



Abstract

In Kerala, boundaries between rural and urban life is often blurred when it comes to visible cultural patterns and lifestyle. The rich, the poor, villager or urbane- every body seem to agree and adapt to a range of traditional beliefs and practices. This link between the past and the present often creates tryst with the mythical and the rational. Many manifestations of such a distinct culture can be seen in the objects of day-to-day life, festival iconography, and architecture. This research and documentation project is a photographic compilation of some of those objects and icons, looking at them from inside their own cultural fabric.



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↑ A collection of traditional artifacts and symbols from Kerala ↑
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Acknowledgements

The idea for this project came after seeing the works of Sri. Hashim P.M, Graphic designer based in Cochin. Vast creative possibilities a designer can explore by the understanding of his own cultural background was demonstrated in his works.

Looking for traditional artifacts has been really fascinating with discussions with elder people, often such discussions ending up in extending some hopes to go back to those 'good old days'.

I thank my guide Prof. G.V. Sreekumar for the help he extended throughout the project.

Thanks to Dad, Mom and Grandmother for helping me a lot in arranging visits to many old houses, and temples.



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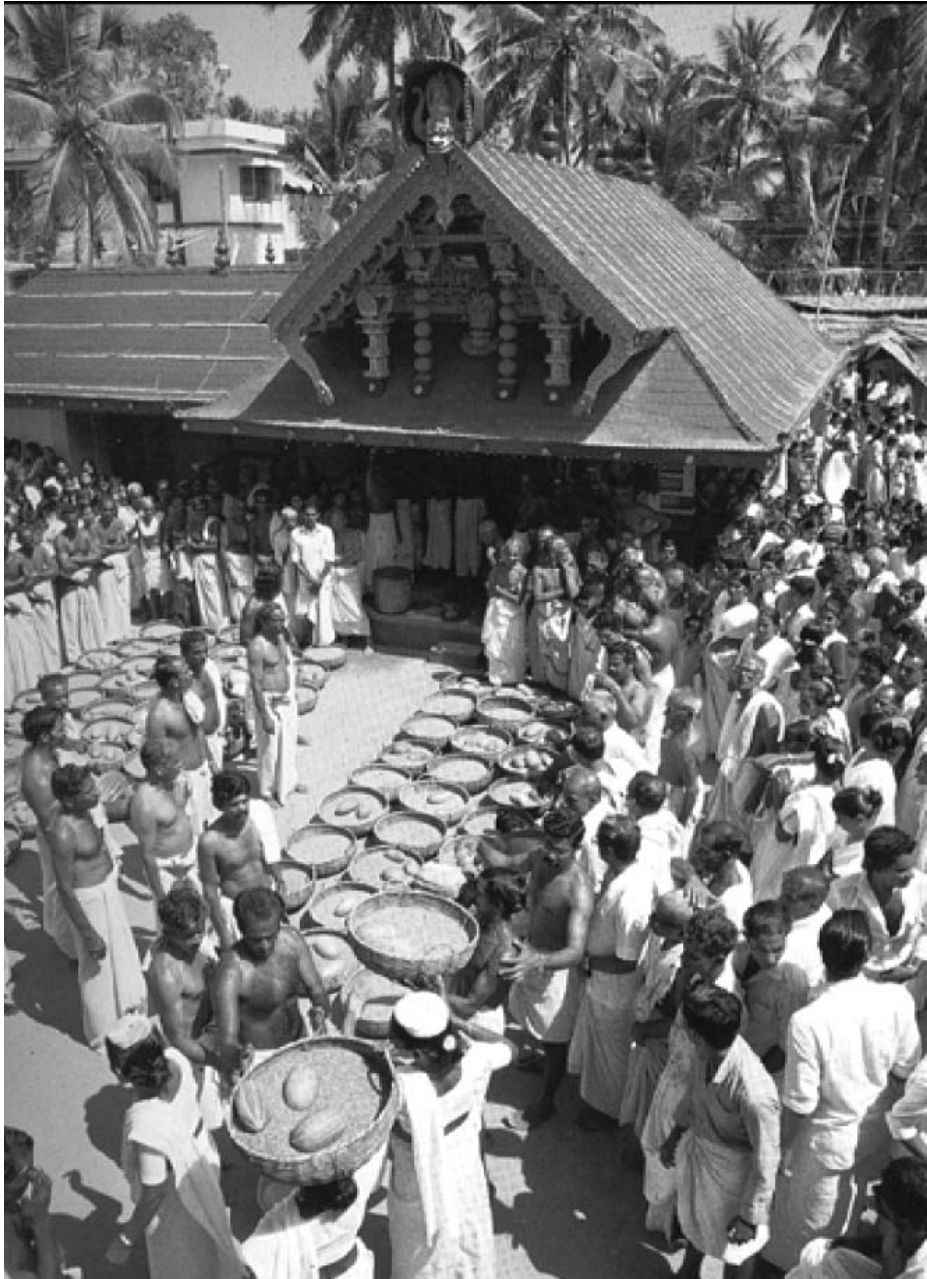


Introduction

Each and every product/artifact in a rural traditional community interacts with the day to day life of that community and encodes specific cultural codes. They reflect world views, cultural patterns, habits and aesthetic preferences. Even in the constant surge of societies with modernity and technology, traditional communities try to retain these products and their usage often with a certain sentimental value. Since each community believes and behaves differently with the world around them, such products are unique to that community and hence are important keys to understand cultural patterns.

This project is aimed at documenting the traditional artifacts and motifs of Kerala and narrating their meaning in the social structure. The short time frame for the project confined the documentation process to be carried out in limited areas and places. However an exhaustive list was first prepared within a broad classification with the help of elderly people from Kerala and efforts to trace and access the artifacts was started.

The final output consisted of Photo documentation and inferences in view of design implications from the study.



Villagers summon at the temple with their offerings to the deity after the harvest

Kerala, a distinct land

Despite the strong forces of urbanization, Kerala retains its cultural values and rich tradition through a number of living artforms and rituals. Apart from identifying and promoting a potential tourism based economy through its natural resources and traditional artforms, several measures were taken by both the state and individuals to retain and promote cultural values and systems. One such initiative is the centre for folklore studies at Kannoor.

The distinct cultural patterns of Kerala as opposed to many other South Indian states could be because of the following attributes;

i. Geographical Boundaries which made foreign invasions uneasy

Flanked by sea on the western side and protected with Western Ghats on the other side, access to Kerala from other parts of the country was literally impossible. Also the geological survey on the region shows that instead of the linear chunk of land as seen now, the region was cut apart at many places by water bodies which made access to even places inside uneasy. In such a condition the economic and social structure of various regions that constituted the geographic region popularly known as *Kerala Naadu* were drastically different from one another. These regions were under the control of various local leaders and kings.

ii. Trade links between Portuguese, Arabs and Romans

The geological conditions in the historic times favored good navigation for mercantile ships from Rome, Arabia and Portugal to establish trade relationships between local leaders of Kerala and buy pepper and other spices that had been abundant in the state. These relationships soon grew in to powerful political tie-ups with these traders to establish authority over rivaling local leaders. Soon these cultures seeped in to the cultural fabric of the region.

iii. Economic structure predominantly based on agriculture

Agriculture was the major occupation of the people. Hence a great deal of importance has been given to agriculture related activities and beliefs. Many of the Folk dance forms reflect the existence of a "fertility cult". These systems had influenced a number of cultural symbols of Kerala.



A toddy tapper belonging to the Ezhava community.

iii. Social structure predominated with rigid cast system

There existed a cast system based on the occupation of people. For example, the Nair community served in the local army, Panikker community mainly engaged in teaching, members of the Ezhava community did toddy tapping. This relationship between the occupational structure and cast existed till the turn of 20th century. Till then to engage in one's specified profession was thus considered to be a matter of social norm.

The products that are documented can be classified in to three categories.

- a. Domestic appliances
- b. Cultural symbols
- c. Environmental symbols.

However, when analyzed with their role in cultural life, even a single product is seen serving a multitude of different contexts. Hence such a classification is for the convenience of categorizing.



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Domestic appliances

Most of the domestic products were made out of materials abundant in nature. Wood, bamboo, stone and parts of coconut tree were used extensively. A unique combination of wood and metal is also found in surface treatment of many products. Most households, even those of the richest followed a simple lifestyle with a minimum number of inexpensive appliances. The most common appliances were measures, bell metal vessels and lamps, stone vessels, cane baskets, spoons and other crockery items made of wood and coconut shells, boxes, furniture and necessary agricultural tools.



Units

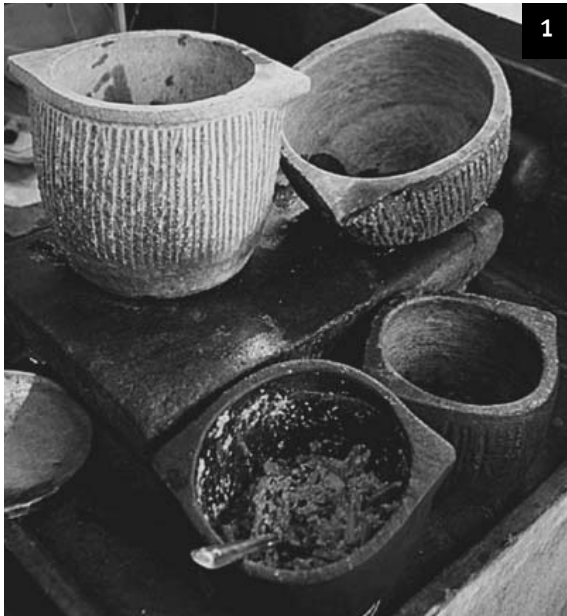
Para, Idangazhi and Nazhi were the most common units in Kerala. Wages for tenants and temple offerings and taxes were paid in these units. Even though not standard measuring units these days, it is still a common household reference unit to prepare rice for the day. Also rice filled in Para is considered to be an auspicious symbol representing prosperity.

7.2 kg= 1 para

1/10 para= 1 idangazhi

¼ idangazhi= 1 nazhi

These measures are found in wood, iron and bell metal. Para is an ideal example of Kerala's craft tradition of wood-bell metal combination.



Utensils made in wood, metal and coconut shell

Artifacts were made extensively with naturally available resources like wood and coconut shell. Bell metal vessels and lamps are still made by craftsmen.

Most common stone artifacts were kitchen grinders and cooking vessels.

1. A set of stone vessels to cook food.

2. Uruvi, the stone container to keep salt.



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1. This glass bottle with coir work on the surface was used as an acid container.

2. *Adapalaka*, a wooden plate to drain water from boiled rice after cooking and to cover the rice in the pot.

3. Tiny pots made of coconut shell.

4. *Chirava*, an essential element in kitchens to scrape coconut.



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2. Kuthuvilakku, a lamp for outside uses. This lamp is carried along with temple processions. The horse head on the lamp suggests its function as some out door event.

3. A camphor stand seen in a temple of Vishnu.

3



1



Lamps

Lamps made in bell metal demonstrate the exquisite metal craftsmanship of Kerala. Lamps are also made in stone. Many varieties of lamps are being used in the religious practices of temples of Kerala. Many of them manifest strong religious symbolism in the form.

1. The most common lamp found all over in Kerala is the Nilavilakku. Made out of bell metal, it is lit everyday and placed at the front porch of houses every evening to welcome goddess Lakshmi; in return of the wealth and prosperity that she gave the household. It has the strong symbolic quality representing a bud blossoming.



Boxes, Furniture & Agricultural tools

Exclusive containers and boxes were used to store jewels, cloths, and other personal belongings. Apart from functional products they added value addition through intricate ornamental work. A variety of tools and accessories can be found in the villages of Kerala specially designed to use for agricultural needs.

1 They once formed the essential elements in the landscape of Kerala. Heavy mechanization of the agricultural scene caused many of these interesting artifacts to disappear.

1. A wooden stand to place Ramayan and other holy books.

2. *Charukasera*, the wooden reclining chair in noble households. The place is reserved for the *Karanavar*, the eldest male member of the family.



2

1



2



1. *Murukkan-chellam*, a box to keep beetle leaf and aracanuts.

2. *Nettool-petti*, a box to keep jewels.

3. *Adappam*, container to keep lime.

4. *Ezhuthani*, *Ezhuthola* the traditional writing materials in kerala.

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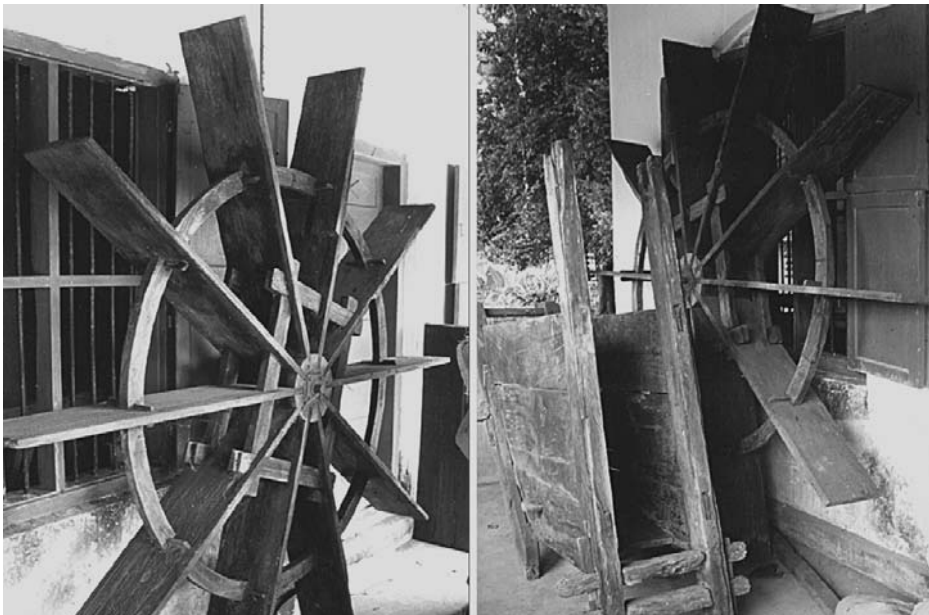
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1. A toddy tappers equipments. The wooden case carry tapping knife and has provisions to carry the mud tody pot. The tapper tie the tools around his waist.

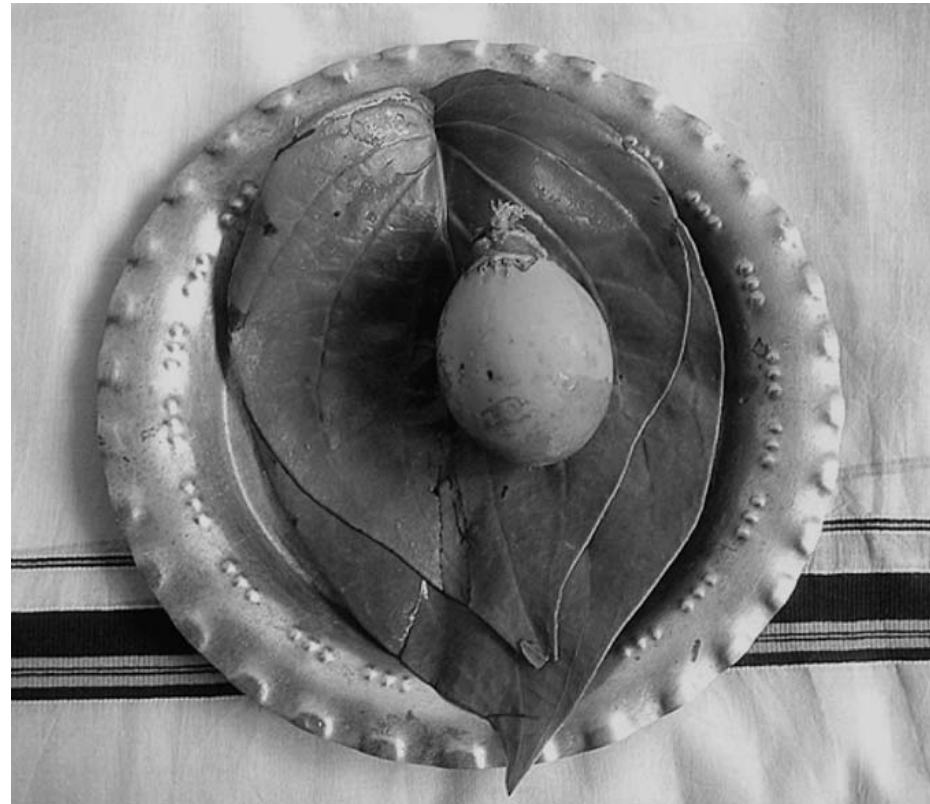
2. A wooden wheel used on the paddy fields to pedal out water from the fields. One farmer would fix the wheel at the edge of the farm land, sit and pedal the wheel, which removes water from the field. Several folk songs were sung in the rhythm of pedaling.

3. Farmers wore hats made out of Aracanut cola leaves to protect from sun and rain.

2 Cultural Symbols



Many of the rituals and practices in Kerala manifests a Dravidian belief system based on the Fertility cult. The mother goddess cult of the Dravidians and importance given to agricultural life is dissolved with the rituals and folk life of Kerala and are manifested in various cultural symbols and artifacts also.



Thamboolam

Thamboolam, is a traditional welcome/ respect symbol of Kerala. It essentially has a beetle leaf and arcanut fruit. The beetle leaf symbolizes the vagina and the arcanut fruit symbolizes a good crop. The word "phalaphoosti" is commonly associated with the giving of Thamboolam to teachers in favor of the service they offer. Phal is the root origin for the word Phalam (fruit) which also has an implied meaning- 'in return'.

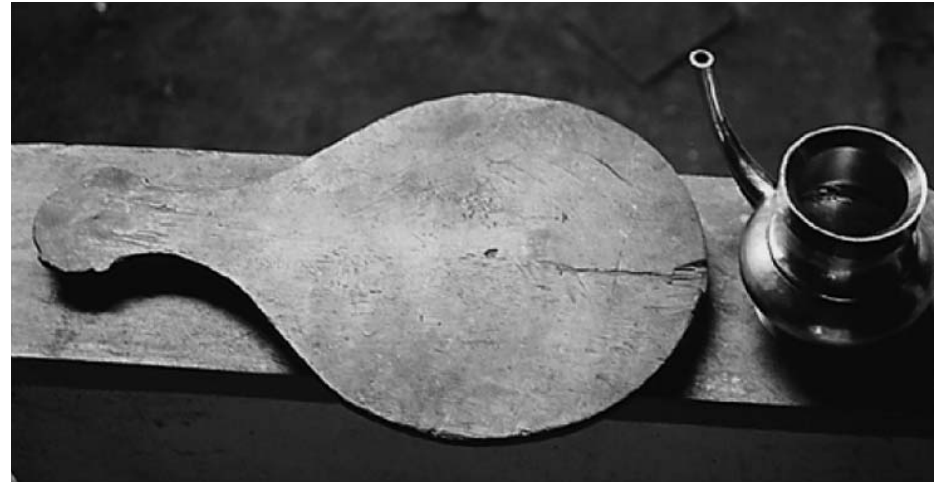


Nira-para

Nira-para means a filled Para (measuring vessel) in Malayalam. It represents a prosperous harvest.

'Para' symbolizes the land.

Similar symbolism can be observed in other religious symbols of South India. For the Tamil New Year- Pongal, women in the family boil milk in a round pot and let the boiled milk spill over. Pongal is also a festival celebrating harvest and paying respect to the mother earth. The pot represents the embryo



Avanippalaka and Kodimaram
(a wooden seat and temple flag post)

Avanippalaka is the wooden seat for performing ritualistic prayers in Hindu houses and temples. Avanippalaka has the profile of a tortoise which suggests the physical and mental state of the person doing the pooja metaphorically.

Kodimaram, the flag posts are essential elements in temple architecture. Often, the lamp post is constructed over the shell of a tortoise. This symbolizes the divine tortoise of the Hindu mythology; Koorma which is believed to carry the universe.



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1. Villagers presents the local diet, the returns of a good harvest.

2. *Nel-katta*, a bunch of fresh grown paddy tied together and hung on the ceiling of houses and temples at the entrance is also a symbol of prosperity.

3. Tender coconuts(orange colour) and banana leaves are symbols to welcome guests during festivals and marriages.

Symbols of prosperity

Other symbols representing prosperity in Kerala are tender coconut (in reddish orange colour), flower of araccanut or coconut tree, and many other fruites (predominantly in red of yellow colour)

The coloures red and yellow are given importance in the cultural life and dance forms of Kerala because of such associations with the agricultural beliefs. Kodi mundu, the traditional dress of Kerala is unbleached cotton which also has a light yellow tinge.

2



3



3 Environmental and Architectural elements



The environment is blessed with natural resources and social life is vibrant with cultural activities around every corner, Political meetings, rallies and religious structures.

Forces of modernity are certainly removing the agricultural life of Kerala. For example, paddy fields are being filled up for new construction activities thus removing those rich green elements and agricultural life from Kerala's environment.

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1. Mughappu from a shop
2. Mughappu from a house
3. Mughappu from a temple

Every place has a distinct architectural style that is conditioned by the environmental and social life of the area. Kerala's traditional architecture is in strong balance with the climatic conditions of the region with pitched roofs to protect from heavy rains, roof ventilation systems, small chambers surrounded by corridors to keep a warmth inside the rooms.

Mughappu- roof ventilator

Mughappu is the wooden roof ventilator for the traditional buildings of Kerala. The main *Mughappu* normally faces eastward and the rest would point to directions going clockwise from the main ventilator. Important structures like temples and houses of rich families have elaborate decorations on *Mughappu*.

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1. A wooden balcony

2. Corridor space covered with external wooden jally work from Padmanabha-puram palace

Apart from these climatic factors one can see layers of social influence also in the architectural style. In the houses of the rich and elite, a number of transition spaces like corridors, wooden jally work, and balconies connect the private spaces with the public areas like courtyard and front yard. In the rigid system of social hierarchy people from the upper class of the society interacted with the lower cast across these transition spaces.



1. Detail on *Nira*

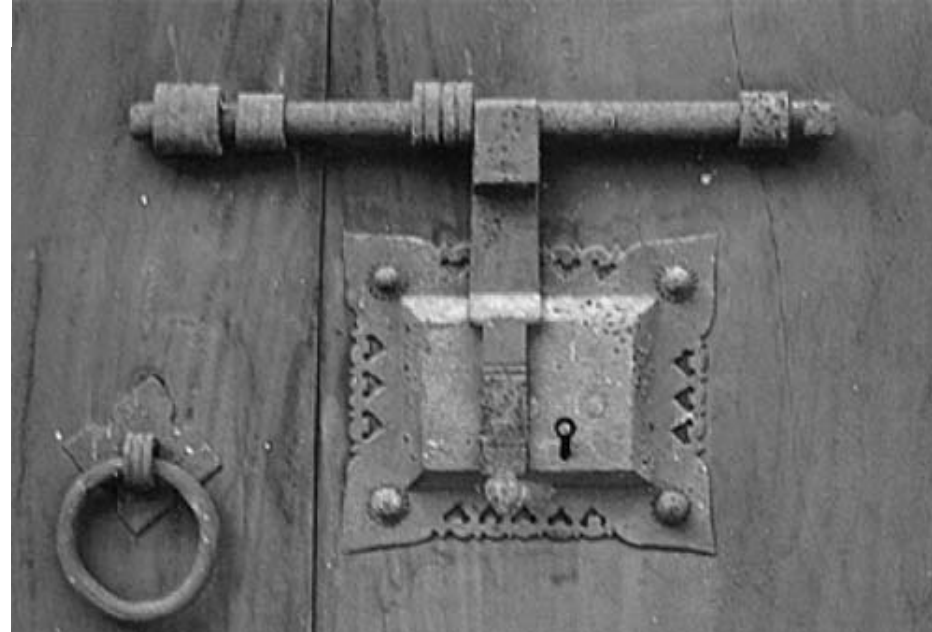
2. *Nira* the wooden fascia work on noble houses

3. *Ara* the storage area

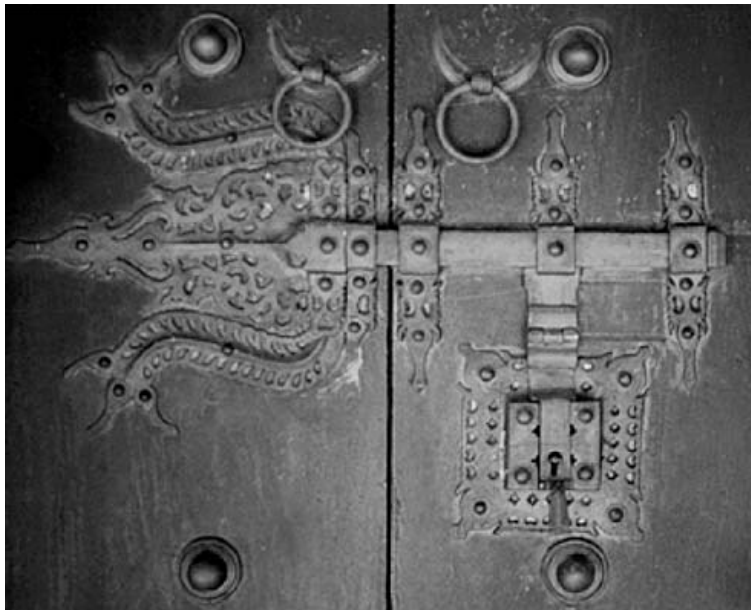
Arayum Nirayum

The wooden fascia of traditional houses of Kerala is known as *Nira*. The name is derived from the vertical columns of wooden planks with which it is made of. The fascia is lined with brass ornamentation. Inside the fascia there is the chamber to keep grains which is called *Ara*.

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2



1. *Kol-poottu*, a variety of locking system

2. *Mani-chitra-tazhu*, an intricate and complex locking system.

Chitrappoottu

One can find several varieties of metal locks in Kerala, with complex mechanism and intricate craftsmanship that perfectly blends with the wooden doors on which they are fixed on.



Kuruthola-thoranam

Kuruthola-thoranams are essential elements of any festivals of Kerala. Also considered as a cultural symbol representing prosperity among the agrarian community, several patterns made with tender coconut leaves are hung from coir ropes which adorn the festive grounds.





Athani- a street furniture

In the olden days when people used to carry weights with them, the villagers made stone structures along the roadside on which the passerby can put down the weight and rest. These structures are called *Athanis* which formed one essential element in Kerala's landscape. With mortised roads and road widening policies, many of the athani structures disappeared from roadsides





Implications

Cultural images which establish strong regional identity and associations could be used as strong graphic elements in Design. Aesthetic elements and styles of ornamentation could be transferred in to newer graphic expressions within appropriate contexts. Indigenous product forms could become inspirational elements for new product ideas. Moreover many cultural patterns are coded in product forms which follow a system of understanding within a community. Understanding the meanings and their contexts is important for a designer to deliver products to that community which has a value of its own rather than blindly getting carried away by the rich visual and product forms.



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