

Kātāla vēsa: On Revisiting the Hunter

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Abstract

This paper attempts a study of: i) how the hunter myth is used in the temple ritual of *kātāla vēsa* at *Vairamkōde vela*; ii) focuses on how the indigeneity of the ritual is affected by modernization. As the study is related to chronological primitivism, qualitative research methods such as direct observation, unstructured interviews, and personal experiences, common in ethnographic researches, are used. Taking the aid of the myths related to the hunter, this paper proves that the vitality and the validity of the *kātāla vēsa* ritual though untarnished, its indigeneity is stained by modernization where the initial goal of such a ritual is no more realized. The 'hunter' is largely underrated in the many (eco-prefixed) theoretical discourses related to indigeneity on Indian agricultural architecture, and hence, this study makes a genuine attempt to repair this deficiency.

Keywords: hunter, *kātāla vēsa*, myth, indigeneity, ritual.

1. Manifestation of the Hunter

The farmer and the hunter are the two sides of the same coin (in primitive agrarian society), the former representing reproduction (farming is fundamentally the scientific method of multiplying seeds), and the latter representing survival (hunting was done to ensure predictable harvest, and as options for alternative food during unpredictable harvests). Referring to Jacobsen, Pappu points out that "*hunters and farmers have coexisted for almost five millennia* [emphasis added], and draws on evidence from Mesolithic and Chalcolithic sites in the Raisen-Sehore complex rock shelters, where stone chipping technology and tool kits coexist with late Chalcolithic or Early Iron Age material and historical goods" (2004, p. 133). Resorting to Heizer, Smith states that the hunting tribes were governed by certain "game laws" wherein, the hunting of some species was reserved to some tribes alone and most of these tribes believed that "animals and plants were created to help man" due to which the irrational killing of animals would invoke supernatural wrath (Smith 1975, p. 742). Hunters may also be seen as the early agricultural managers known for their effectiveness of control of boars, or wild animals, etc.; and the very act of hunting may be perceived as one of defending nature through appropriate measures of controlling an otherwise swelling population (of certain species of wildlife) justifiable perhaps according to the ethics of agriculture and farming alone. "The act of defending Nature's rights based on our obligations to Nature as embedded beings is a contradiction of reproductive and survival ethics" (Mueller and Deborah 2010, p. 10). The ideas of wildlife or marine life conservation was already a principle of life for the primitive hunters since they abided by the decree, to "take sparingly of the bounty of nature" (Smith 1975, p. 742). Thus, the hunter is a symbol for both sustainable ecological and communal harmony in primitive societies. The word "primitive" is used herein its generalized terms of ancestry alone, and the writer is in consensus with the idea (that most experts in this

area such as A. K. Coomaraswamy, Thapar, Kosambi, etc. agree to) that the primitive “consciousness and experience” is “intrinsically superior” (Wroth 2007, p. 205) to that of its modern equivalents.

Primitive man made no real distinction of sacred from secular: his weapons, clothing, vehicles and house were all of them imitations of divine proto-types, and were to him even more what they meant than what they were in themselves ... Those who think of their house as only a “machine to live in” should judge their point of view by that of Neolithic man, who also *lived in a house, but a house that embodied a cosmology* [emphasis added]. (R. P. Coomaraswamy 2004, pp. 129-130).

Primitive cultures nourished the needs of the “soul and the body at one and the same time” (R. P. Coomaraswamy 2004, p. 115). Resorting to the 1940 book, *Art: A Bryn Mawr Symposium*, it is also known that the Neolithic man is a “metaphysical man” who often tends to attempt reasoning through analogies (R. P. Coomaraswamy 2004, p. 115- 129), and therefore depends on symbolic dimensions for higher abstractions about the sky, the sun and the earth. Thus, he saw “in his roof the starry sky” and “in his hearth, the navel of the earth” (R. P. Coomaraswamy 2004, p. 130). Though “symbols are projections of their referents” (Wroth 2007, p. 122), the primitive man does not limit these symbols as mere representations, rather these act as facilitators for participation – a “mystical participation” (Wroth 2007, pp. 200-201). Thus, the sun mimicked the self of the universe in primitive traditions, and enough evidences from the Indus – Saraswati civilizations point to the correlation between the Vedic altar, “a miniature representation of the cosmos,” and the sacrificial fire, “a representation of the sun” which in combination denotes the “blinding radiance of transcendental reality” (Feuerstein, Kak & Frawley 2011, p. 124). The primitive people entrusted “religious specialists” with the responsibility of studying the “heavenly patterns” so that their rituals would “faithfully reflect the divine order,” and moreover, “the celestial geometry” aided as an “archetype” for their “altars, temples and sacred cities” (Feuerstein, Kak & Frawley 2011, p. 231). Gradually, the primitive people of India through their Babylonian and Greek interactions used the scientific application of astronomy and mathematics in agricultural practices like predicting seasons, predicting yields, etc. (Thapar 1978, p. 218). These together account for the synchronic and diachronic transactions of Vedic astronomy, spatial and temporal prerequisites of rituals, which in turn modified the Indian lifestyle.

... on one level the deities are spiritual beings with whom mystical communion is possible and whose benign presence *is invoked to shape a person's life on Earth* [emphasis added]. On another level, the deities are forces *associated with Nature's spectacles* [emphasis added], such as light, darkness, fire, wind, water, earth, dawn, and not least fertility. On a third level, the Gods and Goddesses of the Vedic pantheon are related to *psychological aspects of the human being* [emphasis added], such as brightness, somberness, anger, creativity, or love. On a fourth level, the deities are in some contexts associated with or representing the mighty forces of the celestial vault, such as the two luminaries, the planets, and *the stars and stellar configurations* [emphasis added]. Put differently, the Vedic deities are universal archetypes of great flexibility. They were called upon to explain or render meaningful both internal and external phenomena, which were understood as being part of the same all-embracing continuum. (Feuerstein, Kak & Frawley 2011, p. 230)

Not surprisingly, the primitive people of India saw in *Śiva*, the celestial hunter, and Storl argues that *Śiva* is also found in constellation as the same as *Orion*, (refer Figures 1 & 2 given

below) “To this day, *Rudra*ⁱ [emphasis added] and his hunting hounds are seen in the constellation of Orion and Sirius (the dog star), which begins to be visible in the waning half of the year” (2004, p. 132). This comparison inarguably provides enough gravity on the prevalence of the hunter myth in both western and eastern indigenous (religious) principles. “Scholars agree that indigenous knowledge is not confined only to tribal people or the original inhabitants of a certain area or country, but is *shared broadly by a community* [emphasis added], rural or urban, *from religious beliefs* [emphasis added], to linguistic heritage, foodways, herbal medicine, and native healing practices” (Xing and Ng. 2016, p. 4) and “what westerners separate into *art, economics and religion is moulded and expressed holistically in India* [emphasis added]” (Dharwadkar 1999, p. 463). Citing Norberg-Hodge, Martusewicz et al. the Ladakhis and their Buddhist notion of “dependent origination” point to the holistic principles governing human beings and (non)living entities perpetually in connection with the environment (2010, p. 14). This holistic approach expresses why the Harappans worshipped the “symbols of fertility – the Mother Goddess, the Bull, the Horned Deity, and sacred trees –and these have continued in Hindu worship” (Thapar 1990, p.20) and represent the *Śiva- Śakti* cults as is also obvious from the Indus seal given below (refer Figure 1).

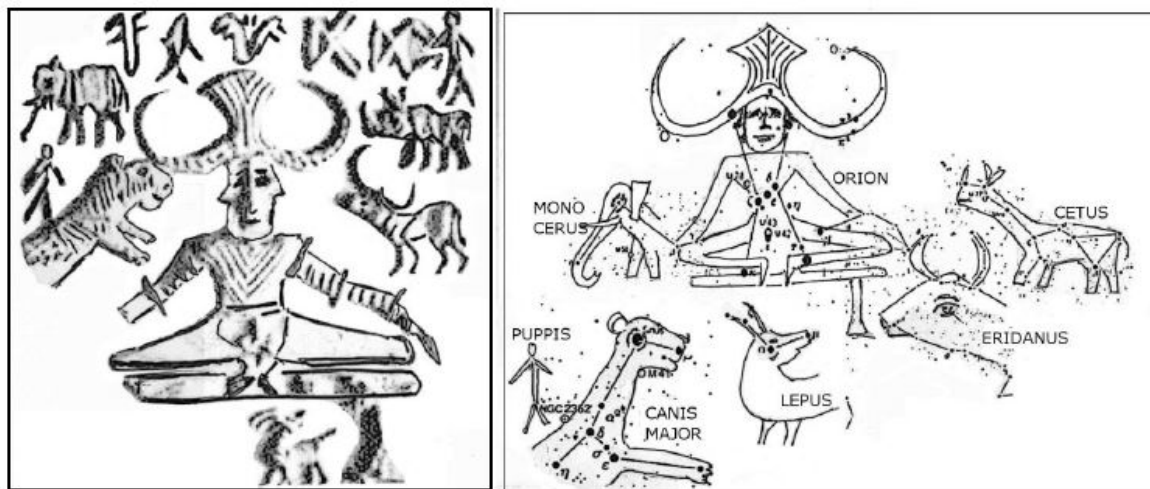


Figure 1: Indus Seal of the Yogi/ Prototype of Śiva; Figure 2: Orion and the Surrounding Constellations

(Source: Figs. 19 & 20 from *New Interpretations on Indus Valley Civilization*, Ramasami, J. p. 151)

As these tribal communities transited from the nomadic phase to the settling phase, they increased in terms of clan size and agricultural produces. Simultaneously, they established the *grama* (village) with its own *sabha*, “council of tribal elders” and *samithi*, “general assembly of the entire tribe” (Thapar 1990, p. 15). Temples developed into the folk centres of civilization - the “centre of activity in each village” (Thapar 1990, p. 60) as the concepts about administration, trade, art, etc. started forming underpinned by the active Aryan collaboration.

At the bottom of the social ladder are the thirty to sixty million hunters and gatherers, the adavasi, or tribal peoples, who even today pursue the oldest calling of humankind in the mountains and remaining jungles, while conjuring spirits and dancing shamanic dances. Beyond these primitive tribals, one comes across swidden and hoe agriculturists

who worship the Great Mother, much as the megalithic Europeans did once upon a time. (Storl 2014, p. 14)

Hunters are believed to have derived from *kirātas*, and Thapar recognizes *kirātas*, to be indigenous and originally belonging to the Himalayas and the Vindhya collectively known as the “*mleccha-deśa*” (Thapar 1978, p. 165). She resorts to the seventeenth-century sources from South India which states that the *kirātas* lived in “semi-barbarous” conditions in the Vindhya (Thapar 1978, p. 168). Thapar also states that the further migration of *kirātas* is likely to have occurred due to the expanding agrarian societies in the Ganges valley. The *kātāla vēsa* may be an epistemic folkloric remembrance of the hunter myth voiced in Bharavi’s sixth-century Sanskrit *kāvya* (verse), *Kirātārjuniya*, and the popular legend of *Śivarātri*. The text extends from a minor episode in the *Mahabharata* where *Arjuna* engages in a penance to please *Śiva* while he is on exile in the forest. A demon named *Muka* tries to attack the great archer in the shape of a wild boar and both *Arjuna* and *Śiva* simultaneously shoot their arrows and kill it. *Arjuna* claims his right over the boar which *Śiva* refutes and thus ensues a fierce battle between both. *Arjuna* is shocked to find that he cannot defeat the hunter (*kirāta*) who is none other than *Śiva* himself and finally he realizes the God disguised as a hunter. The myth of the hunter is further elaborated through the ritual of the *Śivarātri* (celebrated by the Hindu communities till date) where the mythological story relates to a hunter who climbs on a wood-apple tree to escape the tiger that chases him in the forest, and plucks the leaves to shoo the tiger away (that stays at the foot of the tree, much to the dismay of the hunter) the entire night (refer Figures 3 and 4 given below). The early rays of the sun show the hunter that the tiger was none other than *Śiva* himself and that a *Śivalinga* (phallic emblem) has replaced the tiger.

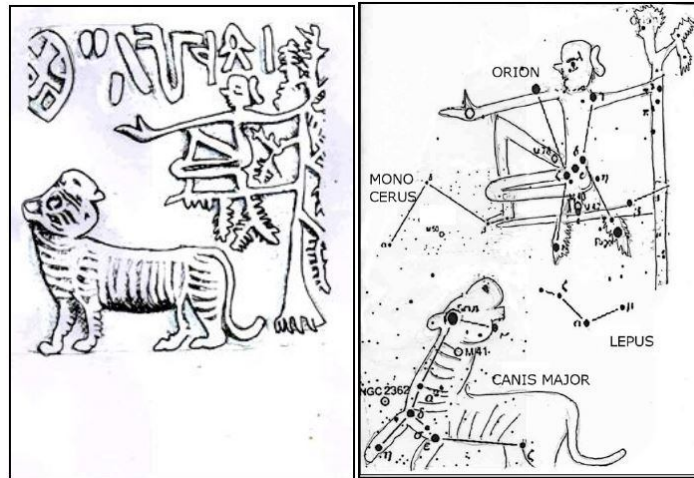


Figure 3: Indus seal: Hunter on the tree; Figure 4: Illustration of Orion and Canis Major constellations.

(Source: Figs. 21 & 22 from *New Interpretations on Indus Valley Civilization*, Ramasami, J. p. 153)

Thapar states that the *Dēvi*, Mother Goddess is the most important deity of the *mlecchas* – that is, the *kirātas*. *Vindhyavāsini* (the inhabitant of the Vindhya) is a “mountain goddess” popularly “identified with *Nārāyaṇi* and *Durgā*,” and so also is the goddess *Caṇḍikā* of the *kirātas*. These are manifestations of *Śiva*’s consort, *Pārvatī*. The *Devi Mahātmya* portrays *Caṇḍikā* as the slayer of the buffalo demon, *Mahiṣāsura*. *Kālī* is often portrayed as a huntress of the evil in

mythological narratives. The balance between Śiva and Kālī is complementary to the harmony oft established between Śiva and Pārvati in folklore and mythological narratives. Even later religious or historic discourses affirm Kālī's position in Tantrism as Śakti, “understood in personified form as Pārvati, Kālī, and other goddesses” (Kinsley 2005, p. 122) aiming at invoking her vitality for spiritual transformations. Women symbolized fertility, and Georg Feuerstein, Subhash Kak, and Dawid Frawley opine that the cult of mother goddesses, which developed from tree worship would have begun from household shrines during the Harappan times, and at a later point of time developed into village deities (Feuerstein, Kak & Frawley 2011, p.121) The primitive belief relies heavily on the syzygies of the sky (symbolizing the and the earth on whose (marital) union and harmony depend the “prosperity and fertility of the entire universe” (Iengar and Coomaraswamy 1993, p. 12). Thus, the sky represents the masculine energy, and the earth, the feminine. It also represents the “satⁱⁱ and asatⁱⁱⁱ.” It would not be wrong to say that this forms the essential principle behind the concept of the *ardhanārīśwara* (half Śiva and half Pārvati). In this interrelation between Śiva and Pārvati, the “antagonistic principles unite to constitute a single organism, a paradox, representative of the intrinsically twofold nature of the onefold universe and its inhabitant, man [emphasis added]” (Zimmer, p. 216). Even in the Śivalinga, one can easily perceive the confluence of the yōni^{iv} and the linga^v and represents the “unmanifest and invisible source of creativity” (Kramrisch 1981, p. 177). Neither has the primitive society nor has the current Indian society tried to ever see Śiva and Pārvati as separate entities. Thus, “the rhetoric is of spiritual connecting and transformation, there is a clear quest for the sacred and use of ritual, frequent reference to earth magic and animism/ transcendentalism [and so forth]” (Reser 1995, p. 242). Such dualistic interpretations of the gods and goddesses have tried to portray the violence in nature, displaying anti- romantic properties; and that these energies and entropies simultaneously suggest both the symbiosis of beauty and violence as is incorporated in the *Vairamkōde Bhagavati* (goddess), in whose praise and adoration rituals like *kātāla vēsa* are encouraged.

2. Kātāla vēsa at Vairamkōde vēla

Thapar notes that there were three types of villages dependant on the statuses – *brahmadeya*^{vi}, *agrahara*^{vii}, and *devadana*^{viii} (1990, p.119). Vairamkōde^{ix} situated in Malappuram district was a *brahmadeya* village under the *Ālvāncēri Tambrākkaḷ*^x. The deity of the Vairamkōde temple is *Vairamkōde Bhagavati* or *Vairamkōde Amma* (mother), which is another name for *Bhadrakālī* (*Durgā*) or *Rudrakālī*. As per the oral temple legends, *Vairamkōde Bhagavati* is the sister of *Koduññallūr*^{xi} *Bhagavati* or the sister (another self) of *Aññādīpuram*^{xii} *Tirumāndhāmkunnū Bhagavati*. Despite the validation of these legends being difficult, the connection of these to *Ālvāncēri Tambrākkaḷ* could be stated beyond doubt. It is believed by the local people till date that it was *Ālvāncēri Tambrākkaḷ* who seated the *Dēvi* at Vairamkōde when she reached the *Ālvāncēri mana* (brahmin house) after crossing the Niḷā river. Dependent on unstructured personal interviews, it was also known that *Ālvāncēri Tambrākkaḷ* still exercises enough powers in the discharge of duties and responsibilities in the major temple festivals at Vairamkōde temple despite the temple being currently maintained by the Malabar Devaswom, Kerala. Kosambi states that all the mother-goddess temples of India belong to local origin promoted eventually to this status from their primitive tribal cults, but were “later brahminized” (1962, p. 64). As “animals, trees, mountains, and rivers were held sacred” (Thapar 1990, p. 80) it is not astonishing that most of the village temples of the Śakta cult (a) would be either near the river or on the mountains or submontane tracts, and (b) most of them would have a serpent grove. As per oral legends, Vairamkōde temple is nearly 1500 years old and the chief deity, *Bhadrakālī* (*Durgā*) or *Rudrakālī* is

accompanied by *Rudhirapan*, who according to legends is said to be born out of few drops of *Śiva's* blood. Their mutual presence is symbolized by twin *dīpasthambhās* (big granite stone lamps) on three sides of the inner shrine.

Rudhirapan is considered to be the main escort of the goddess as her benefactor and protector. Devotees believe that *Rudhirapan* is another form of *Śiva*. “When he approached shooting, he howled (*arodit*). Hence, his name is *Rudra*, the roarer [emphasis added], according to popular etymology” and “he has two natures or two “names”: the one, cruel and wild (*Rudra*), the other kind (*Śiva*) and tranquil (*Śanta*). These he assumes at will” (Kramrisch 1981, p. 7). *Bhadrakālī* or *Rudrakālī* (*Durgā*) considered to be *Pārvati's* “personified wrath, her alter ego” who always appears to destroy the evil; and in combination as “a consort, wife or associate” to *Śiva* (here, *Rudhirapan*) symbolises the “destructive behaviour” as is evident from the battles related with *Śhumbha* and *Niśumbha*; *Raktabīja* and *Dāruka* found in the religious text, the *Dēvī- Māhātmya* (Kinsley 2005, pp. 116 -120). Thapar ascertains that “Parvati, Kali and Durga who were various consorts of Shiva” were given “priestly blessing and incorporated into popular belief and ritual” (2002, p.318). These goddesses attained great prominence in the “mythologies of Puranic Hinduism” which led to their acceptance as “primary and pre-eminent deities” paving the way further for their respective roles as “Tantric deities” (Thapar 2002, p. 278).

Bhadrakālī temples of south Malabar, Kerala are characterized by *tiyātṭṭu* or *kanalātṭṭu* (a ritual performed on embers of jackfruit wood). *Vairamkōde vela* is distinct from such festivals of the neighbouring temples as the writer has found through oral surveys conducted among the local people, unstructured interviews with the temple manager, perusal of the temple book, and first-hand experiences during the *vela* – (i) elephant processions are prohibited, (ii) the *kātāla vēsa* (*kātāla* meaning ‘hunter’ and *vēsa* meaning ‘guise’) as a ritual is encouraged, (iii) the *avakāśa* (rights) of such performance is not restricted to particular family lineages or castes contrary to that of the *thirā* and *pūtan* (folk performances). Thapar states that from a period of transition from “*aranya* or *vana*” (forest) “*grama* or *kshetra*” (settled area) also began the exploitation of the forests for agricultural reasons and economic prosperity, and the garnered items included “timber and elephants” (2002, p. 422). Hence, in every likelihood, instead of burning the woods or engaging in the heavy task of cutting the trees in the forest for the construction of newer settlement areas, our predecessors would have used tamed elephants to fell trees. “Nature and animals were treated as sacred metaphors of deity... with a focus on groves” (Thapar 2002, p. 278) and the “non-acceptance of Vedic ritual” was also translated into the *gana-sanghas*^{xiii}, and their “veneration for sacred enclosures and groves, with other manifestations of popular religious cults” (Thapar 2002, p. 148). This establishes the fact that the *Vairamkōde* temple was supported largely by the *gana-sanghas* or the people who are the degenerate *kśatriyas* and *śudras*, and explains with great conviction why elephant processions are prohibited for the *Vairamkōde vela*.

The *Gana-Sanghas* maintained a “corporate aspect of government,” where the heads of families or clans were invited to the (assembly located in the main city) presided by the head of the clan, whose “office was not hereditary” [emphasis added] (Thapar 2002, p. 148). The degenerate *kśatriyas* and *śudras* attempt to oppose the *varna* hierarchy elucidates why the *avakāśa* (rights) of such performance is not restricted to particular family lineages or castes in the performance *kātāla vēsa*, a temple ritual. This fact could be supportive of either the maintenance of this ritual on stricter norms in this temple than that of its neighbourhood, or allowance of this ritual reinforced by the unique presence of both *Śiva* and *Kālī* as village god and goddesses in this temple, considering the various mythological narratives, liturgies, etc.

Primitive tribal gods have something in common with the lower village gods. Often they pay worship to the gods of a village and the village recognises their deities, too. The country festivals that draw many villagers from a distance can often be traced back to a primitive tribal origin, though the actual tribe may have vanished. (Kosambi 1997, p. 20).

Tribal gods and country festivals have integrated to form the larger picture of the temple festivals we see currently, which are reflections of life, representing the spiritual and the mundane. It is interesting to note that the *Vairamkōde Bhagavati* assumes mainly two extreme forms – the peaceful *Uttama Śānta Durgā (Pārvati)* in the morning, and the *Adhama Roudra Durgā (Bhadrakālī)* in the afternoon. The other chief deity, *Śiva* also has two forms.

The two forms imply the tension between life and its negation on the one side, the wild untamed world, the wilderness in man and nature, and on the other side the world of *ṛta* and cosmic order. Both are his domain. In the one he acts as the Wild Hunter. In the other he manifests as guardian of the dwelling, as guardian of the sacred cosmic order. (Kramrisch 1981, p.8)

These connotations clearly demonstrate that since most of the farming activities take place in the morning, the villagers of Vairamkōde seek the blessings of the peaceful *Pārvati* during the day time, and during the evening, the same villagers admire her wrath and ferociousness, and seek the blessings of the dark *Kālī* so that their hunters would effectively safeguard their fields from the evil attacks of the wild (boars) animals.

In this case of *Bhadrakālī* worship - of the *Uttama Śānta Durgā* and the *Adhama Roudra Durgā* - the villagers' prayers translate to pursuing benevolence. However, whether the intentions are to seek strength to attack the wild (boars) animals, or to seek mercy so that they (the villagers and their fields as a singular entity) are not attacked by the wild (boars) animals, are not predictable. While the mythological narrative of *Kirātārjunīya* is in favour of the earlier assumption, the empirical evidence of the Amerindians is in favour of the latter. Rituals are defined as a "complex process of communication," that provide "fictional equivalents of a real behavior" through various symbols (Hoskins 2001, pp. 50-53). These symbols may either be in affirmation or in negation (Hoskins 2001) of the higher meaning they tend to signify; for instance, the Andaman aboriginal ritual meant for peace makes use of the symbol of war dance and small clashes between the two groups, and these actions negate the very purpose of the ritual. The *kātāla vēsa* of *Vairamkōde vela* could be both and hence is ambivalent. Since man attributes humanly qualities to God as per the theories of anthropomorphism, the chances that the *kātāla vēsa* is intended to appease *Śiva* and *Kālī* assuming that the villager's evil deeds might invoke the wrath of the gods, and punish them with ailments in family, poor harvest, and rough weather, and such other potential threats to peaceful life cannot be discounted. If so, the meaning of the ritual would substitute penance seeking forgiveness.

The people who adorn this *kātāla vēsa* smear black soot all over their bodies clad in only black half pants. In the morning of the *tīyātṭṭu utsava*, people who adorn the *kātāla vēsa* (hereinafter referred to as *kātālas*) take seven coconut shells, stacked up one against another. The front courtyard of their homes are cleaned daily and repeatedly, and also smeared with cow dung. It is believed that cow dung is smeared to make it ritualistically pure. These coconut shells are then placed in the courtyard and after prayers to the goddess through a small *pūjā* is performed, where the offerings are beaten rice, tender coconuts, bananas, and molasses, sesame oil is poured into the coconut shells. Soot is obtained after burning these shells and oil using a thick cloth

wick. The soot is again mixed with some more sesame oil before applying on the *kātālas'* body beginning from the face and slowly moving down to the feet. Even the bow and the arrow made of arecanut wood supposed to be carried to the Vairamkōde temple are completely smeared with soot. "Oh, Lord Rudra, unto your anger let there be my salutations, also unto your arrows, salutations, salutations unto your bow," alluding to the initial verse of the Rig Veda, " (*Anuvaka I, Rik 1*), as the Yajur Veda Shri Rudram lauds him" (Storl 2004, pp. 119-20), it becomes obvious that the bow and arrow is an integral component of the hunter image of Śiva. Most of them also fix artificial long wooden teeth on both sides of their upper jaws to enhance the ferocity and originality of the *kātāla vēsa*.

These men, who would become *kātālas* for the *Vairamkōde vela* have to be ritually pure, austere, and chaste following a strict vegetarian diet for one month starting from the *Makara chowwa* (first Tuesday in the Malayalam month of *Makaram*; Tuesdays and Fridays are considered to be auspicious as per the *Śakta* cult) by putting a *tilak* (a mark) on their forehead with the soot from the *pradhāna dipastambha* (main granite stone lamp) after taking a dip in the temple pond. It is said that this *vrutam* (vegetarian diet pattern wherein the *kātālas* do not take cooked rice for supper, though rice gruel or dishes made of rice powder are permitted) is usually fixed for thirty to forty-one days for the beginners and fifteen days for the second- time goers. "The intention" of ritual practitioners by way of maintaining austerity through a specific life pattern, an inherent principle of ascetic is not traversing the mundane, rather seeking a new philosophy rooted in "impassive spirituality" (Thapar 2002, p. 132). Such practical ways of maintaining ascetic culture- a "cross-culture" may be considered as acknowledgement of the modern definitions of "religious and social thought in India" (Thapar 2002, p. 132). The *kātāla vēsas* come from nearby places like Tirūr, Pilātharā, Valānceri, Ātavanatū, etc., and these men walk all their way to the Vairamkōde temple on the day of the *vela*, however long or hard the road may be.

The indigenous practice of the *kātālas'* announcement of the upcoming *Vairamcode vēla* by going to homes in and around their locality asking for *bhikṣa*, is on the decline. Giving *bhikṣa* is also a noble deed and often the men in observance of rituals, the *kātālas*, are seen as superior to the others. Community life and interdependencies among communities (and between the mundane and the spiritual) are encouraged through such gestures. Small children, strictly not less than five, also participate in this procession assuming the *kātāla vēsa*. Children *kātālas* try to fulfill through this ritual, the oaths of their mothers who would have prayed to the *Vairamkōde Bhagavati* for easy remedies concerning complications relating to their children's birth or their health. The religious beliefs and practices ascertain that the pleasant and destructive forms of the *Bhagavati* is often decisively invoked as the very manifestations of the human *karma* (deeds) and the psychological and social connotations are fluid enough to accommodate all the gratifications of each of the primitive agrarian communities. Sarah Caldwell sums it up in a comprehensive way: "For communities dwelling in the hills, she is the spirit of the mountains; for lowland agriculturalists, she is the paddy and the earth from which it grows; for toddy-tappers, the graceful coconut palm is her form" (1999, p. 10).

Usually, three people accompany the *kātāla*, one beating the drum and two serving as helpers. The performance is one of boundless energy where the *kātālas* display tremendous force on entering the temple premises making a frightening hooting sound of the hunters and vigorously beating their drums, which add to the effect. Sometimes, their energies are so fierce, that they would have to be held with a towel or small piece of cloth that acts as a harness on their waists and controlled by another companion who is not a *kātāla* (refer Figure 5 given below).

This fierce energy though could be a symbolic representation of the hunter for the younger people, the older generation people do ascertain that they feel utmost powerful in this guise.



Figure 5: Harnessing the fierce energy of the *kātāla*.

Śiva is hailed as the God of Consciousness and Spirits; the God of Animals; the Healer and as the Supreme Hunter who is always honoured for the ecstatic dances he performs (Storl 2004), and also comments that the hand drum that Śiva carries makes him a Shaman (pp. 111-120). Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1918) also mentions that the hand drums are tribal in origin and spirit. Therefore, the *kātālas*' drums and their ecstatic performances as if in trance could be considered to be borrowed from the iconographic representations and the mythological narratives pertaining to Śiva and Shamanism. Thus, the drum beat of *kātālas* and Śiva signify un(natural) potency, will, courage and integrity, which is in perfect accord with that of the “primal rhythmic energy” (A. K. Coomaraswamy 1918, p. 42) of the universe that reverberates within us, thus making our very entity plausible. Yet, rituals symbolize greater awe for the unfathomable power of the Superior Power in temples, simultaneously asserting and negating the concept of theological dualism insisting on the responsibilities of humans to God and God's responsibilities in turn to the (in)animate world (Smoley 2009, p. 49).

The temple authorities claim that earlier, the *kātāla vēsa* used to be the prerogative of the lower classes alone and not surprisingly because history, through the sixth to eighth century - architectural text, the *Māna-sāra-silpa-sāstra*, asserts that *Kālī* is “associated with the periphery of the Hindu society (she is worshipped by tribal or low-caste people in uncivilized or wild places)” Kinsley 2005, pp. 117-8); historians also assert that *Kālī*'s temples or her favourite “dwelling place” is the cremation ground, a place not frequented by the affluent in any society (Kinsley 2005, 124). Only men or boys are allowed to become *kātālas*. These hunters enter the temples during its polluted state when the brahmin priest is yet to perform the purifying rituals. From this, it could be deciphered that this tradition has been formed as a way to vent the frustration of casteist morbidity forcibly enforced on a group of people, although from the higher order of thinking it does shed light to the fact that despite all the people being born equal before God, it still leaves the scope of meat (hunting/eating) people being treated as inferior. We would have to then substantially admit that the ritual of the *kātāla vēsa* is more related to the lower castes of the society who are also at the lower positions of the societal ladder. It should be clear through the concepts of the *ardhanariśwara* that there is hardly any permitted gap between the masculine and feminine genders in Śiva and Śakti, because each carries in itself a part of the other, and achieves completeness or perfection only through this interdependence. Hence, the practice of this ritual by the male gender should be thought of either as a later development in the

ritual imposed by the rigidity of regressive patriarchal hegemony or as an apathetic continuation of stagnant primitive attributions of 'safe' domestic task reservations for women.

3. Modern influences on the Indigeneity of *Kātāla vēsa*

"Primitive ritual was a substitute for what we now call scientific theory" (Kosambi, "*Science, Society and Space*") and hence, the hunter in the indigenous rituals signifies the concepts of balance and justice as well as an epithetical concern for interdependent relationships in (eco)cultural crisis. The presence of the hunter does not only balance the expressions of passive toil of the farmer to hunter's active aggression where the farmer's sweat is replaced by the hunter's blood, and the feelings of his patience by the hunter's anger or greed. Myths reiterating as rituals depend on the not merely didactic pedagogy of the land unraveled through the "interrelationships and subjectivities beyond the human" (Dannenmann 2008, pp. 248-49). Historians like William Logan, M. G. S. Narayan, A. Sreedhara Menon, Balakrishnan P. K., P. Bhaskaranunni, etc. from Kerala unanimously agree that the topography of this land was determined by forests and hills, which posed serious challenges on the feasibility of human habitation. Little wonder, the tribal "hill-god" later "merged to Śiva" (A. K. Coomaraswamy 1918, p. 56) would have come as their condonation to the evil thoughts of possible mishap thus giving weightage to the 'hunter' myth and the subsequent *kātāla vēsa* ritual. Münzel (2019) further suggests that the mythological stories are woven around "un-usual stories," and through the narrative techniques of paradox, inversion and absurdity underlies some rules of conduct for certain societies to follow that contributes to its indigeneity.

Vairamkōde vēla is axled on practices dominating ecological sustenance because the society is largely agrarian in nature. Though these temples in the Indian context are supportive of some religious creed, it should be noted that in indigeneity, the claims of religion is first, "anthropomorphism (the attribution of human characteristics to the nonhuman world); and second, that such attribution is peculiarly intuitive — that is, spontaneous and independent of external tuition" (Guthrie 2001, p. 99). Since, the approach is both anthropomorphic and intuitive, the experiences provided at these temples, be it education through myths, asserting a way of life or practice of rituals, the affects travels from "cognitivist to emotionalist" (Guthrie 2001, p. 100) on the scale. Hence, it is obvious that the *kātāla vēsa* at *Vairamkōde vēla*, a ritual equally anthropomorphic in its conceptual portrayal of myths weighed heavily by psychological needs than by religious observances (Namboodiri 2004, p. 292), and therefore is still rooted on indigeneity.

The future of ritual is the continued encounter between imagination and memory translated into doable acts of the body. Ritual's conservatism may restrain humans enough to prevent our extinction, while its magmatic creative core demands that human life—social, individual, maybe even biological—keep changing. (Schechner 1993 p. 263)

Cultural infiltrations have brought about changes in the indigeneity of the ritual, *kātāla vēsa*, wherein the fasting period is reduced to seven days, the earlier palm leaf or coconut leaf hunter cap replaced by plastic and cardboard; and in some cases, bows and arrows are also replaced by plastic for the sole conveniences of reuse and zero labour.



Figure 6: The artificial caps of the *kātāla vēsa* at *Vairamkōde vela*. This photo is taken during the festival.

The leaves of the holy basil (*tulsi*) and wood-apple are considered dear to *Śiva*, and red ixora flowers are considered apt for the worship of *Śakti*. One cannot ignore the garland of *tulsi*/wood-apple leaves and ixora flowers missing in the bodies of all the three *kātālas* in Figure 6; whereas it was present on the waist of the *kātāla* in Figure 5. Such garlands worn either on the neck or on the waist constituted the integral makeup of the *kātāla vēsas* from traditional times. The non-vertical concrete constructions altering the Kerala landscape has grown incompetent to afford the abundance of these plants, which otherwise grew in plenty and buying these from the florists is a very expensive option, Kerala being primarily a consumerist society. Very soon, this integral embellishment of the *kātāla* would efface, if not but replaced by cloth or paper garlands. Upon pursuing the trend of the *kātāla vēsas* for some years, I have found that not only is there an increase in the statistics of the people performing this ritual but there is also a wide merging of the upper caste people along with the lower castes to perform this ritual. Today, this ritual performs the higher function of being an offering to *Śiva* and *Bhagavati* of the Vairamkōde temple. I have further noticed in the tenure of my qualitative research (through the direct oral submissions of many people who perform this ritual which constitutes my primary data) in order to understand how modernity has affected the indigeneity of this ritual that the goals of the *kātāla vēsa* are now no more feasible with the traditional concepts related to agriculture, rather to more associative concepts of modern life such as keeping diseases- especially small pox and chickenpox at bay, and to bring overall prosperity in domesticity.

4. Conclusions:

The ritual, *kātāla vēsa* does support non-formal knowledge related to the importance of the hunter in agrarian communities, and is specific to Vairamkōde area in Kerala, supports agricultural context, and is rooted in the Hindu culture. As in the case of any indigenous practices, no rigid rules for the conduct of the ritual is formally laid, and the transmission of information about this ritual from generations to generations is largely oral. In the Indian contexts of indigeneity, the ritual of *kātāla vēsa* intrinsically connected to the hunter myth is largely related to the wrath of nature, and the indispensable *karma* due to which the tribe necessarily need to take a religious overturn. “As George Tinker points out in “Defending Mother

Earth,” cultural values and social and political structures in many indigenous communities are rooted in a worldview shaped by reciprocity and spatiality” (Xing and Ng. 2016, p. vi). It is obvious that though *kātāla vēsa*, may have been closely related to the ecological sustainability, and mutual interdependence of communities promoting holistic living earlier, the very dynamic and adaptive nature of the indigenous ritual influenced by the domineering trends of modernity have been off late reversed.

Today, if this ritual is performed, it is only for the realization of personal selfish goals where the modern (superstitious) man, no more a ‘hunter,’ presently places himself above the communities (not essentially agrarian) he belongs to. Indian “idyllic” village community, always known for its essential “spiritual quality” is now perpetually tarnished with the materialistic ideals of the western world because (quoting Max Muller) it has discarded its “passive, meditative and reflective” qualities and instead highlighted on the “active, combative and acquisitive” characteristics (Thapar 1978, pp. 3-12) presented by globalization. With the present generation of Kerala fast moving toward a global outlook of distancing from nature and the collective consciousness of the population glued to many indigenous practices (also modernized by neoreligionistic attempts of revitalization) more powers are attributed to the supernatural; it is seen that though the numbers of ritualistic doers is not diminishing, they are hardly aware of the cultural significance that the ritual of *kātāla vēsa* once carried. If the sanctity of the ritual is still maintained, it is only due to the fear of the supernatural power of the gods and is strictly not rooted on the needs of communal interdependence for better ecological sustainability. To conclude, the ritual may still be indigenous, though the goals which provide meaning to this ritual is no more the same.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Rudra is another name for Śiva, and is interchangeably used to represent one and the same. Read the first paragraph of section 2. “*Kātāla vēsa* at *Vairamkōde vela*” of this paper to know more about the definitions of *Rudra*.

ⁱⁱ *Sat* means the state of being. It may refer to illusion as well – that is, here, representation of the divine.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Asat* means the state of not being. It may refer to delusion as well – that is, here, the flaws in the representation of the divine. Together, *sat* and *asat* symbolize completeness.

^{iv} *Yōni* translates to female vulva. Kramrisch suggests an alternate translation as “lap of the goddess,” and it “presupposes the existence of the Great Goddess” (1981, p. 178) for creation to be possible. It also represents *Prakṛti* or earth.

^v *Linga* represents the phallus and takes its shape as a “pillar” and ontologically implies the invisible presence of the source (Kramrisch 1981, p. 178). It also represents the *Puruṣa* and the sky.

^{vi} Brahmadeya village: “the entire village or the lands of the village were donated to a single brahman or

a group of brahmins.” Tax was exempted (Thapar 1990, p. 119).

^{vii} Agrahara: “an entire village settlement of brahmins.” Tax was exempted (Thapar 1990, p. 119).

^{viii} Devadana: The concept was that these villages were donated to God, and hence, “the revenue from these villages was donated to a temple and was consequently received by the temple authorities” (Thapar 1990, p. 119).

^{ix} Alternate spelling- Vairankode.

^x Title of the *nambūdiris* of Ālvāncēri family. They were supposed to be the spiritual leaders among the *nambūdiris*, the title belongs to the senior most male members of the brahmin feudal lords of Ālvāncēri *mana* (brahmin house).

^{xi} Formerly known as Cranganore belongs to Thrissur district, Kerala.

^{xii} Situated in Malappuram district, Kerala.

^{xiii} “Gana-sangha clans as degenerate kshatriyas and even shudras, because they have ceased to honour the brahmins or to observe Vedic ritual. Honouring the brahmins included accepting varna stratification. The gana-sanghas had only two strata - the kshatriya rajakula, ruling families, and the dasa-karmakara, the slaves and labourers. The latter were therefore non-kin labour, which was a departure from earlier clan systems where kinsfolk laboured together” (Thapar 2002, p. 148).

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