

Design Resource

## Vanji Making, Ernakulam - Kerala

Boat Making

by

Prof. Bibhudutta Baral, Divyadarshan C. S. and

Lija M. G.

NID Campus, Bengaluru

Source:

<http://www.dsource.in/resource/vanji-making-ernakulam-kerala>



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## Introduction

Long years ago, people discovered the islands and connected from one island to the other either by swimming or by floating on the log of wood rowing with the sticks to reach the opposite land. It is said this led to the making of the small boats in their own way and technique using the stuffs from their day to day living. Some of the parts of Kerala are filled with island and in Ernakulam there are many islands where the usage of boats were more before the development of the roadways.

If the old people of Kerala especially the people living in the banks of the backwaters are asked they would tell the story of their experiences what they faced as their discoveries, sorrows etc. Earlier there was a tradition more of joint families and in any ceremonies, functions or occasions if the relations lived on the other side of the banks then the entire family will be taken in these boats in various turns. Nearly each house had their own vanji who lived at the banks of backwaters and was used for travelling, fishing, collecting mussels and removing (transporting) sand from the collection point etc.

Usually of 2, 3, 5 and 7 people can travel at a time depending on the sizes of the boat (vanji). Most of the people knew swimming and rowing some years ago as their major travel was either by walk or through the boating. At present very few people continue to use it as the source of transport but mostly found using for fishing and transporting of goods.

It is said that the craftsmen is working on the making of the traditional boat from about 10-20 years. Though his father is also a carpenter he learnt from an Asan (a teacher) of this place. Most of the people living in Chellanam, a village of Kochi in the Ernakulam district of the state of Kerala in India live by fishing. Chellanam is a village of about 10 km near to Thoppumpady which is filled with water bodies and paddy fields.

The name Chellanam itself says as the place where no one goes as previously it was the forest where nobody preferred to live. Most of the people of Chellanam lives by the fishing, making of boats and agriculture. They are basically referred to the shore side people who live with traditions and their day to day activities of fishing and cultivation. Chellanam is filled with the natural water bodies in between the fields where cultivation happens on both sides of the roadway. Coconut trees in between with different types of birds sitting and flying through them in search of their food. Anybody would admire the nature that is being maintained even today without much influence of the modern systems and world.

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Traditional Boat made out of wooden planks called Vanji locally in Kerala it is a local country boat.

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Artisans of Vanji making (Traditional Kerala boat) at their workshop studio.



Artisans engrossed in making the Vanji at their studio.



Artisan's residence and studio at Ernakulam, Kerala.

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A local port at Ernakulam where Vanji and other boats are rowed for fishing and transportation.

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## Tools and Raw Materials

Following are the tools and raw materials required to make the Vanji (the traditional boat).

- **Wild Jack/ Punna:** It is generally the wood preferred for making of the Vanji.
- **Coconut Husk:** It is used to fill the gaps between the planks of wood.
- **Coir Rope:** It is used to align together to fill the gaps between the planks of wood.
- **Nylon Rope:** It is generally used to stitch the filling material in a criss cross manner.
- **Wooden Mallet:** It is generally used to tighten the rope bundle to the condensed form.
- **Uli (Chisel):** It is generally used to shape the wood to the required forms.
- **Sawing Machine:** It is used to cut the wood to the required shapes and sizes.
- **Planer:** It is used to smooth the surface of wood at various stages.
- **Hand Drill:** It is used to make holes at the required portions.
- **Iron Nails:** It is used to place the coir fibers to the holes firmly to avoid any leakages of water.
- **Needle:** It is used to stitch the fillings together in the gaps.
- **Wood Filler/ Putty:** It is used to cover the gaps in the wood surface.

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Wooden planks to build traditional wooden boat.



Hammer with hardwood grip and a scraping chisel.



Electric circular saw to cut the planks and electric jigsaw (Sabre saw) to cut curves.



Block plane is used to flatten the plank and in finishing process.

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Electric hand buffing machine to smoothen the surface of the plank.



Plastic thread used in stitching the two planks together.



Hammer with hardwood grip to hammer the nails.

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Round wire nails are driven into workpiece.



Claw Hammer to drive nails.

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Thread made out of coconut fibre for binding and filling the gap between two planks while connecting.



Resin based adhesive is used to fill the holes and gaps.

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## Making Process

The wooden pieces of Wild Jack, Anjili (called locally) and Punna (garcinia or mangosteen family) are generally preferred for the Vanji (the traditional boat). The wooden pieces are hammered to the ground at various places as per the length firmly by checking the levels at each point. The longest and the main piece of wood are made to curves by heating the wood and curving the corners. The bottom woods would generally be of two inches thickness as after the completion of the making they will be fully in water. The long piece of wood is fixed firmly to the pieces of wood that is hammered to the ground.

They are placed by the smaller pieces of the similar shapes on both the sides of the main wood piece. Holes are made on the ends of the wood pieces with the sawing machine with four finger gap each facing the long, main piece of wood (central plank) of the curve shape.

Six to seven coir rope of 2mm thickness are arranged parallel to each other and tied together at the ends. Between the planks of wood the coconut husk is placed to which the coir ropes are stitched together with the nylon rope and needle in a criss-cross manner for holding it firmly to the gaps. The wooden planks are placed sides to the main plank and stitched on one side, then the other side plank is placed and stitched. For about four to five piece of planks are placed to the main piece and then the corner wood piece called the Kaavatam is placed and filled with coconut husk, coir rope and stitched.

Minimum of two people are required with one passing the rope over the bundle of coir's by tightening to a condensed mass and the other pulls to obtain the criss-cross pattern. As there are small holes after stitching they are then filled by taking the coconut husk in thicker layer and inserting it by hammering with the nail. All the corners where it is stitched is filled with putty (wood filler) to close the gaps from the exterior to obtain a smooth surface.

Blocks of wood are placed some distance away from the corners horizontally at equidistance and a plank is placed below the blocks to make it into compartments. Especially when it is taken for the fishing purpose the fishes in the net is not lost as it will be in the compartment and they can concentrate on rowing till they reach the banks of the backwaters. In case of travelling the main people for rowing sit on the corners and the remaining in the middle portion for easy travelling.

Sanding is done on the surface to obtain a smooth finish of the vanji such that any scratches or gaps can be covered further by applying the putty. After which the mixture of fish oil, chanchalyam (arpus) and charcoal powder are applied on the surface either by a brush or a waste cloth. The vanji is applied with Fish oil (Sardine mostly) to improve the floating property of the boat to avoid any further leakages.

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### Flow Chart of Making Process:

1. Wooden pieces are hammered to the ground as per the length to be got by checking the levels from the ground at all positions.
2. Wood of generally Wild Jack, Anjili and Punna are preferred for the making of Vanji (the traditional boat).
3. Longest piece of wood is considered as a main piece generally of two inches thickness which is curved at the corners.
4. To the main piece of wood on both sides smaller pieces of wood are attached to both sides of the main piece.

5. Six to seven coir ropes of 2 mm thickness are arranged parallel to each other and tied together at the ends which are placed with coconut husk and stitched with the nylon ropes in a criss cross manner for holding it firmly to the gaps made at a distance of four fingers.
6. After stitching the hole is filled with coconut husk with the help of hammering by a nail.
7. The holes are then filled with putty from the exterior part to fill in the holes.

8. Planks are fixed horizontally to form as compartments and sanded throughout to obtain a smooth finish.
9. A coat of the mixture of fish oil, chanchalyam (arpus) and charcoal powder is applied to the surface.
10. It is then applied with fish oil through out to avoid any leakages further and to improve the floating property.

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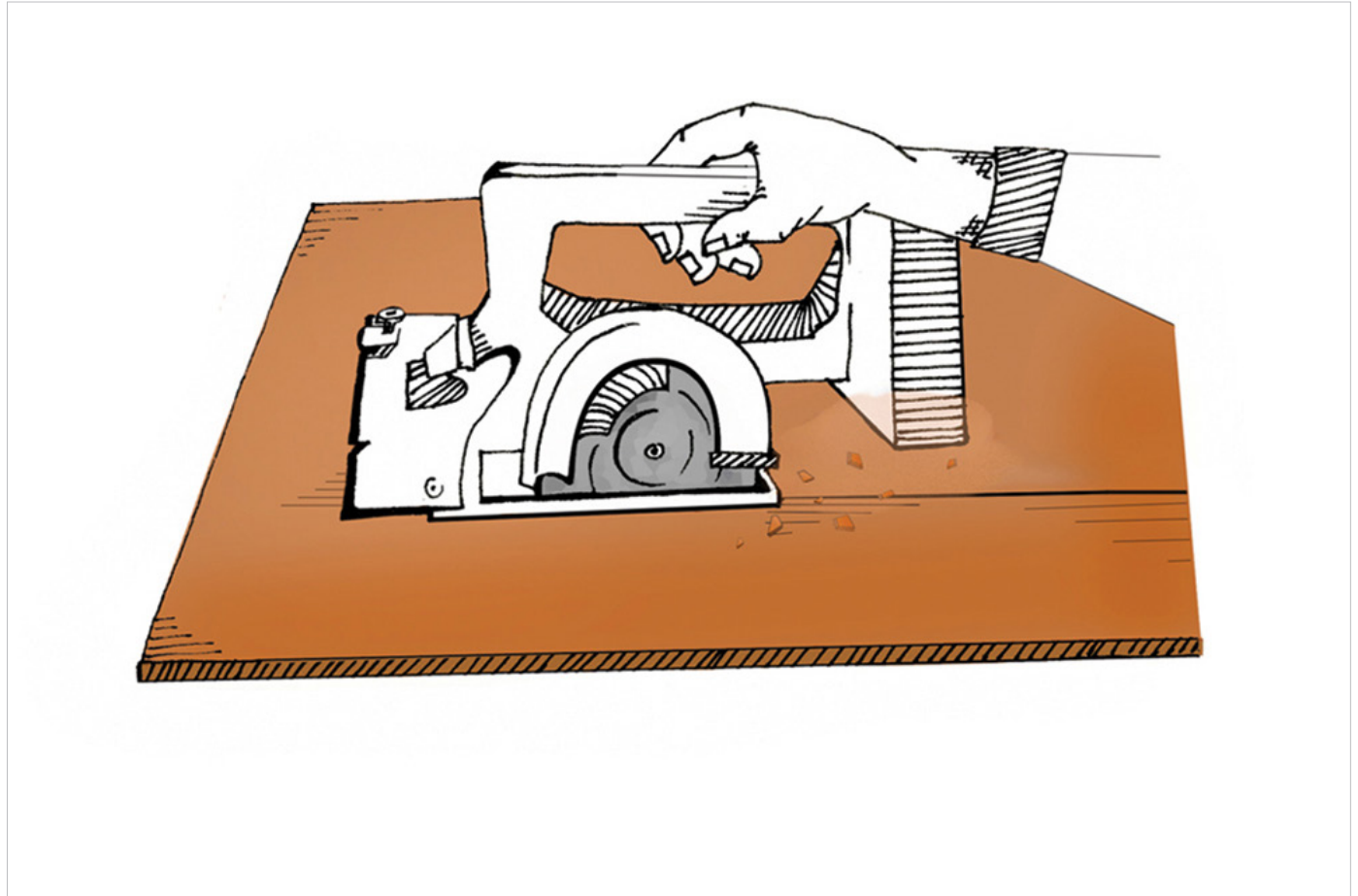
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Dividing the plywood with the help of electric circular saw.

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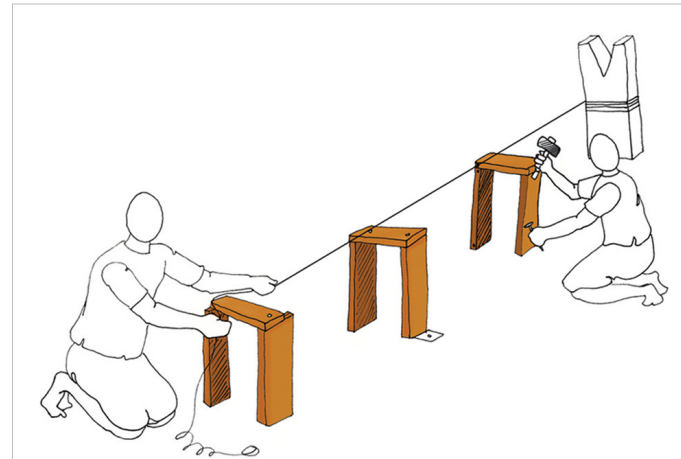
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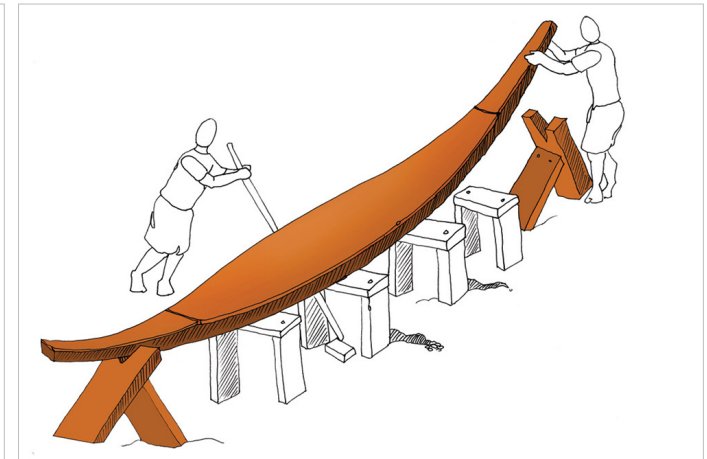
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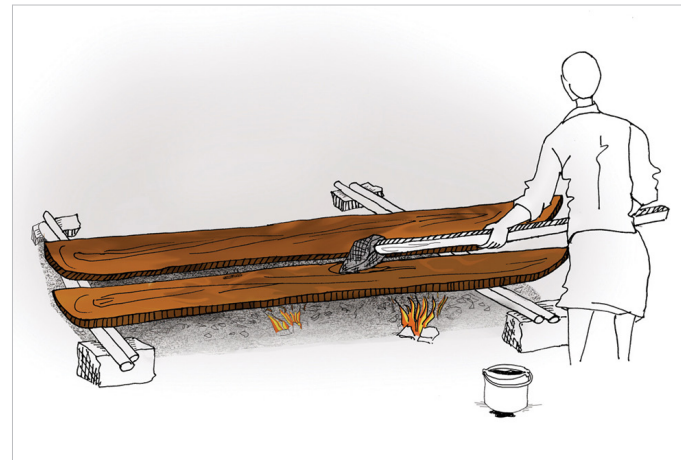
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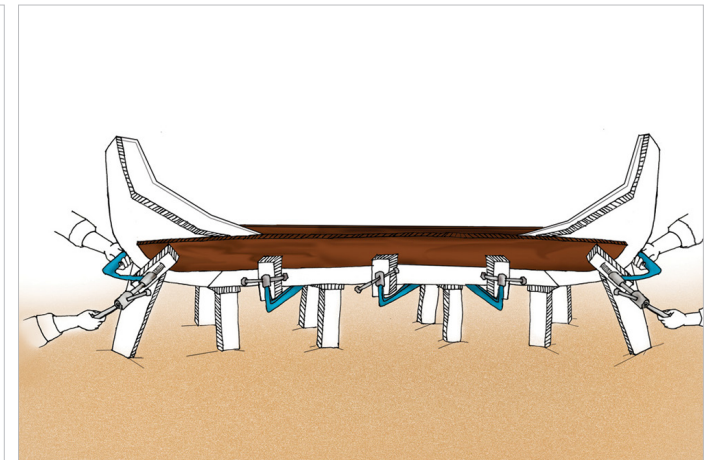
Hammering the planks to the ground made for the pedestal for boat construction.



Placing the plank made for the keelson part of the boat onto the pedestal.



Heating the planks to make it pliable to bend them into a desired shape.



Clamping pre heated planks to the either sides of the keelson base of the boat.

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Artisan makes groove lines and holes with electric circular saw and a round bull point Chesil.



Groove lines and holes are correspondingly made on two different planks outside the boat to conceal the plastic wire woven onto it.



The plastic wire is stitched with big needle into corresponding groove holes made, like tying shoelace and the wire sits inside the groove line made.



On the internal side of the boat the gaps between the planks are packed with coconut fibre threads and stitched upon it.

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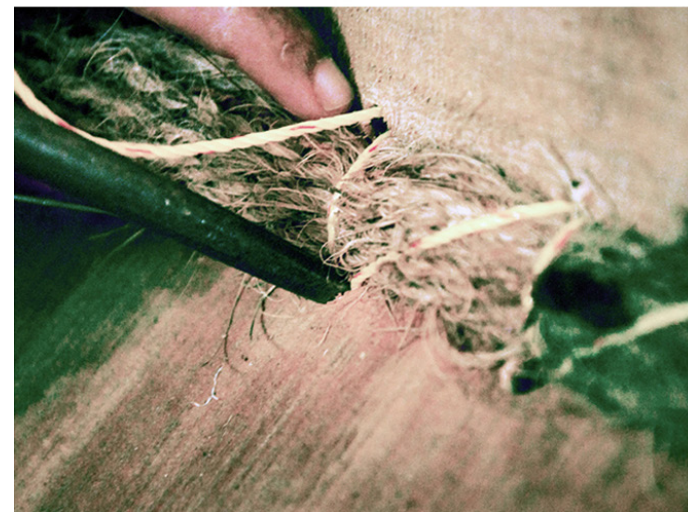
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The coconut fibre thread is hammered and tightly held by packing it with Plastic wire.



Hammer is used in pulling the plastic thread for the further tightness.



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The binding is done between every two different wooden planks to ensure the boat leak proof.



Coconut fibres are used in filling the gaps made while stitching to make the boat leak proof.



Two artisans work simultaneously and collaborate in making one boat where one artisan is on the internal side and other one is outside.

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Smoothing the surface with the help of Electric hand buffing machine.



Applying M-seal to fill the line gaps caused by the stitching process.



Painting a completed wooden boat in black color with the help of cloth.



A traditional wooden boat called Vanji in Kerala which is local country boat.

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## Products

In Chellanam mostly the wooden boats are been used for transporting, fishing and for the day to day life activities. Various sizes of the Vanji's (boat) are made for the day to day activities of the people such as the seven and a half kol (called locally) is nothing but of 210 inches in length, nine kol of 252 inches in length and fifteen kol of 420 inches in length with the cost varying from INR 18,500 to about INR 80,000 depending upon their sizes.



A Beautiful traditional wooden boat called Vanji in Kerala which is local country boat.

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## Video



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## Contact Details

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