachment that still binds the old generation to the region and their occupations, handed down to them by their forefathers. The old inhabitants’ mind appears to stay assorted as they remain in between the old and new worlds. “This is our hereditary occupation. I like my occupation and will do it till I die. I am known by this occupation which is my identity in this region. But this occupation must end with me. I will not let my children enter the fields,” expressed Keshavan, an agricultural labourer with strong feelings.

The current changes have severed the firm relationship that existed between the land and the people in Lower Kuttanad. This is now reflected in their attitude towards resources. “Interest in paddy cultivation is dwindling day by day. Absentee landlordism<sup>147</sup> has increased with the giving of paddy fields on *pattom* (lease) to those who still have the fascination to do cultivation by the ‘educated employed’ settled outside Kuttanad as well as the old and the new landlords”, Krishnan expounded from Mampuzhakkary.<sup>148</sup> The *pattom* holders are said to have no intimacy to the land as they just fancy profit and so do not take care of the land. “Land values being high, and decrease in the intimacy and dependency on land, the owners profit much more by selling it than by continuing to use it for the cultivation of rice”, Sadanandan revealed.<sup>149</sup> “The

---

<sup>145</sup> Rajappan an agricultural labourer and member of Communist Party aged 50 from Champakulam. Interviewed on 26 September 2011 – Monday.

<sup>146</sup> Radha an agricultural labourer aged 57 from Champakulam. Interviewed on 25 September 2011 – Sunday.

<sup>147</sup> Doing cultivation, without being present in the fields. Cultivation is not a primary occupation for them but only a secondary one.

<sup>148</sup> Krishnan a new landlord and an old agricultural labourer aged 52 from Mampuzhakkary. Interviewed on 26 September 2011 – Monday.

<sup>149</sup> The traditional occupations in Lower Kuttanad are paddy cultivation, coir making, canoe making, toddy tapping, duck rearing, fishing, net making, collecting clay from the water-bodies, and lime-shell collection.

paddy fields are fast disappearing with the creeping in of other opportunities of livelihood,” Venu a labourer from Moncompu brought to my notice. This has tempted some of the cultivators to switch over to other enterprises like tourism and construction industry and also to cash crops which they claim are more profitable and easy to grow. The manner in which the patterns of land-use are changing in Lower Kuttanad, with the changes that have come up the region takes attention to the investigation of work, identity and state-making in the forests of southern West Bengal in India made by Sivaramakrishnan (2008) who expresses that the changing patterns of land use, redefine village communities tied to each other, and to a particular landscape, by their collective struggle for livelihood. “Some have already started growing vegetables by reclaiming some portions from the paddy fields”, says Chandamma pointing at the vegetable garden in his neighbour’s property.<sup>150</sup> But still, no large-scale cultivation of any other crop other than paddy is possible and paddy cultivation is still the only major occupation in this region.<sup>151</sup>



Fig.11. Vegetable gardens formed by reclaiming small portions of paddy fields.

---

Sadanandan a new landlord and an old agricultural labourer aged 57 from Champakulam. Interviewed on 29 September 2011 – Thursday.

<sup>150</sup> Chandamma an agricultural labourer and a new landlord with children abroad, aged 56 from Champakulam. Interviewed on 4 October 2011 – Tuesday.

<sup>151</sup> Kunjachayan an old landlord aged 60 from Champakulam. Interviewed on 10 October 2011 – Monday.

In the context of the transformations brought about by the migration of inhabitants to places outside Kuttanad, the research conducted by Spalding (2011) in Panama on migration and socio-economic changes in Bocas Del Toro, needs to be mentioned, where the author illustrates the way new migration patterns affect local livelihoods, cultures, and natural ecosystems through changes in alternative employment opportunities and growing economic disparities, and land cover change due to new forms of land use. “Kuttanad has the right climate for paddy cultivation and giving up paddy cultivation for the sake of cash crops and other profitable crops is a sad consequence,” says Kunjachayan, an old landlord from Champakulam. While the Land Utilization Act that prevents inhabitants from using paddy fields for purposes other than paddy cultivation is a relief for those still engaged in the occupation, it is considered as a curse by those who have lost interest in the occupation.<sup>152</sup> “The Act is preventing us from making this cursed land into a blessing. Dependency on resources will decrease further unless the law is modified and we are allowed to use the land for other purposes,” Antappan who is engaged in the tourism industry, voices for the youth in the region. In spite of all laws, every year the area for cultivation and production of rice is said to be shrinking, which is adversely affecting the employment opportunities of the traditional agricultural population still engaged in the same occupation.<sup>153</sup> “The shrinkage of the fields is a silent indicator of the perpetual disappearance of the region and the occupation, in the near future” Chinnachan an old landlord from Mampuzhakkary who is still engaged in paddy cultivation told with grief.

---

<sup>152</sup> Mamachan an old landlord aged 60 from Champakulam. Interviewed on 8 October 2011 – Saturday.

<sup>153</sup> Vavachan, an agricultural labourer aged 51 from Champakulam. Interviewed on 17 October 2011 – Monday.



Fig.12. Filling of paddy fields for construction and other purposes by those who have lost interest in paddy cultivation.

### **Labour shortage**

More people are moving out of traditional occupations, and the region is experiencing a great threat of labour shortage.<sup>154</sup> “This is in contrast to the excess labour that was available in the past, when there were no other occupational options before the inhabitants”, related Eathamma an agricultural labourer from Champakulam.<sup>155</sup> Besides the circumstances created by the spread of education, contacts with the urban world and the transformation in the social positions of the inhabitants, a number of other factors are also understood to contribute to the labour shortage. The seasonal character of the occupation that increases unemployment, the vagaries of harvest in the fragile ecosystem and the high risks involved, has prompted many to leave the occupation, and increasingly regard paddy cultivation as a secondary occupation.

Different from Lower Kuttanad Linares (2003) refers to the ‘turnaround migration’ among the Jola of Senegal, which he explains as seasonal migration to the towns during off seasons when there is no work in the fields and returning back during

---

<sup>154</sup> Toekuttan an old landlord aged 59 from Champakulam. Interviewed on 18 October 2011 – Tuesday.

<sup>155</sup> Eathamma an agricultural labourer aged 50 from Champakulam. Interviewed on 22 October 2011 – Saturday.

the seasons of cultivation to work in the fields. If this prevailed in Kuttanad then it would have turned out to be a good solution to the problem of unemployment in the region. Further, the increasing cost of cultivation and lack of commensurate price for the produce that pushes cultivators in spiraling debt burden is also said to make them lose their interest in the occupation.<sup>156</sup>

In compliance with what Norton (1973) stated in her work on marital migration in Essex County in Massachusetts, that migration at the time of marriage is a common social phenomena, marriage of women labourers of the region to places outside Kuttanad are also viewed as reasons for labour shortage. “The women who are married to this region by the men of this region are not ready to work in the fields”, Rajamma who was married to a man from Kuttanad itself told me.<sup>157</sup> In her research on food-farming and migration in Fante villages Hill (1978) has pointed out the importance of the husband and wife being from the same region, for the success of cultivation. She has written, ‘The men are attached to the land, they own it and clear it; the women are attached to the food, they grow it, process it and cook it and sell it.’ A new policy of the government that classifies people into APL (Above Poverty Line) and BPL (Below Poverty Line) providing huge quantities of rice for very low price to the so called BPL (Below Poverty Line) section is encouraging people to quit traditional occupations or to regard it as a secondary.<sup>158</sup> “As many children leave Kuttanad from the nuclear families, for studies and occupations, only the parents are left behind, and as financial support is given for their sustenance by their children, they tend to become lazy and hesitate to work in the paddy fields, thereby reducing the number of people who work for cultivation,” Kurunnappan an old landlord from Mampuzhakkary explained. All these changes leading to decrease in paddy cultivation pose a serious threat to those still engaged in the occupation.<sup>159</sup> “Unlike the old landlords who completely depended on labourers for everything, now most of the new landlords who were labourers in the past, knows

---

<sup>156</sup> Kurunnappan a landlord aged 60 from Mampuzhakkary. Interviewed on 5 November 2011 – Saturday.

<sup>157</sup> Rajamma a member of agricultural labourer union aged 52 from Pulinkunnu. Interviewed on 22 November 2011 – Tuesday.

<sup>158</sup> Kalyani an agricultural labourer aged 62 from Mampuzhakari. Interviewed on 29 November 2011 – Tuesday.

<sup>159</sup> Padmanabhan an agricultural labourer aged 48 from Ramankari. Interviewed on 30 November 2011 – Wednesday.



cultivation and work in their own fields instead of keeping labourers to reduce cost, which is also aggravating unemployment among the existing labourers”, informed Ramadasa Swami from Moncompu.<sup>160</sup>



Fig.13. Women labourers on their way to work through the green paddy fields at Champakulam in Lower Kuttanad.

Since it is mainly the women who are now more engaged in activities related with paddy cultivation, the major victims of this change are observed to be the women.<sup>161</sup> “Due to tremendous decrease in the number of labourers, the same labourers work in all the fields of Lower Kuttanad one after the other,” Philomena who belongs to an old landlord family from Champakulam brought to my notice. Having realized that work in the paddy fields is not reliable, none among the women now depend solely on paddy cultivation. Due to decreasing work opportunities of women in paddy fields they are found more inclined to rely on the local welfare schemes introduced by the government like *kshemanithi*, *kudumbasree*, *ayalkoottam* and *thozhilurappu* which is giving them

---

<sup>160</sup> Ramadasa Swami a Tamil Brahmin landlord aged 75 from Moncompu. Interviewed on 23 November 2011 – Wednesday.

<sup>161</sup> Kunjannamma an agricultural labourer aged 53 from Ramankari. Interviewed on 21 October 2011 – Friday.

almost an equal pay; a further reason for them to quit the paddy field.<sup>162</sup> “Rice cultivation will not survive unless more youngsters come to the field. This will never happen as we ourselves are not allowing our own children to work in the field. Even though the government is now increasingly coming forward with new financial offers, grants and loans with the hope of attracting youngsters into the field, none among the new generation are ready to step into the field and take up risks. This occupation will end with us,” says Kunjachayan an old landlord from Champakulam. This again bring us to analysis made by Hill (1978) who has written about the labour shortage experienced in the Fante villages due to the migration of the young men and women, leaving behind the old generation. With increasing labour shortage it can be admitted that paddy cultivation in Lower Kuttanad is on the verge of decline.

“The vast stretches of green paddy fields where ‘life’ is grown, cannot be left barren”, says Ousep Thommi an old landlord from Champakulam. Labour shortage is forcing the landlords to rely on machines and other non-manual methods as they have no other way to continue cultivation in their fields. This in turn is a further threat to the existing labourers leading to unemployment.<sup>163</sup> The landlords consider the coming of machines as a blessing as it enables them to lessen the disputes with the labourers and nullify the labour shortage and in that way, the dependency on them.<sup>164</sup> The old landlords hate dealing with the labourers who they say are making use of all the opportunities now in their favour, to exploit them. But the machines are not always easily available due to high costs involved. Mamachan a landlord from Champakulam said, “This is *kali kalam*<sup>165</sup>. It is the time of the labourers. Now the government and even the Gods are on their side.” The labour unions are quite strong and the landlords are now forced to yield to the demands of the labourers and their unions for work to get done.<sup>166</sup> The weak old generation told me from the paddy fields of Kuttanad, “You are seeing the last generation

---

<sup>162</sup> Theyyamma a housewife of a new landlord who also goes for thozhilurappu aged 48 from Mampuzhakkary. Interviewed on 20 October 2011 – Thursday.

<sup>163</sup> Vava, an agricultural labourer and member of Communist Party aged 42 from Champakulam. Interviewed on 14 October 2011 - Friday

<sup>164</sup> Devasi, a new landlord from Champakulam. Interviewed on 11 November 2011 – Friday.

<sup>165</sup> The Indian notion of *Kali kalam* here means the worst time in life.

<sup>166</sup> Bhaskaran a Communist Party member aged 40 from Pulinkunnu. Interviewed on 2 November 2011 – Wednesday.

in the field; if the occupation happens to continue in future then machines will replace labourers.” But it has to be pointed out that inspite of mechanization and all the efforts by the remaining labourers, the production of rice still remains low. “Being the staple food of the state and the demand increasing with increase in population and low production, it has now become necessary to depend on the neighbouring states for rice. This is a shame to admit as a native agricultural labourer of this region,” conveyed Vishwambaran an agricultural labourer from Moncompu.<sup>167</sup> “There is no point in calling Kuttanad the ‘Rice Bowl’ anymore,” mutters Parupanikkathi an old agricultural labourer with a mixed feeling of anger and sorrow. It seemed really a pity to observe the region and the population that once fed almost the whole state, disappearing and losing significance day by day.



Fig.14. Machines are replacing human labour. The use of tractors to plough the fields.

### **The old food producers**

“Cultivation was a way of life apart from a means of livelihood for the old inhabitants of this region”, recognised Devan, aged 49, who was found very much

---

<sup>167</sup> Vishwambaran an agricultural labourer aged 45 from Moncompu. Interviewed on 8 November 2011 – Tuesday.

interested in the occupation.<sup>168</sup> It is unanimously agreed by all my informants that Kuttanad had a wealth of generations of hardworking people who carried the proud legacy of indomitable adventure, innovation and achievements in taming the nature, unmindful of the challenging conditions, for creating resources and livelihoods.<sup>169</sup> “The old labourers of Kuttanad were sturdy men with plenty of intelligence and full of experience of the plant and the soil, which has been handed down from father to son, through the ages”, asserted Leela, an agricultural labourer.<sup>170</sup> These workers are said to form the backbone of the labour force, not so much on account of sheer physical strength, but primarily because of the accumulated skill and experience achieved as a result of years of paddy work. “No machine can replace man”, declares Kuttychan an old agricultural labourer from Ramankari. “A successful crop was a result of the hard work put in by many,” stated Raja an agricultural labourer.<sup>171</sup> The resources and the peculiar geography of this region demanded unity and cooperation. My old informants say that the risks and difficulties they faced together had knit them all with love and unity.<sup>172</sup> Overcoming the challenges posed by nature, through unique agrarian methods, the old generation inhabitants of Kuttanad made this region a real granary.<sup>173</sup>

With the passage of time these distinctive skills and work culture of the agricultural labourers of Kuttanad declined till it reached the present state of affairs. “The old responsibility as the ‘food producers’ is no more in the hearts of the inhabitants”, admits Gopalachan an old agricultural labourer with pain.<sup>174</sup> “The pride that we had as creators of the land we lived is disappearing,” Kunjanpavan an old labourer from Mampuzhakkary put in. Unlike the heroic old generation who struggled against the challenges imposed by nature, the young generation landlords and labourers are not ready

---

<sup>168</sup> Devan agricultural labourer owning his own land aged 49 from Mampuzhakkary. Interviewed on 24 October 2011 – Monday.

<sup>169</sup> Cheeran an old agricultural labourer aged 77 from Champakulam. Interviewed on 15 September 2011 – Tuesday.

<sup>170</sup> Leela an agricultural labourer aged 56 from Ramankari. Interviewed on 11 September 2011 – Sunday.

<sup>171</sup> Raja an agricultural labourer aged 53 from Champakulam. Interviewed on 4 September 2011 – Sunday.

<sup>172</sup> Madhavan an agricultural labourer aged 67 from Champakulam. Interviewed on 17 September 2011 – Saturday.

<sup>173</sup> Kunjanpavan an agricultural labourer aged 73 from Mampuzhakkary. Interviewed on 9 September 2011 – Friday.

<sup>174</sup> Gopalachan an agricultural labourer aged 78 from Mampuzhakkary. Interviewed on 8 September 2011 – Thursday.

to continue traditional occupations and to take up risks.<sup>175</sup> “We knew the land and the waters as life and breath but the new generation knows nothing,” says Anthonichan an old landlord from the region. “Nobody knows cultivation now,” adds Thommi another old landlord from the region. “Now everyone has money”, uttered Vavachan an old agricultural labourer. The lust for money and for the things money could buy has become so ferocious among the inhabitants that it has compartmentalized life leading to the disappearance of true love, friendship, trust, dependency and cooperation among the inhabitants.<sup>176</sup> “Now walls have come up between houses,” exclaimed Cheeni, an old labourer who remembers a time, not so distant, when all properties in the region were open to everyone. The resources, the land and the water that once united the inhabitants are disappearing with alterations made now in the landscape, thereby, connecting this once water-locked region to the outside world. “Now there is no paddy cultivation to bring people together to unite or to cooperate”, exclaimed Rosammai, as she tried to recollect her memories.<sup>177</sup>

### **A solution?**

“It is not fair to insist that the labourers should remain perpetually in this tough occupation but policies have to be taken to remove the toughness of this occupation and to attract more people to the traditional occupations so that rice production would not stop,” says Chandamma thoughtfully. In her analysis of the rural to urban migration and capital accumulation in Norway, Rye (2006) refers to people leaving the countryside as indicative of the inability of rural societies to provide attractive or at least acceptable living conditions which points to a critical analysis of the local governance in Lower Kuttanad. “If cultivation continues, it is a best sector to give employment to a vast majority of the agricultural population in the region,” Mamachan stated. My informants recommend that the cultivators who are the producers of food must be uplifted by giving them due respect, status and life by offering all needed support. Apart from producing

---

<sup>175</sup> Kamalakshi, an agricultural labourer, aged 65 from Champakulam. Interviewed on 19 September 2011 – Monday.

<sup>176</sup> Karthikeyan an agricultural labourer and coolie aged 47 from Champakulam. Interviewed on 28 September 2011 – Wednesday.

<sup>177</sup> Rosammai, wife of a landlord, aged 77 from Champakulam. Interviewed on 29 September 2011 – Thursday.

food for the whole population they are the protectors of the environment taking good care of the fields. They suggest that the traditional workers can be encouraged by increasing the price of the rice they sell, giving production bonus, insurances, pensions, and so on which will make paddy cultivation more attractive.<sup>178</sup> ‘The small boys and girls who sit in far away offices in the towns and see Kuttanad only through files and televisions, and the scientists who see the cultivators and labourers only in seminars do not know the actual tiller of the soil, the land or the life in this region,’ exclaims the real cultivators of rice, with suppressed feelings, from the paddy fields of Lower Kuttanad. “Accurate compensations are not given to the cultivators for natural calamities, the insurance and compensation amounts are not paid in time, and the machines needed for cultivation are also not available in time which leads to great loss,” complaints Jochayan from Champakulam. It is a known truth in the region that the studies and researches conducted by government were never able to find a complete solution to most of the problems in Lower Kuttanad and almost all the governmental interventions were failures.<sup>179</sup> Roe, in her study of the third world rural developments, brings up an observation that “the reasons we do not learn from past rural development efforts are precisely the same reasons we cannot plan better for future one (1991:287)”. The statements of the inhabitants prove that nearly all the developmental activities in the region were done without taking into account the mind of the inhabitants. The inhabitants plead that the resources in the region are their future and hence to plan and implement policies and programmes with utmost care. This shows the high regard that is still given to paddy cultivation and other traditional occupations by the inhabitants of the region inspite of all changes and transformations, which is indicative of the attachment they still have in them towards their region; their sense of place.

### **Continuation of “the gifts”**

The research into the changes sweeping Lower Kuttanad brought me to the observation that the cycle of blessings and curses and ‘sacrifices’ are still abiding. The education received by the young generation, irrespective of social divisions, enabled most

---

<sup>178</sup> Kunjachayan an old landlord aged 60 from Champakulam. Interviewed on 10 October 2011 – Monday.

<sup>179</sup> Chandamma an agricultural labourer and a new landlord with children abroad, aged 56 from Champakulam. Interviewed on 4 October 2011 – Tuesday.

of them to secure good jobs and positions outside Kuttanad, which in turn raised their and their families' social positions in Lower Kuttanad which is indeed considered as a blessing by them. It has brought a halt to the generations of sufferings undergone by the lower orders. The same education that is blessing the inhabitants is at the same time turning out to be a curse to the region when the raised social positions of the young generation and their families prevent them from embracing hereditary occupations, leading to labour shortage adversely affecting paddy cultivation and related livelihood means, resulting in the disappearance of almost everything old and the traditional. Even those among the educated youth who remain in the region are not ready to take up traditional jobs, due to the negative value attached to the occupation with the spread of education and money in the region.

As similar to what Davis (2000) speaks of the 'wrong gift' where the donors regret their gifts when matters do not turn out the way it is expected, the gift of education that can be considered as given by the parents to the children, is seen on the one hand as producing adverse effects on traditional occupations leading to the disappearance of the landscapes, life and lifestyle in this region while on the other hand it is seen as a remedy for most of the curses of the region and hence as a blessing. A further analysis of the continuing cycles and sacrifices brings our attention to the kind of relationship the inhabitants have with their place of residence and the factors that link them to a particular region. This makes the analysis of the study of the Western Apache people by Basso (1996) significant in which he gives a fine account of how self-hood and place-hood is completely intertwined. In Lower Kuttanad it appears that the cycle of blessings and curse and sacrifices and the memories of the same in the past are binding all the inhabitants, the old and the new generation, those who remain in the region as well as those who have gone out, to the region and to a common past.

Education seems to be the greatest 'gift' the parents in Lower Kuttanad now give to their children and it can be observed in this region that gift is always accompanied by sacrifices which is seen to continue in new forms under changed circumstances. The prolongation of the old belief in sacrifice becomes evident in the strong words of

Sulochana who says, “This will be the last generation of workers that you are seeing. We will not let our sons and daughters to enter the field and work for the landlords. We suffered, our parents suffered and this is going to be the end. We have given our children good education so that they don’t have to work in the fields and suffer like how we did.” From the accounts of my informants it becomes evident that the old generation parents are still sacrificing their lives working in the disappearing fields, to earn money to educate their children so that they live comfortably. Some of my informants claim that it is the parents’ unlimited love for their children that stimulates them to make ‘sacrifices’ for which they do not always expect anything in return. Like what Sahlin (1972) says about the ‘generalized reciprocity’ in his ‘spectrum of reciprocities’, in this instance, gifts and assistance in Lower Kuttanad are seen to be given freely and indistinctively where the return is not specified; it may come soon or it may never come, but the relation between giver and receiver continues nonetheless as in the case of close kin.

This leads to an analysis of the return gift. Are the children who received the ‘gift’ of education by the sacrifices of their parents, returning the gift? According to Mauss (1925) ‘gifts are in theory voluntary, in reality given and returned obligatorily’. Education is enabling the children to secure good jobs which in turn are making them capable of acquiring wealth. The wealth is helping them to raise the social position of their families in Lower Kuttanad which can be seen as the ‘gift’ the children give back to their parents as an acknowledgement and gratitude of the sacrifices made by them and as an indicator that their efforts and sacrifices did not go in vain. Hence the gift is reciprocated here. Now it can be seen that not all but most of the parents expect a return of advancement and favours from their children in their old age while giving education to their children. It is that hope that makes the parents work hard in the fields under strenuous conditions.

Hubert and Mauss (1899) puts it, ‘If sacrificers give something of themselves it is in part to receive. The sacrifice is both a useful act and an obligation. Unselfishness is mixed with self-interest.’ The gift is not ending with this. The educated children who take care of their parents are in turn expecting the gift of their parents’ blessings in their life.



But everything depends on the children. This reminds of the 'Three Graces' mentioned in Greek mythology.

The 'comfortable' life experienced by each coming generations in the region is often seen as a 'gift' of the life sacrificed by the older generations in the past. In the same way as in his work on the gifts of sixteenth century France, Davis (2000) rightly states, human beings are held together by reciprocity and reciprocity was created by gifts and benefits, the gift rhythm of obligation and gratitude is unending in Lower Kuttanad. It is this 'gift' of sacrifices that always created a sense of attachment among the inhabitants to the region and is also seen as binding those who have left the region now to those remaining in the region. All this signifies their sense of place and attachment to the region of survival. In spite of all changes and transformations, the bond that binds the inhabitants to the region is clearly visible and is sure to remain till the paddy fields, the stage where this miracle of the merger of life and death with blessing and curse happens, disappear completely.

## Chapter V

### Conclusion

Lower Kuttanad, the arena where life and death merge with blessing and curse is fading into the memory of people day by day. Through the empirical presentation, the inhabitants of Lower Kuttanad have been followed in the various stages of their life courses with the help of their own memories that bind them to a past they so often recall in everyday life. This anthropological study presents the inhabitants' dependency on resources that has led to the formation of certain peculiar rituals and beliefs that still have a strong grip over their contemporary life. In Lower Kuttanad where almost all developmental programmes undertaken so far to uplift the region are proving to be failures one after another, an understanding of the relationship that exists between the region and its inhabitants is contemplated to be appropriate, which forms the main purpose of the present study. In the context of changes and transformations in the region and life of the inhabitants, with the creeping in of urbanisation and developments, leading to the losing of the uniqueness of this once remote water-locked region, the present study is expected to further our understanding of the relationship between the inhabitants, their land and water in Lower Kuttanad.

My main argument in this study is that the old local beliefs and memories of the past that are cherished by the inhabitants still remain, and it is these that bind them with feelings of attachments to this land area. I have tried in each chapter to present the manner in which the old local beliefs in the 'cycle of blessings and curses', 'sacrifices' and the 'process of death giving way to life' are reproduced in contemporary Lower Kuttanad. With new developments, the embedded history is disappearing, thereby leading to decrease in dependency and attachments to their resources, which includes their land and water, inspiring people to give up traditional occupations. Success of developmental activities may continue to remain vague, unless the strong bond that exists between the land, the water and the inhabitants of this region, are taken into account. The history that is written in the 'landscapes' of Lower Kuttanad, uphold and preserve the uniqueness of

the region. Considering this verity while planning and implementing policies, will not only prevent inhabitants from leaving the place and customary occupations but will also enable the preservation of long established traditions of this man-made granary. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century when the diverse cultures of the world are increasingly being found to merge into one, it becomes necessary to conserve the purity and uniqueness of the 'local' to make the world remain 'colourful'.

Throughout the thesis, the intimate relationship between the inhabitants and their resources, the land and the water, has been given considerable importance; the analysis of which discloses their sense of place that is uniquely shaped by local and historically imposed circumstances. This relationship has been examined by focusing my study on the old local beliefs prevalent in the region in the form of the notion of 'death giving way to life' and the 'cycle of blessings and curses'. An evolution of dependency on resources (the land and water) can be clearly visible in all chapters. In each succeeding chapter, the decreasing dependency on these resources can be noticed, which when we reach the fourth chapter, can be seen culminating in the leaving of the region by the educated new generation, giving up hereditary occupations and everything old and traditional. Simultaneously with the decreasing dependency on land and water, lay the factors that strongly bind the inhabitants to this agricultural region. This is explained using theories of landscapes and gift, giving special regard to the sense of place, all of which together explicates how and why inhabitants connected, identified, communicated and coexisted together.

A summary of the main findings of the separate empirical chapters may help us to draw a broader picture of the interrelation between the region and its people. More than being a plain narrative of past reminiscences, the second chapter that handles the local notions of sacrifices, life and death, gives importance to the effect of those historical memories on the contemporary lives of inhabitants. These memories are found to be an important aspect that binds them strongly to Lower Kuttanad by stirring up their sense of place. The memories of real human sacrifices of the agricultural labourers in the breached mud-bunds of Lower Kuttanad by their *thampurakkal*, made the inhabitants to consider

life in Lower Kuttanad to be the gift of death or the dead. Appreciation of the heroic sacrifices of their ancestors, mixed with feelings of rancor for their *thampurakkal* replicates in the words, deeds, and thoughts of contemporary inhabitants, binding them to this water-logged region. Life is thus held to be the legacy of the years of suffering and toil of their ancestors in the paddy fields of Kuttanad, fighting the forces of nature. The hard labor in the paddy fields, under tedious conditions, is still looked upon as ‘sacrifices’ by my informants that prove the emblematic continuation of the old practise. Symbolically, their ‘sacrifices’ or ‘death’ in the paddy fields produce rice (food) which stands for ‘life’ and hence ‘the process of death giving way to life’ and ‘the sacrifices’ are seen to be continuing even in contemporary Kuttanad. The *kuruthi* ritual in the local temples, discussed in the chapter, complements this argument.

The functioning of the cycle of blessings and curses is portrayed in the third chapter with the help of my informants’ accounts and my own observations in the field. The paradox of life in this region, where key resources, the land and the water, intermittently bless and curse the region has been substantiated. The alleged ‘blessings’ and ‘curses’ that are now experienced by the inhabitants appear as floods, salinity, the spread of water-weeds and pollution. Floods that come as a curse, creating disaster in the region, at the same time blesses this low-land with silt, making the region fertile for rice cultivation. Salinity that curses Lower Kuttanad, destroying cultivation, simultaneously blesses the same region by disintegrating the water-weeds that spread the water-bodies. Similarly, the water-weeds that spreads the water-bodies here as a curse, turns out to be a blessing when it degenerates and become organic fertilizer for the plant life here. Kuttanad is blessed with water, but as a curse, there is no pure water to drink. Hence in Lower Kuttanad, blessings and curses often seem inseparable and intermingled which further makes the region and its study interesting. The way life is blend with the land and the water has been revealed. The analysis brings us to the conclusion that it is the challenges experienced and overcome by the inhabitants in the region and the memories of the same that bound generations to this water-locked region.

The noticeable transformations that have come up over the past few decades in Lower Kuttanad form the crux of the fourth chapter. The uncertainty of the inhabitants who are the victims of changes is brought forth. The state of traditional occupations with the exit of the educated new generation from Lower Kuttanad forms the main theme. The old inhabitants of the region still remain as before in paddy fields working, (sacrificing or dying) to gain money to educate (give life to) their children and to rescue them from the cycle of blessings and curses. In that way, the continuation of ‘sacrifices’ in the paddy fields of Kuttanad, and ‘the process of death giving way to life’ is corroborated. These sacrifices and the memories of the same are analysed to bind the inhabitants to Lower Kuttanad. The changing landscapes and the passing away of the old generation brings up the question as to how long this powerful cord that bound generations together to this agricultural region would remain, as it is already showing signs of decay and disappearance. In this perspective, the significance of serious developmental planning is required.

Life in Lower Kuttanad now for the inhabitants, my informants, is a blend of memories of their past life in a closed rural world where they depended entirely on the land and the water surrounding them for everything, and experiences of their present life in the busy world of urbanisation, developments, money, and all that money could bring, with no personal attachments and intimacies to anyone and anything. I see them remaining perplexed between the old and the new ways of living which they see as two entirely different worlds. The links that connect these two diverse lives of theirs seem to be shredding out each day. With changes in the geographic area, the embedded history is vanishing. The decreasing dependency on resources (land and water), the disappearance of the paddy fields, the loss of local folks and myths from the memories and interests of inhabitants and lack of knowledge of the real meaning of many of the traditional rituals and ceremonies that are the only indicators of the past, points to the loss of those last remaining links that connect the old and the new. The attachment the inhabitants have with their land and water and their past which is indicative of their sense of place, can be seen blend with all the rest of the highlighted themes in the thesis. The past functions as a guiding factor by which people establish a relationship with the land. It may seem

unusual in this modern age to experience such a love affair with a region but as far as Lower Kuttanad is concerned, the natives' rapport with their region is most marked which is substantiated by the accounts of my informants and my own personal observations in the field. The alterations in their sense of attachment to this agricultural belt of Kerala are observable in the pages as varying according to individuals and their perspectives. But inspite of all changes and transformations that have swept this region and its inhabitants, a powerful but invisible bond that still connects them together has been exposed throughout the chapters.

As we trace the link that ties the inhabitants to the region of Lower Kuttanad and its past, within the cycle of blessings and curses and 'sacrifices' in the fields, it is significant that an equally important concept, lying parallel to it, do not skip our attention and that is, the notion of 'gift' and 'gifting'. An analysis of the findings brings us to the understanding that 'gift' forms an important underlying notion in the life of Lower Kuttanad along with 'landscapes'. Their notion of 'gift' is so much linked with their land and water that the focus of inquiry and conceptualisation of society employed throughout this entire thesis has hence been based on theories of both gift and landscapes which together throws light on their sense of place. Together, the outline given by the various scholars gives a theoretical background to the theme of this thesis. All the theoreticians I used have certain things in common albeit they also differ from each other on several points. Although not all parts of all theories were applicable in my analysis, the contributions as a whole have given a necessary understanding of the background, rendering my results plausible from a theoretical point of view.

The accounts of my informants in the chapters of the thesis serve as useful devices to trace the conception of 'the gift' that lies in the background of life in the region, which clearly reveals the way 'the gift' is entangled with the local notions of sacrifices, life, death, blessing, curse and landscapes, which include the land and the water in the region. 'The gift' that becomes apparent from the first chapter where life is seen as a gift of death or the dead, prolongs in the second chapter where the cycle of blessings and curses in Lower Kuttanad is regarded as the gift of *Devi* and the resources

(land and water), and extends to the third chapter where education of the new generation is considered to be the gift of the sacrifices of the old generation who work and worked in the fields of Kuttanad, in order to rescue them from the cycles of curses. The thesis leads us to reach the understanding that ‘the gift’ binds not just the chapters of this thesis but generations of inhabitants in Lower Kuttanad.

Let us have a look at the manner in which the notion of ‘the gift’ blends with the life in Lower Kuttanad throughout the chapters. In the beginning ‘death’ can be seen as the most significant ‘gift’ the labourers offered to their *Thampurakkal*, to the resources, to other inhabitants, to the coming generations, and to their *Devi* according to their local religious beliefs to get ‘life’ in return. Life here is turning out to be the ‘gift’ of the dead and death, which is infact a very extreme form of gift that needs analysis. The writings of Nietzsche (1889) and Bataille (1988) on ‘the gift’ have been utilized in this chapter to analyze the dilemma. Even though it has been found out that the reasons for such sacrifices varied, it has to be mentioned that it was never for recognition that in the beginning, the sacrificed offered themselves. They never got anything in return in person, except that, they were able to save the fields from destruction, which was a common good. Hence it can be agreed that similar to how ‘the sun gives without receiving’, as argued by Bataille (1988), the labourers sacrificed their lives for others and for the common good, out of the true devotion that developed due to their peculiar way of life in the region, as exposed in the second chapter. The contradictory statements made by Bataille and Mauss have been considered to scrutinize the problem.

In the background of the ideas put forward by Mauss (1925), Bataille (1988), Davis (2000) and Nietzsche (1889), that have been made use of in this thesis, a thorough analysis of the sacrifices and the notion of ‘gift’ in Lower Kuttanad reveals the understandings that in this region, a mixed form of generous, obligatory and forced gifts are found at various instances, where in all circumstances, the labourers or the lower orders are found to be the only victims. This enables us to understand the whole process as an expression of power, as it was always the labourers or the lower orders that were sacrificed and never the landlords or the higher orders. It has also been exposed that the

motives of sacrifices changed, in course of time, as sacrifices were seen, at one point of time, as a stage to quench grievances. Here it has to be mentioned that it was without the permission and sometimes against the will and even the knowledge of the sacrificed that they were buried in the breached bunds. Here, 'the generous gift' cannot be observed, even though the 'others' are made to believe such deaths, which can be better understood to be murders, as generous sacrifices or 'gifts' of the labourers. The obligatory nature of "gift" or rather the forced nature of gifting without the will of the giver becomes revealed. But it is believed by my informants that whatsoever be the motives behind sacrifices, such gifts of life were never in vain as the fields were always rescued from destruction after the sacrifices were conducted. Hence even though the cost of giving was extreme, the return was supposed to be certain, for this kind of a 'balanced exchange'. Now it can be identified that in Lower Kuttanad 'what is lost' in death is inseparable from 'what remains' and what remains, is in some sense, the 'gift' of what is lost in death all of which together forms their sense of place.

As we move on we observe again, the resources (land and water) that are the source of 'life' in Lower Kuttanad are regarded by the inhabitants as 'the gift' of their *Devi* or the divine who uses the same resources to further gift them with blessings and curses in cycles. The intimate relationship the inhabitants have with their land and water, plays a significant role in their acceptance of the gift, be it, blessing or curse. In return for the gifts bestowed upon them by the resources or *Devi*, the inhabitants, in turn, are seen offering their energy as gift in the form of labour. Apart from labour, they offer gifts of their produce in the form of paddy, coconuts, vegetables, fruits and flowers to the *Devi* in times of festivals and rituals in the local temples and churches, and the whole process continues as a cycle. But of all the gifts the inhabitants offer, nothing can be weighed against their supreme gift of human sacrifice. Even though such extreme gifts are no longer presented, the *Kuruthi* ritual continues to be offered in the local temples in remembrance of the old practise. All these gifts of the inhabitants have become part of the cycle of life in Lower Kuttanad, and the cycle of gifts continues in a systematic sequence. Davis (2000) writes about the various forms of gifts that are exchanged between a number of givers and recipients and points the fact that the spirit of gift is



carried not by names alone, but by whole situations. Like how Mauss (1925) stresses the notion that a combination of interest and disinterest and freedom and constraint is found in the gift, in Lower Kuttanad the gift seems to contain a combination of blessings and curses. As this chapter is meant to signify the close relationship that exists between the region of Lower Kuttanad and its inhabitants, more of the theories on landscapes have been included.

As we reach the fourth chapter we get the impression that ‘gift’ in Lower Kuttanad is always accompanied by sacrifices. The importance and continuation of ‘sacrifices’, in the present life of Lower Kuttanad finds expression. The ideas of Sahlins (1972), Davis (2000), and Mauss (1925) have been used to examine how the gift system works in Kuttanad in the changed state of affairs. Beliefs in gift and gifting between the inhabitants, resources (the land and the water), and their *Devi* continued till great transformations happened in the region, in the landscapes, life and lifestyles, as we have already seen, with the spread of communism and education, which destroyed the old intimacy and dependency on their resources and shambled the life of the inhabitants, altogether. But it has been observed that even when the new generation has become fast affected by the winds of change, the old generation still remains in the region, in the fields, offering the gift of ‘life’ to their children in the form of food, money, education, blessings and so on. They are still working hard in the disappearing fields, to earn money, to look after their children and to educate them, so that they are rescued from the cycle of curses.

Education is seen as the greatest ‘gift’ the parents now give their children to save them from the sufferings in the water-logged Lower Kuttanad. A further analysis of the gift of education brings forth the question as to with what motive the ‘gift’ is offered. It has been observed that even though most of the parents are seen to claim that they are ‘sacrificing’ their lives liberally due to their limitless love for their children, hoping their wellbeing without expecting anything in return, it becomes evident from the accounts of many of my informants that at heart, not all, but most of the parents expect a return of advancement and favours from their children in their old age while giving the gift of

education to them. It is that hope that makes the parents work hard in the fields under strenuous conditions. And when the children, who made use of the gift bestowed on them, in turn look after the parents, as expected of them, the gift is again reciprocated and the process continues. The rhythm of gift and gifting is unending and it can be observed that it is this gift of sacrifice that binds those who have left Lower Kuttanad back to this region and to those left behind. But it has to be stated that this cycle of gifts is understood to cease with the present old generation in the near future, as none of the educated new generation is showing any interest in settling permanently in this agrarian wetland, taking up traditional occupations.

The landscapes are changing; the life and the lifestyles are changing. Disappearance of the paddy fields which was the pivot of 'life' of the inhabitants in the past, is leading to the loss of the arena where blessing and curse merge with life and death. As everything that could act as a link between the old and the new are fast disappearing, it is probable that the old 'Rice Bowl' will completely collapse in the near future. Perhaps it is this anxiety that forces the inhabitants to support the various 'experimental' developmental programmes that are being implemented in the region one after another, each time with the hope that cultivation will not stop and 'life' gets produced in the region. The life of the inhabitants can be seen within the local notions of the 'cycle of blessings and curses', the process of 'death giving way to life' and the system of 'gifts' in Lower Kuttanad; in short, in the pages of this thesis. As mentioned earlier, taking into consideration the intimate relationship that exists between the inhabitants, the land and the water of Lower Kuttanad, which is often forgotten or ignored while planning and implementing developmental policies, is expected to bring positive results in future developmental activities. But it has to be borne in mind that the values attached by people to what might be termed 'historical environment' will be multiple, changeable and will not necessarily map onto those identified by official bodies and hence the most significant aspect is to know first, the mind of the local inhabitants and to hear what they have to say.

The issue of place affects all of us. Although Lower Kuttanad has undergone a process of continual change and transformation, it has, like other historical sites, become embroidered with romantic sentiment and represents a distinct cultural expression of the rural life. Regions such as Lower Kuttanad are works in progress which represent maps of past, current and future journeys. Like storytellers, landscapes move from the typical/real to artistic and metaphorical modes. These sites are the blueprints of past experiences. Lower Kuttanad creates an image of experience in history to be remembered and experienced. This landscape, like all other types of landscapes, serves as a text which has a historical message that can be decoded. This interpretation of the cultural and social landscape illuminates prevailing beliefs, values and social attitudes that arise out of deep cultural processes, as a society adapts to new environments, technologies and opportunities and as it reformulates its basic concepts.

Relationship between people and landscapes/resources is highly complex phenomena, and a thesis such as this can only offer a limited contribution to a full understanding of them. Lower Kuttanad is an area where almost no Anthropological study has been made so far where the present study is supposed to be the first and therefore, there is a need for a lot more research in this area. There are various other topics that still need to be researched. For instance, there can be probably a lot more that can be said about their sense of place, memories, folks, traditional occupations, local festivals that are so much linked with resources in the region, and a horde of other topics. Gender, embodiment and role of the state in the region have been only lightly touched in the present research. A thorough study of the social positioning of the various sections of society would be interesting. The limited time schedule had induced me to skip and omit various areas that would have broadened my analysis further. Even though this has its limitations, it has contributed with one more piece of work in the enormous field of anthropological studies on the relationship between land and people.

It is time to realise that we carry within us the seeds of our own awakening – in our feeling for the world, in our memory of particular places. Even, perhaps, in our

feeling for places yet to be discovered. A study such as this enables us to point out concrete needs for future research based on the increase in information it has yielded.

Well, there is time left –

Fields everywhere invite you into them.

And who will care, who will chide you if you wander away

From wherever you are, to look for your soul?

Quickly, then, get up, put on your coat, leave your desk!<sup>180</sup>

---

<sup>180</sup> Mary Oliver, 'Have you ever tried to enter the long black branches?', *West Wind*, Houghton Mifflin, New York, 1997.

## References

- 1) Alexander, K.C. (1973). Emerging Farmer-Labourer Relations in Kuttanad. In *Economic and Politically Weekly*, Vol.8, No. 34.
- 2) Ashley, Caroline. (1998). Tourism, Communities and National Policy: Namibia's Experience. In *Development Policy Review*. Vol. 16. No. 4.
- 3) Balchand, A.N. (1983). Kuttanad: A Case Study on Environmental Consequences of Water Resource Mismanagement. *Water International*. Vol.8. No.1.
- 4) Basso, Keith H. (1996). *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache*. University of New Mexico Press.
- 5) Bataille, George. (1985). The Notion of Expenditure. In Alan Stoekel (Ed.), *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- 6) Bataille, George. (1988). *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*. Vol. 1. Robert Hurley (Trans.), *Consumption*. New York: Zone Books.
- 7) Baviskar, Amita. (2003). Tribal Politics and Discourses of Indian Environmentalism. In Paul Greenough and Anna Tsing (Ed.), *Nature in the Global South: Environmental Projects in South and Southeast Asia*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- 8) Bender, Barbara. (2002). Time and Landscape. In *Current Anthropology*. Vol.43. No. S4. Special Issue Repertoires of Timekeeping in Anthropology. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 9) Benjamin, Walter. (1973). Some Motifs in Baudelaire. In *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*. London: New Left Books.
- 10) Bertelsen, Bjorn Enge. (2004). 'It will rain until we are in power', Floods, elections and memory in Mozambique. In Harri Englund and Francis B. Nyamnjoh (Ed.), *Rights and the Politics of Recognition in Africa* (Postcolonial Encounter Series). London: Zed Books.
- 11) Biersack A. and Greenburg J. (Ed.). (2006). Red River, Green War: The Politics of Place along the Porgera River. In *Re-imagining Political Ecology*. Durham: Duke University Press.

- 12) Bloch, Maurice. (1995). People into Places: Zafimaniry Concepts of Clarity. In Eric Hirsch and Michael O'Hanlon (Ed.), *The Anthropology of Landscape: Perspectives on Place and Space*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- 13) Brosius, J. Peter, Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt and Zerner, Charles. (1998). *Representing Communities: Histories and politics of community-based natural resource management*. London: Routledge.
- 14) Burton-Christie, Douglas. (1999). Theological Trends: A Sense of Place. In *The Way: Contemporary Christian Spirituality*. Vol. 39. No.1.
- 15) Castree, Noel. (1997). Nature, Economy and the Cultural Politics of Theory: the 'War Against the Seals' in the Bering Sea, 1870-1911. In *Geoforum*. Vol.28.
- 16) Connerton, Paul. (1989). *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge University Press.
- 17) Dabble, Margaret. (1979). *A Writer's Britain: Landscape in Literature*. London: Methuen.
- 18) Dahlberg, Annika C. and Blaikie, Piers M. (1999). Changes in Landscape or in Interpretation? Reflections Based on the Environmental and Socio-economic History of a Village in NE Botswana. In *Environment and History*. Vol. 5. No.2. White Horse Press.
- 19) Davis, Natalie Zemon. (2000). *The Gift in the Sixteenth Century France*. The University of Wisconsin.
- 20) Douglass, Mary. (1970). *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*. New York: Routledge.
- 21) Fairhead, James and Leach, Melissa. (1994). Contested Forests: Modern Conservation and Historical Land Use in Guinea's Ziaman Reserve. In *African Affairs*. Vol. 93. No. 373. Oxford University Press.
- 22) Farner, Jennifer, Hall, Troy and Krugner, Linda E. (2005). *Sense of Place in Natural Resources Recreation and Tourism: An Evaluation and Assessment of Research Findings*, Department of Agriculture, Pacific Northwest Research Station.
- 23) George, Alex. (1987). Social and Economic Aspects of Attached Labourers in Kuttanad Agriculture. *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol.22. No. 52.

- 24) George, Jose. (1992). *Politicisation of Agricultural Workers in Kerala: A Study of Kuttanad*. Kerala: Indian Institute of Regional Development Studies.
- 25) Geschiere, P.L. (2004). Ecology, Belonging and Xenophobia: The 1994 Forest Law in Cameroon and Issue of 'Community'. In *Rights and the Politics of Recognition in Africa*. Zed Books.
- 26) Giles-Vernick, Tamara. (2000). Rethinking Migration and Indigeneity in the Sangha River Basin of Equatorial Africa. In Vigdis Broch-Due and R. Schroeder (Ed.), *Producing Nature and Poverty in Africa*. Sweden: Nordic Africa Institute and Transaction Press.
- 27) Graham, Helen, Mason, Rhiannon and Newman, Andrew. (2009). *Historic Environment, Sense of Place, and Social Capital*, International Centre for Cultural and Heritage Studies (ICCHS), Newcastle University.
- 28) Haenn, Nora. (2005). The Power of Environmental Knowledge: Ethno-ecology and Environmental Conflicts in Mexican Conservation. In *Human Ecology*. Vol. 37. No. 1.
- 29) Hansen, Susan. (Ed.). (2001). *Ten Geographic Ideas that Changed the World*. Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data.
- 30) Hill, Polly. (1978). Food-Farming and Migration from Fante Villages. In *Journal of the International African Institute*. Vol.8.
- 31) Hoskins, W.G. (1955). *The Making of the English Landscape*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- 32) Hubert, Henri and Mauss, Marcel. (1899). *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function*. W.D Halls (Trans.). (1964). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 33) Ingold, Tim. (2000). Culture, Nature, Environment: Steps to an Ecology of Life. In *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*. London: Routledge.
- 34) Jackson, J.B. (1984). *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*. London: Yale University Press.
- 35) Jackson, John Brinckerhoff. (1994). *A sense of place, a sense of time*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

- 36) Jefferey, Craig. (2010). Timepass: Youth, class, and time among unemployed young men in India. In *American Ethnologist*. Vol. 37. No. 3.
- 37) Jokisch, Brad D. (2002). Migration and Agricultural Change: The Case of Smallholder Agriculture in Highland Ecuador. In *Human Ecology*. Vol. 30. No. 4. Springer Science and Business Media.
- 38) Jose, A.V. (1977). *The Origin of Trade Unionism among the Agricultural Labourers in Kerala*, *Social Scientist*, Vol. 5.
- 39) Kannan, K.P. (1979). *Ecological and Socio-economic Consequences of Water-Control Projects in the Kuttanad Region of Kerala*. Vol. 2. No.4. Sadhana.
- 40) Katz, Cindi. (2000). Fuelling War: A Political Ecology of Poverty and Deforestation in Sudan. In Vigdis Broch-Due and Richard A. Schroeder (Ed.), *Producing Nature and Poverty in Africa*. Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.
- 41) Kemman, Alex. (2010). *Development, blessing or curse? Mining, Development and Governmentality in Guatemala*. Bachelor Thesis. University of Utrecht.
- 42) Komter, Aafke and Vollebergh, Wilma. (1999). Gift Giving and the Emotional Significance of Family and Friends. In *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol.59. No.3. National Council on Family Relations.
- 43) Kratz, Corinne A. (1989). Genres of Power: A Comparative Analysis of Okiek Blessings, Curses and Oaths. In *Man*. Vol.24. No.4. New Series.
- 44) Kurup, B.M. (2000). Integration of Fresh-water Prawn Culture with Rice Farming in Kuttanad, India. *Working Papers*. The WorldFish Centre.
- 45) Linares, Olga F. (2003). Going to the City...and Coming Back? Turnaround Migration among the Jola of Senegal. In *Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol 73.
- 46) Low, Setha and Altman, Irwin. (1992). Introduction. In Irwin Altman and Setha Low (Ed.), *Place Attachment*. New York: Plenum Press.
- 47) MacCormack, Carol. (1980). Nature, Culture and Gender: A Critique. In MacCormack and M. Strathern (Ed), *Nature, Culture and Gender*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- 48) Mauss, Marcel. (1967). *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. New York: Norton.



- 49) McCormack, Carol P. and Strathern, Marilyn (Ed.). (1980). *Nature, Culture and Gender: A Critique*. University of Cambridge Press.
- 50) Monaghan, John. (1990). Sacrifice, Death, and the Origins of Agriculture in the Codex Vienna, American Antiquity. In *Society for American Archeology*. Vol.55. No.3.
- 51) Morton, John. (1989). *Singing Subjects and Sacred Objects: A Psychological Interpretation of the 'Transformation of Subjects into Objects' in Central Australian Myth*. Oceania Publications. University of Sydney.
- 52) Murphree, M.W. (2005). Congruent Objectives, Competing Interests, and Strategic Compromise: Concept and Process in the evolution of Zimbabwe's CAMPFIRE 1984-1996. In J. Peter Brosius et.al (Ed.), *Communities and Conservation: Histories and Politics of Community-based Natural Resource Management*. Globalisation and the Environment.
- 53) Nietzsche, Friedrich. (1887). *The Genealogy of Morals: A Polemical Track*, New York: Anchor.
- 54) Norton, Susan L. (1973). Marital Migration in Essex County, Massachusetts, in the Colonial and Early Federal Periods. In *Journal of Marriage and Family*. Vol. 35.
- 55) Oliver, Mary. (1997). 'Have you ever tried to enter the long black branches?'. In *West Wind*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- 56) Palsson, Gisli. (2006). Nature and Society in the Age of Postmodernity. In Aletta Biersack and James Greenberg (Ed). *Re-imagining Political Ecology*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- 57) Park, Deborah Carter and Coppack, Philip M. (1994). The Role of Rural Sentiment and Vernacular Landscapes in Contriving Sense of Place in the City's Countryside. In *Human Geography*. Vol. 76. No. 6. Series B. Geografiska Annaler.
- 58) Parry, Jonathan. (1986). The Gift, the Indian Gift and the 'Indian Gift'. In *Man*. New Series. Vol. 21. No. 3.
- 59) Peluso, Nancy Lee. (1996). Fruit Trees and Family Trees in an Anthropogenic Forest: Ethics of Access, Property Zones, and Environmental Change in

- Indonesia. In *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. Vol. 38. Cambridge University Press.
- 60) Pillar, V.R. and Panikkar, P.G.K. (1965). *Land Reclamation in Kerala*. New York: Asia Publishing House.
- 61) Posey, D.A. (1985). Indigenous Management of Tropical Forest Ecosystem: The Case of the Kayapo Indians of the Brazilian Amazon. In *Agroforestry Systems*. Vol. 3. No. 2.
- 62) Rammohan, K. T. (2006). *The Tales of Rice, Kuttanad, Southwest India*. Kerala: Centre for Development Studies.
- 63) Rappaport, Roy A. (1968). Ritual Regulation of Environmental Relations Among a New Guinea People. In *Ethnology*. Vol.6. No.1.
- 64) Roe, Emery M. (1991). Development Narratives, Or Making the Best of Blueprint Development. In *World Development*. Vol.19. No.4.
- 65) Rye, Johan Fredrik. (2006). Leaving the Countryside: An Analysis of Rural-to-Urban Migration and Long Term Capital Accumulation. In *Acta Sociologica*. Vol. 49.
- 66) Sahlins, Marshall. (1972). *Stone Age Economics*. New York.
- 67) Sahlins, Marshall. (1996). The Sadness of Sweetness: The Native Anthropology of Western Cosmology. In *Current Anthropology*. Vol.37. No.3.
- 68) Sahlqvist, Lief. (2001). Territorial Behaviour and Communication in a Ritual Landscape. In *Geografiska Annaler. Human Geography*, Vol. 83. No.2. Series B. Blackwell Publishing.
- 69) Santos-Granerio, Fernando. (1998). Writing History into the Landscape: Space, Myth, and Ritual in Contemporary Amazonia. In *American Ethnologist*. Vol.25. No.2.
- 70) Scheper-Hughes, Nancy. (1992). O Nordeste: Sweetness and Death. In *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil*. University of California Press.
- 71) Schroeder, Richard A. (2000). Reclaiming Land in the Gambia: Gendering Property Rights and Environmental Intervention. In *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol.87. No. 3.

- 72) Seigel, Peter E. (1999). Contested Places and Places of Contest: The Evolution of Social Power and Ceremonial Space in Pre-historic Puerto Rico. In *Latin American Antiquity. Society for American Archeology*. Vol. 10. No.3.
- 73) Shipton, Parker. (1994). Land and Culture in tropical Africa: Soils, Symbols and the Metaphysics of the Mundane. In *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 23.
- 74) Sivaramakrishnan, K. (2000). Crafting the Public Sphere in the Forests of West Bengal: Democracy, Development and Political Action. In *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 27. No.2.
- 75) Sivaramakrishnan, K. (2008). Work, Identity and State-making In The Forests of Southern West Bengal. In *PoLAR Political and Legal Anthropology Review*. Vol 21.
- 76) Slater, Candace. (1995). Amazonia as Edenic Narrative. In William Cronan (Ed.) *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*. London: W.W Norton and Company.
- 77) Small, Linda Marie (Rev.). (2006). Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology by Mary Douglas. In *Material Culture*. Vol. 38. No. 2.
- 78) Snyder, Robert, Williams, Daniel and Peterson, George. (2003). Culture Loss and Sense of Place in Resource Valuation: Economics, Anthropology and Indigenous Cultures. In Svein Jentoft et.al (Ed.), *Indigenous Peoples: Resource Management and Global Rights*. The Netherlands: Eburon Academic Publishers.
- 79) Spalding, Ana K. (2011). *Re-making Lives Abroad: Lifestyle Migration and Socio-Environmental Change in Bocas Del Toro, Panama*. Ph.D Dissertation in Environmental Studies. Santa Cruz: University of California.
- 80) Sponsel, Leslie E. (1986). Amazon Ecology and Adaptation. In *Annual Review of Anthropology*. Vol.5.
- 81) Stephen, Michele. (2000). Reparation and the Gift. In *Ethos*. Vol.28. No.2. 2000.
- 82) Steward, Pamela J and Strathern, Andrew. (2005). Cosmology, Resources and Landscape: Agencies of the Dead and the Living in Duna, Papua New Guinea. In *Ethnology*. Vol.44. University of Pittsburg.

- 83) Strathern, Marilyn. (1980). No Nature, No Culture: the Hagen Case. In Carol McCormack and Marilyn Strathern (Ed.), *Nature, Culture and Gender*. Cambridge University Press.
- 84) Strauss, Claude Levi. (1969). *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- 85) Tausig, Michael. (1995). The Sun Gives Without Receiving: An Old Story. In *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. Vol.37. Cambridge University Press.
- 86) Taylor, Charles. (2004). *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Public Planet Books. Durham: Duke University Press.
- 87) Taylor, Ken. (2008). *Landscape and Memory: cultural landscapes, intangible values and some thoughts on Asia*, Research School of Humanities. Australia: The Australian National University.
- 88) Taylor, Matthew J., Taylor, Michelle J. Moran and Ruiz, Debra Rodman. (2006). Land, Ethnic and Gender Change: Transnational migration and its effects on Guatemalan lives and landscapes. In *Geoforum*. Vol. 37.
- 89) Tharamangalam, Joseph. (1981). *Agrarian Class Conflict: The Political Mobilisation of Agricultural labourers in Kuttanad, South India*. University of British Columbia.
- 90) Tomlinson, Matt. (2004). Ritual, Risk and Danger: Chain Prayers in Fiji. In *American Anthropologist*. Vol. 106. New Series.
- 91) Tsing, Anna Lawenhaupt. (2005). *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- 92) Vaske, Jerry J. and Kobrin, Katherine C. (2001). Place Attachment and Environmentally Responsible Behaviour. In *The Journal of Environmental Education*. Vol.32. No.4.
- 93) Weeratunge, Nireka. (2000). Nature, Harmony, and the Kaliyugaya: Global/Local Discourses on the Human Environment Relationship. In *Current Anthropology*. Vol. 41. No.2. The University of Chicago Press.
- 94) Williams, Daniel R. (2004). Environmental Psychology: Human Responses and Relationships to Natural Landscapes. In Manfredi, M.J., Vaske, J. J., Field, D. R.,

Brown, P. J., and Bruyere, B. L. (Ed.), *Society and natural resources: A summary of knowledge*, MO: Modern Litho, Jefferson City.

- 95) Wilson, K. (2005). Of Diffusion and Context: The Bubbling up of Community Based Resource Management in Mozambique in the 1990s. In J. Peter Brosius et.al (Ed.), *Communities and Conservation: Histories and Politics of Community-Based Natural Resource Management*, Globalisation and the Environment.

## Glossary

*Bhadhrakali* – Goddess of Sacrifice

*Bhumi* – Land

*Bhumi Devi* – Goddess of Earth

*Chechy* – Sister

*Devi* – Goddess

*Ente Kochei* – My child

*Gundas* – Thugs

*Janmi-kudiyar* – Landlord-labourer

*Kama bhrandhanmar* – Men with sexual desires

*Karkkidakam* – Monsoons

*Karumadikuttan* – A local deity

*Kayal* – Lake or backwater

*Ketta Nadu* – Cursed Land

*Kunkumam* –

*Kuruthi* – Sacrifice

*Molei* – Child

*Moothaparayan* – A senior Paraya

*Muthalali* – Capitalist landlord

*Nel Katta* – Bundle of paddy

*Nottakaran* – Supervisor

*Pattom* – lease

*Pola* – Water weed

*Prasadam* – Blessing

*Puja* – Ritual

*Pujari* – Priest

*Pulaya* – A low caste engaged in paddy cultivation

*Ramayanam* – Indian Epic

*Sakthi* – Power

*Thampurakkal* – plural of Thampuran

*Thampuran* – Lord

*Thozhilurappu* – Local government work providing scheme

*Vallam* – Local canoe

*Varambu* – Ridge of the paddy fields

*Vayal* – Field

*Vilakku* – Lighted Lamp

