

Special project

Study of temple flags of north Malabar

Rashmin Raj A
02625004

Guided by Prof Sreekumar G. V.



Contents

Introduction

Festivals

Kerala temples

Dwaja stamba

Symbolism of the dwaja-stamba

Flag types

Symbolism of the dwaja

Colors

Dwaja standards

Variety and construction

Inferences

References





Introduction

Kerala is world famous for its natural beauty and its vibrant art forms. Kerala was also world famous many centuries ago for its spices. A time in which pepper was known as the black gold and was worth a king's ransom. The most important of Kerala's ports were in Malabar. Malabar consists of the 6 districts namely Kozhikode, Tellicherry, Cannanore, Kasaragode, Palghat and Malappuram which make up north Kerala. This was where the first European traveler namely Vasco da Gama landed, a few kilometers from Kozhikode at a place called Kappad.

Malabar is also called the land of the living gods. This is

because of the vibrant art form called Theyyam. The coastline is dotted with temples and Kavus each of which have a festival associated with it. The festivals are a social event whereby all the people in proximity to the temple join together and celebrate the festival. When the festive dates are decided flags are hoisted to inform the people about the event. It's a really colorful spectacle to see the green landscape dotted with the vibrant flags, visible from far. This study was aimed to understand the usage, varieties, and the standards if any and the meaning of the traditional flags in north Malabar.

Festivals

Each temple had a festival associated with it. Festivals usually coincide with the harvest season and thus people offer part of the harvest to the gods as offerings. The festival is thus a very social event; where by the whole neighborhood comes together. As part of my research I tried to find out the real significance of festivals according to scriptures. According to the experts it is believed that the Chaithyanam (power) of the deity diminishes because of the mistakes and faults of the priests and devotees. The temple is compared to a pot filled with water, where the water signifies chaithyanam. Thus to replenish the chaithnam every year strict discipline is followed and special poojas and offerings are done, it is believed that

because of this the pot overflows and flows to fill the entire neighborhood and thus revitalizing the whole space.

The festivals can be classified into three types

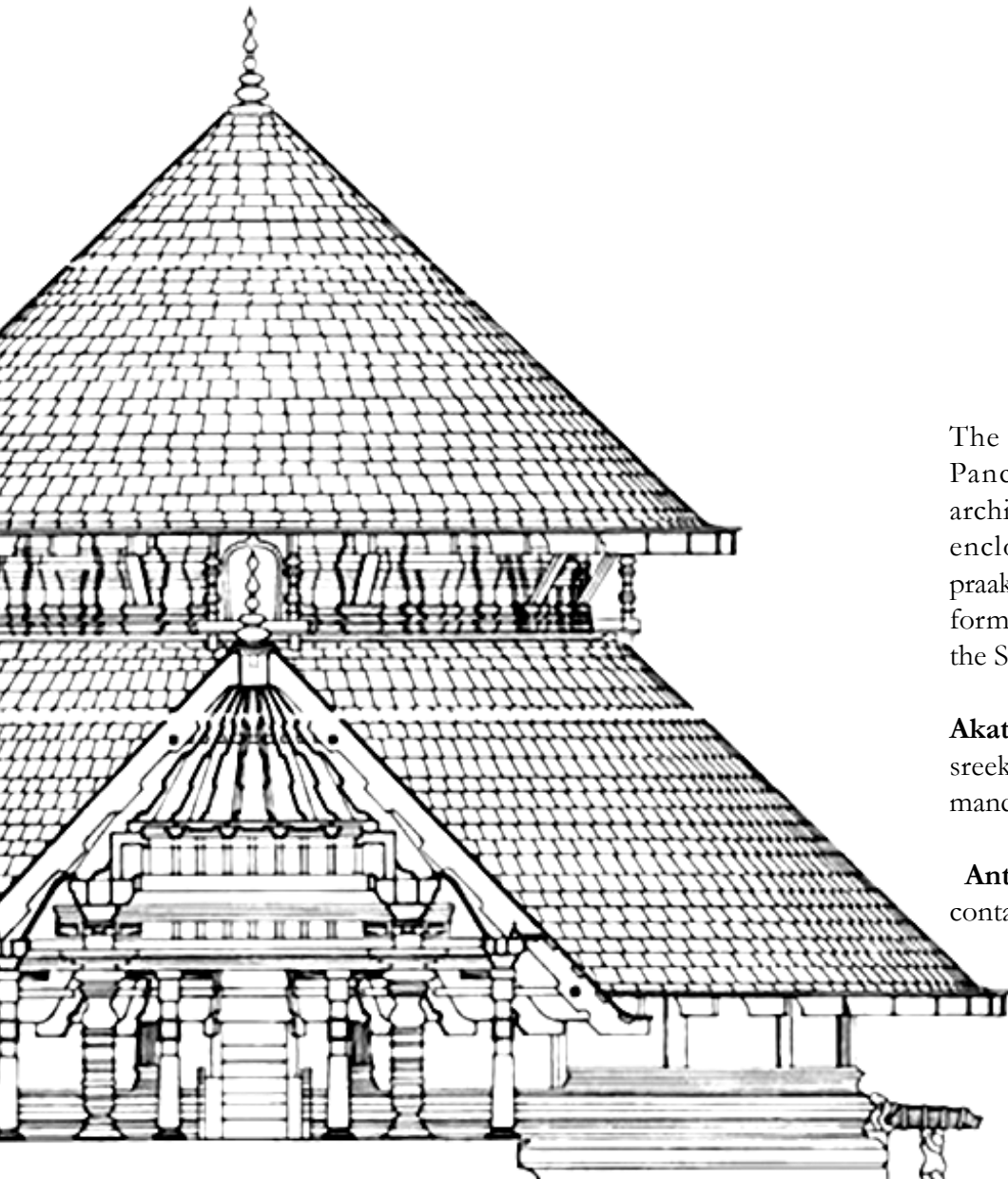
Anguradhi: these are festivals which involve the sowing of sacred seeds and then their harvest

Dwajathi: festivals involving hoisting of flags and offering of pooja to the same.

Padahadhi: these are festivals which involved the use of fireworks.

For all the festivals flags are hoisted but Dwajathi involves the hoisting of special flags.





Kerala temple

The temples of Kerala fall under the Panchapraakaara scheme of temple architecture. Prakaakaara refers to the enclosure of the temples and pancha praakaraas denote the five enclosures which form the temple in which at the centre lies the Sreekovil or the grabhagriha.

Akatthe Balivattam: This consist of the sreekovil, the antar mandala, namaskaramandapa, shrines of subsidiary deities etc.

Antha-haara or chuttambalam: this contains Valiambalam (both sides of the main entrance), Mulayara

(The area where holy seeds are planted), thitappalli (kitchen) , sub shrines, store etc.

Madhahaara or vilakkumaatam: this is a structure with colums on which lamps are fixed and it runs all around the temple.

Baahya-haara : this region contains the balikkal (sacrifice altar) , outer pradkshina veethi and dwajasthamba (flagpost).

Maryaada or puram mathil : this is the outer compound wall

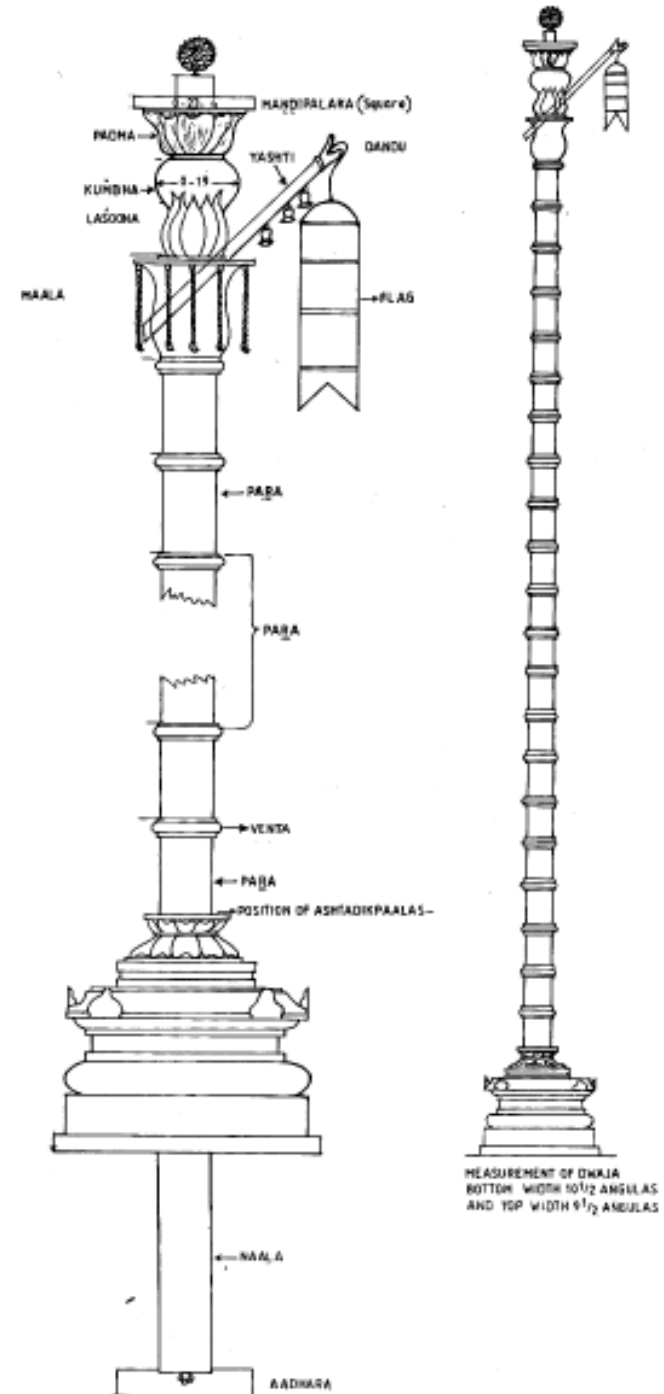
Ususally only the great temples have all the five praakaaraas

Dwaja stamba (flag post)

The dwaja stamba or flagpost is installed in the Baahya haara and is outside the balikkal. It is placed so that a person standing outside the temple has a unobstructed view of the deity.

The flagpost consist of naala, adhistana, padma, idols of dik-palakas, paras, venda, maalasthana, lasoona, mandi-palaka, yashti, veerakantha, vaahana and other decorations. Than ala consists of granite stone on which the flagpost is fixed above that, naala and aadhara are inside the ground and acts as the foundation. Over the naala is the square vedika and over this is the adhistana and the inverted lotus shaped padma on top of

the same. The next level contains the ashtadik-paalakas. The paras constitute the next stage which forms the major part of the flagpost. Over the paras comes kalasa and lasoona. This is surmounted by a square plate to which eight steel garlands are fixed, above this comes kumbha and again a padma and over this a platform known as the mandipalaks is placed and on top of this a smaller square platform called the veerrakanta. The vahana of deity is placed on top of the dwaja –stamba. The flag is hoisted on the yashti.





Symbolism of the Dwaja-stamba

The dwaja stamba symbolizes kundalini-sakthi, the log is symbolic of the vertebral column and spinal column of the human body, the coverings of metal over the dwaja stamba are symbolic of the other bones and ribs around the spine. The hoisting of the flag is symbolic of raising of the Kundalini sakthi and keeping it at the summit. The Kundalini sakthi is believed to be asleep in

the base of the human spine and the goal of all forms of enlightenment is to awaken the same and then to raise to its summit, thus attaining enlightenment. Once the flag is hoisted it is believed it is as holy as the idol. Thus it is the state in which the lord looks over the entire village and showers his blessing over the people.

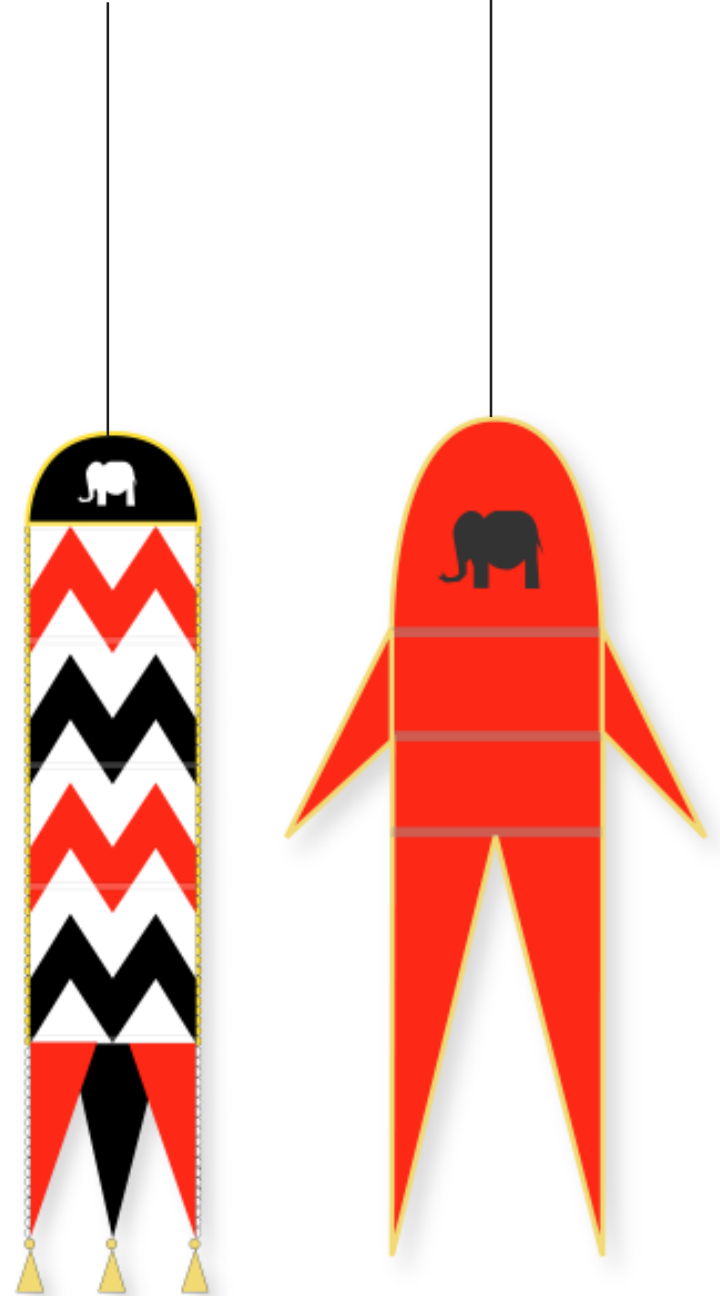
Flag types

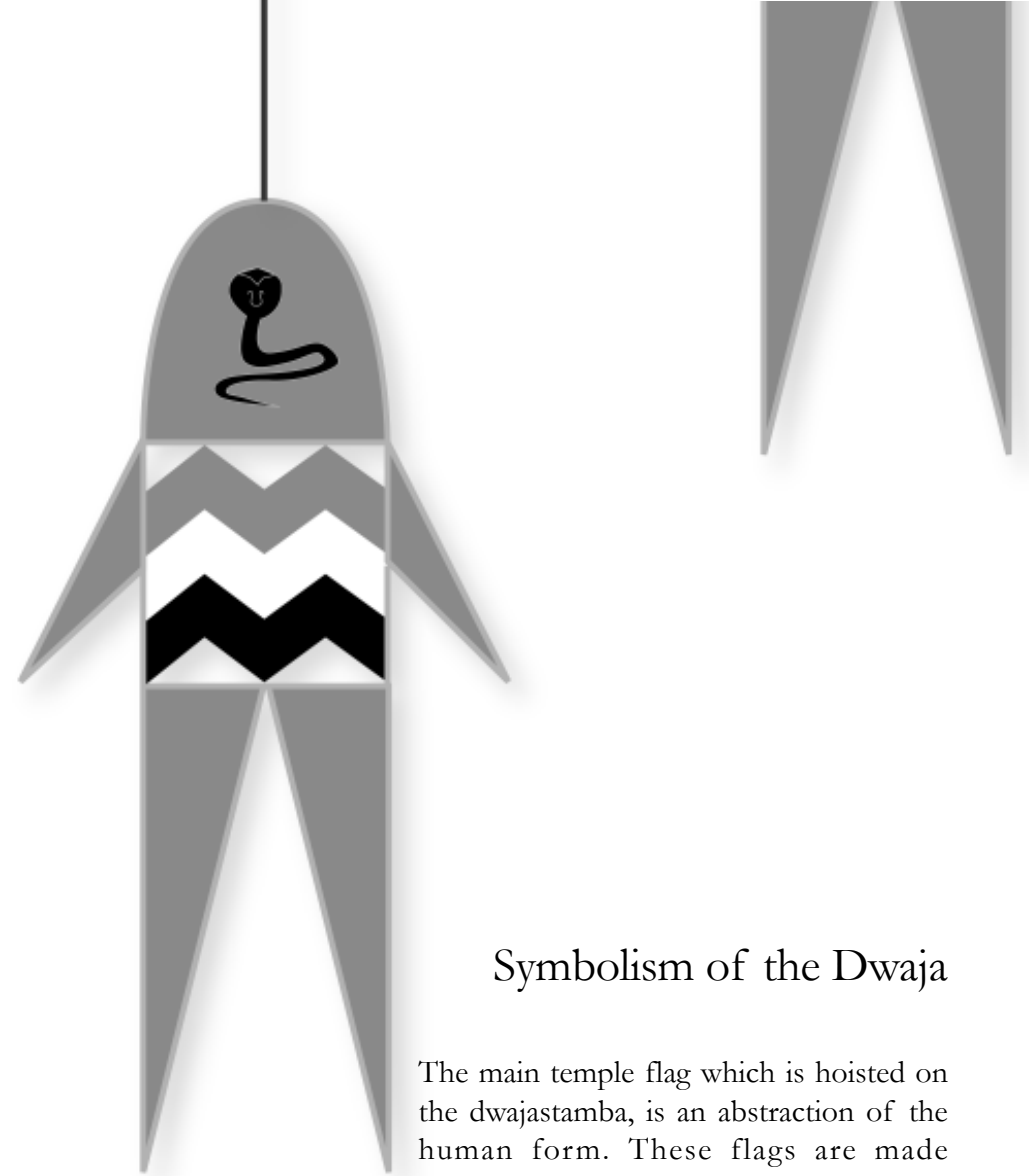
Flags can be classified based on their usage and form. They can be classified into two basic forms. It was observed that the flags which are put up around the temple and the neighborhood were long and there was a large variation in their designs and length. There was no standardization in their forms. It was discovered that these flags were part of the offerings made by people and thus they had only followed a general grammar.

There were three parts to these flags, the head, body and the tail. The colors used in these were red, white, yellow and black. Most of these flags had three tails. The markings on their head contained a graphic

symbol, in some cases the vehicle and then the name of the person who has offered the flag.

The second type of flag is the one used inside the temple, these were the flags which were hoisted on the dwaja stamba. These flags were a lot more similar in their forms dimensions and colors than the general type. The main constituents of these flags were the head, body, hands and the legs.





Symbolism of the Dwaja

The main temple flag which is hoisted on the dwajastamba, is an abstraction of the human form. These flags are made according to strict rules which specify the size, graphics, color and placement. The parts of the flags can be directly related to the human form, as head, legs, hands, torso and legs. The flag is symbolic of the god. The two triangles in the flag symbolize Agni (fire)

Colors

The colors used in the traditional temple flags are white, black, red and yellow.

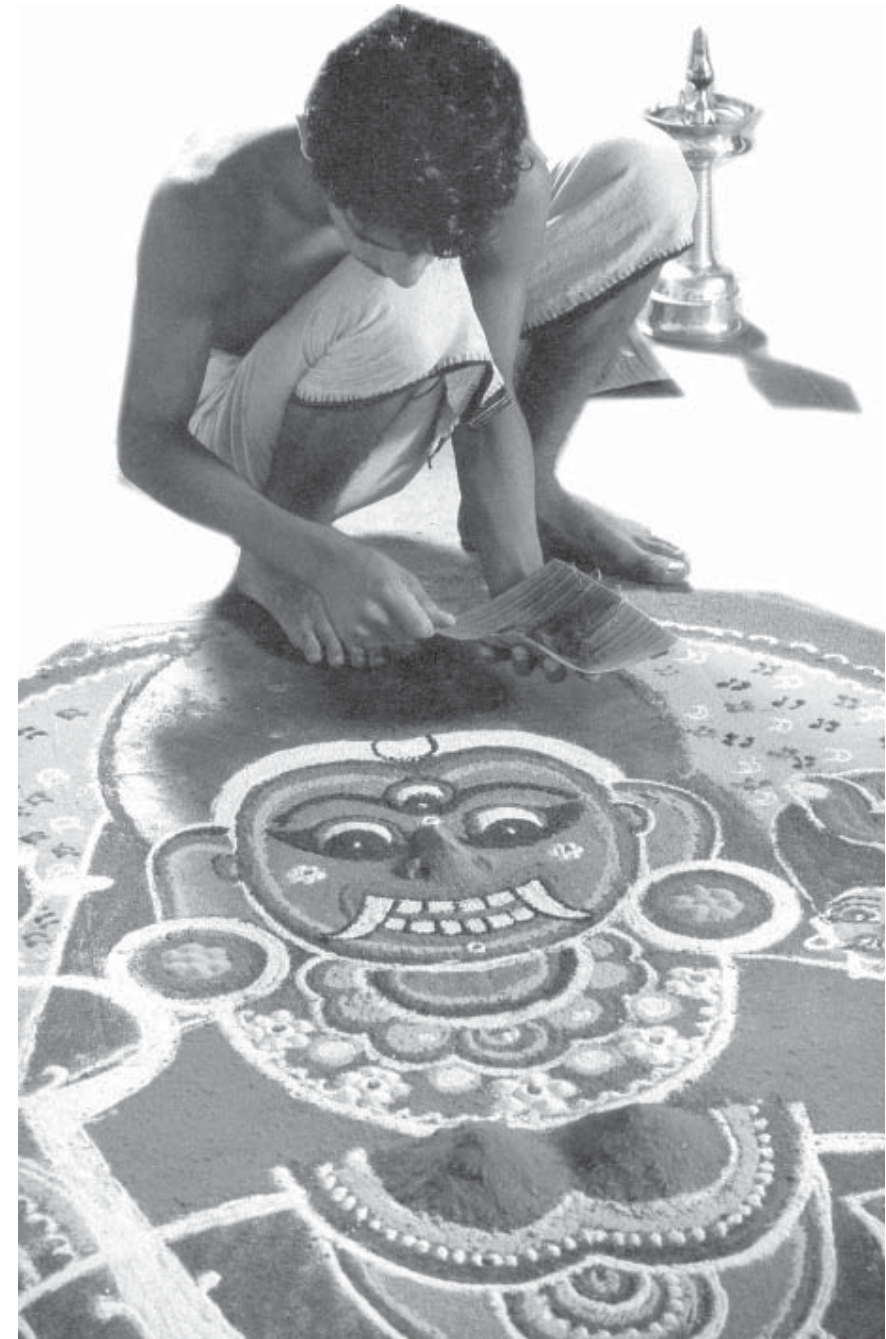
Yellow: yellow symbolizes earth and thus mother goddess. It's a very auspicious color, the color of turmeric. The traditional dress worn on festivals like vishu and onam has a yellow shade. In tantric symbols earth is symbolized with a yellow square.

White: white symbolizes fertility and prosperity.

Black: black represents disintegration and annihilation.

Red: red is the color of blood, it is the life giving color. It represents creation.

The same colors are found in all the traditional art and art forms in Kerala. From Theyyam to Kalamayuthu. In each of these art forms there are levels of meaning. The apparent form would symbolize a god or goddess, but the next level of meaning lies in the colors, the rituals and the graphic elements.





Dwaja standards

There seems to be no prescribed standards for the general flags and were made according to the lengths in multiples of feet. It was observed that some of these flags had also blue color in them, this was seen in a temple belonging to the fishermen community. Some of the flags were more than 30 feet in length. Since these were offerings made by devotees no standards were followed other than the overall form and color scheme. The form, color, graphic treatment were similar.

For the making the main flag very strict standards are followed. The length of flags are 3ft, 4ft, 5 1/2ft and 6ft. the breath is quarter of the length. From half the length the legs start. The upper part is divided in two and the top part forms the head the other the torso. The hands start from the upper edge of the torso and is quarter the length of the flag. The head contains graphic symbol which signifies the vehicle of the lord.

Variety and construction

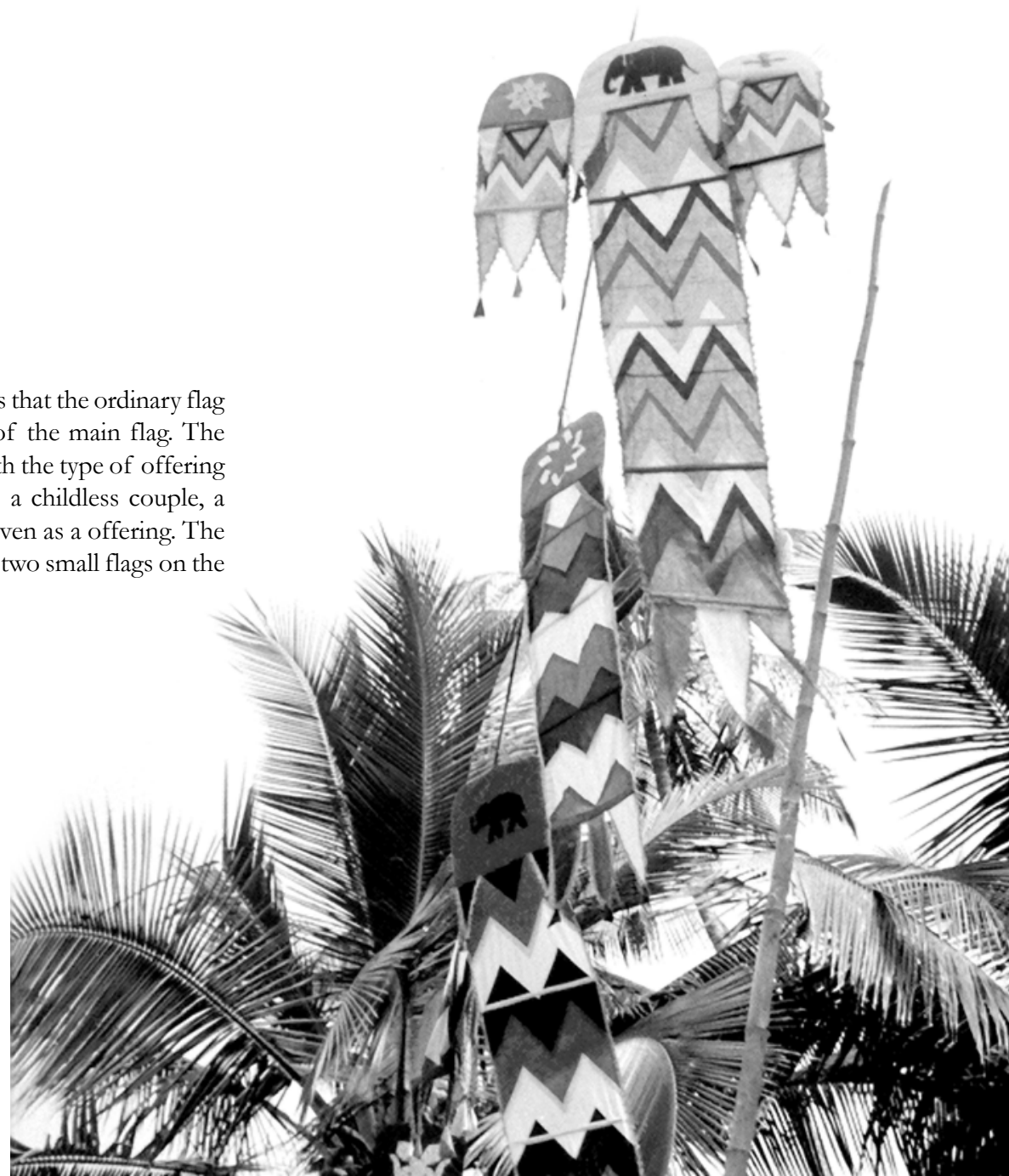
The main flag is made from cotton and are reinforced using bamboo strips. These flags are made by special tailors. The main flags are made following strict rules.

It was observed that lot of the tailors didn't know the standards and just copied the existing design.

The normal flags are made by specifying the length and are charged on the basis of length. The names of the devotee is also marked on the head of the flag just below the symbol. Usually for Vaishnava temples the sun symbol is stitched on the reverse side of the flag and for Shaivite temples it is the moon.

I had encountered numerous forms of flags during my study. Flags which were three feet in length to flag which were thirty feet in length. Some flags had three legs and some

had no hands. It seems that the ordinary flag is a stylized version of the main flag. The type of flag varied with the type of offering made. In the case of a childless couple, a combination flag is given as a offering. The combination flag had two small flags on the side of the main flag.





Inferences

There are two types of flags, the general flag which acts as a signifier. It communicates to the public that the festival is nearing and by means of placement it communicates to which temple it belongs to. The main flag is both the signifier and the signified. This is the reason it is considered as holy as the idol and is considered as the manifestation of the lord. The real purpose of the flag was to act as a medium to communicate to the people the details of deity and other associated details. It thus acted as signage. The vahana on top of flag post denotes the deity. The vahanas are different for each god, bull for Siva, garuda for Mahavishnu, Garuda over a bull for Sankaranarayana, mouse for Ganapati, horse for Ayyappa, peacock or cock for subramanya, lion for Bhagavathi, vetala for Bhadrakaali and nattu for Chamundi. The length of the flag denotes the state of the deity.

If the deity is a new born child as in case of Lord Krishna the flag is 3ft in length

If the deity is teenager then the flag is 4 feet in length

If the deity is an adult male its 6ft and 5 ft for the female deity.

The yashti (rod extending from the flagpost on which flag is hoisted) should face the right side of the main deity. Thus it denotes to which direction the deity faces.

The color palette of any part of Kerala is mostly dominated by green and blue shades. Thus to stand out from such a color scheme the need for the use of a contrasting color scheme is seen. This would be the logic behind the use of red extensively

in the color scheme of the flag. Since the need to attract the attention of people from far. This is also the reason of red being used so extensively in all art and artforms.

The normal forms of the flag seem to be a stylized form of the main flag, since we find all the elements of the main flag in them.

References

Kshetra chaitanya rahasya: Madhav G

Chuvanna Keralam: Raghavan P

Temples of kerala: S Jayashanker

Interviews

Dr Priyadarsan Lal

Mr Deva Shikamani Kozhikode

Priests

K. S. S. members

