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The Young Goddess Who Dances through the Ordinarity of Life—A Study on the Tantric Traditions of Kerala

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Abstract: Drawing on both ethnographic and literary sources, this paper indicates that initiations into the mantra of Bālā are essential rites of passage for various Tantric communities. We focus on two previously unstudied texts: *Bālāvīmśati stotra* (“Twenty Verses on the Bālā Goddess”), a popular eulogy sung on festive occasions in Kerala temples, and *Bālādīkṣāpaddhati* (“A Treatise on Initiation into the Bālā Mantra”), a short treatise explaining the rules of initiation into the Bālā cult of Kerala. The article contextualizes the texts by providing commentaries of practitioners and interpretations of Kerala gurus who initiate their adepts into Śrīvidyā.

Keywords: Tantra; Bālā; Kerala; Śrīvidyā; Hindu goddess; Śāktism



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1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to highlight the importance of worship of the goddess Bālā Tripura Sundarī in modern Kerala culture. Drawing on both ethnographic and literary sources, the study indicates that initiations into the mantra of Bālā are essential rites of passage for various communities, including Brahmin and non-Brahmin families. We focus on two previously unstudied texts: *Bālāvīmśati stotra* (“Twenty Verses on the Bālā Goddess”), a popular eulogy sung on festive occasions in Kerala temples, and *Bālādīkṣāpaddhati* (“A Treatise on Initiation into the Bālā Mantra”), a short treatise explaining the rules of initiation into the Bālā cult of Kerala. The latter text was found in the manuscript collections of a Brahmin family from central Kerala¹. The collections are being edited and digitalized by the present authors with the intent of preserving and making this body of valuable scholarly material widely available.

The Bālā goddess is one of the manifestations of Tripurā, the main deity of Śrīvidyā, a Hindu Tantric cult (Brooks 1992). As the name Tripurā indicates, she has three forms: Tripurā Bālā (The Young Maiden of Three Worlds), Tripurasundarī (The Beauty of Three Worlds), and Tripurabhairavī (The One who Terrifies the Three Worlds). Tripurā is a personification of Śakti, the all-encompassing power of the universe. She is venerated as a maternal figure, gracious and compassionate. The worship of the Tripurā goddess is rooted in the nondual philosophy of Kashmirian Śaivism and multiple references to this system can be found in the texts of Śrīvidyā. Flood (1996, p. 186) names the earliest sources of the tradition as *Nityāśoḍaśīkārṇava* and *Yoginīhr̥daya*, which together form a compendium known as *Vāmakeśvara Tantra*. The first text is a ritual handbook dealing with external rites, while the latter can be called an exposé on esoteric interpretations of the Śrīvidyā main yantra—the iconic *śrīcakra*. White (1997, p. 176) argues also that Śrīvidyā originated in Kashmir in the 12th and 13th centuries and afterwards “migrated” into South India, where it has remained the mainstream form of Śākta Tantra.

Even though there are not many temples dedicated to Tripurā in Kerala, *śrīcakra* is secretly worshipped by various communities, and the Bālā goddess is often invoked with a popular hymn, *Bālāvīmśati stotra*, during temple festivals. This article interprets the

stotra and shows its persistence in Keralan culture: it is ceremonially passed from one generation to another within certain Brahmin families, recited during secret ceremonies, and contemplated by Tantric practitioners during their solitary meditations. Conversely, the importance of Bālā mantra initiations is discussed here based on the authors' anthropological fieldwork and their study on *Bālādīkṣāpaddhati*. Our paper contextualizes the text by providing commentaries of practitioners and interpretations of Keralan gurus who initiate their adepts with the Bālā mantra. We include notes from field research conducted by both authors², on various occasions, in the Kozhikode (Calicut), Malappuram, and Kannur districts of Kerala, and provide insights from interviews with practitioners from these regions, particularly the Müssats, Nambi Brahmins, Kaḷari Panikkars, and the Nāyars.³ The article also briefly addresses the problem of purity and power in the rituals of the Śākta communities, the worshippers of Bālā, and comments on the ceremonies performed in their sacred groves (*kāvū*), which required the cooperation of various Tantric communities and ritual experts initiated into Śrīvidyā.

2. *Bālāvīmśati Stotra* and Its Commentaries

Bālāvīmśati stotra, a hymn ascribed to Laghu Bhaṭṭāraka, praises the goddess Bālā Tripurā and the powers of her mantra. The text is a *stotra*: an ornately embellished, vibrant poetic commentary on beliefs and religious practices. The *stotras* constitute a diverse body of poetic texts composed in Sanskrit and the regional languages of South Asia, interspersed with other genres and literary forms of the region.⁴ Commenting on Kashmirian literary traditions, Stainton (2019, p. 95) adds that *stotras* became “intersections for the rich religious and literary developments” and participated in “dynamic dialogue with other texts” as well as religious traditions and audiences. Stainton's remark is also true in the case of *Bālāvīmśati stotra*, a hymn alluding to ideas from Tantric and yogic textual traditions (see Appendices A and B).

In what follows, we attempt an interpretation of *Bālāvīmśati stotra* based on the Malayalam commentaries and oral reports of Keralan Tantrics. Sastri (1917) mentions that one of the oldest manuscripts of the *Bālāvīmśati* that he obtained from the Ettumanoor collection records the copying date of the work as Kollam year 861 (1685 C.E.). However, Sastri observes that the *stotra* has remained popular in Kerala since medieval times, having been recited at Śākta rites, critiqued by scholars, and chanted in temples. In this context, it is worth mentioning that in certain Brahmin families in the Kozhikode district, *Bālāvīmśati* is taught to young boys at the time of *upanayana saṃskāra*, a traditional rite of passage marked by the acceptance of the sacred thread. Moreover, the *stotra* is chanted in the temples of the region during the Navarātri festival, especially on its final day, which is called Vijayadaśamī.⁵ The *stotra* has 21 verses written in a Sanskrit metre, *śārdūlavikṛīḍita*. The metre consists of two-lined stanzas of 19 syllables (Vṛttaratnākara 2012), p. 119. Even today, the *stotra* is studied and recited in almost all Brahmin *illams* (houses) of Kerala, along with popular eulogies such as *Devī māhātmya* or *Lalita Sahasra nāma stotra*. Brahmins initiated in Śrīvidyā also learn how to meditate on the text to deepen their understanding of their religious tenets.

The author does not use the term Bālā in the text, and therefore the title “Bālāvīmśati” could have been added by later commentators. Another title by which the text is known, *Tripurāstotrāvīmśati*, can be translated as “Twenty Verses upon Goddess Tripurā”. It is also a title referenced by Keralan commentators Kaikkulangara and K Vasudevan Moos, while others like Kandiyur prefer to call it the *stotra Bālāvīmśati* (Namputiri 2016, p. 17). However, if this work is generally known by the name *Bālāvīmśati* or *Tripurāstotrāvīmśati* in Kerala, in other parts of India it has been called *Laghustuti*. For instance, Rāghavānanda, a disciple of Kṛṣṇānanda and the author of *Paramārthasāra*, calls it the *stotra Laghustuti* in his commentary. Conversely, a detailed commentary of a Parameśvara Ācārya, mentioned by Sastri in his edition of *Bālāvīmśati*, is known as *Laghubrimhaṇī*. Therefore, Sastri (Sastri 1917, preface) surmises that these two commentaries were probably composed by non-Keralan authors.

On the other hand, many manuscripts of *Bālāvīmśati*, which Ganapati Sastri mentions in his *editio princeps*, are in fact from Kerala and belong to these three local manuscript libraries:

1. Pantlialahi Raja.
2. Narayanan Moottatu, Ettumanoor.
3. Kilimanoor Palace.

In this study, we refer to the published editions of *Bālāvīmśati* and the Keralan commentaries of the text.

3. Laghu Bhaṭṭāraka, the Author of *Bālāvīmśati* and the Keralan Connection

Despite its popularity in Kerala, *Bālāvīmśati stotra* is often said to have been composed in Kashmir, where it was included in a collection known as *Pañcastavī*—a set of five eulogies: *Laghustuti*, *Ghaṭastuti*, *Carcāstuti*, *Ambāstuti*, and *Sakalajanāstuti*. These *stotras* are traditionally linked to spiritual practices (*upāya*) of Kashmiri Śaivism (Namputiri 2016, p. 7). The author of *Bālāvīmśati stotra* remains a mystery. Even if tradition calls him Laghu Bhaṭṭāraka, we do not know much about his life. Moreover, Bhaṭṭāraka is an honorific appellation often added to the names of Brahmins or kings. Therefore, even his name could be a pseudonym. The term *bhaṭṭa* was used as a generic name for Brahmin scholars from Kashmir. Similarly, the adjective *laghu* has several meanings in Sanskrit, including light, active, quick-witted, or light-hearted. Hence, it could be an epithet rather than the real name of the author, as suggested by Gopi (Gopi 1975).

According to the community legends, Bhaṭṭāraka is also a Keralan caste name to which the author belonged. According to Piṭārars' stories, the community of Bhaṭṭāras migrated into Kerala from Kashmir and established their temples there. They developed their own rituals and integrated Kashmiri Krama observances and Keralan religious beliefs (e.g., the worship of local Mother Goddesses). Legends say that they founded 13 temples in honour of the 13 Kālīs of the Krama tradition⁶. The temples, found in Central and Northern Kerala, remain important pilgrimage destinations for the modern Tantric adepts of Kerala (Figure 1). In time, the Bhaṭṭāras were called Piṭārakas and today they are known as the Piṭārars. Thus, for instance, modern Piṭārars of the Mannampurattukāvu temple recognize Laghu Bhaṭṭāraka as the first spiritual teacher in their long tradition of gurus. Other clans and communities, such as the Mūssats of Kozhikode, who are related to the Piṭārars, also mention legends about a Kashmirian sage teaching doctrines to their ancestors, but these legends are regrettably vague.⁷ Perikamana (Namputiri 2016, p. 8), a Keralan commentator of *Bālāvīmśati*, argues against the legends connecting Laghu Bhaṭṭāraka with Kerala and refers to a lack of historical records. Similarly, the authorship of *Pañcastavī* is not firmly established. Lakṣmīdhara in his commentary on *Saundarya Laharī*, refers to the author of *Pañcastavī* simply as *ācārya Kālidāsa*, a master who was a follower of the goddess Kālī. Similarly, several manuscripts of *Pañcastavī*, from a collection in the Kashmir Government Manuscript Library, give the author's name as Lāghava Ācārya. Other manuscripts and commentators ascribe the authorship of *Pañcastavī* to several different famous teachers and poets, including Ācārya Prithvīdhara (a disciple of Śaṃbhunātha, the guru of Abhinavagupta), Dharma Ācārya or Rāmacandra Ācārya (Gopi 1975, p. xvii).



Figure 1. Kaḷarivātukkal, a Śākta temple of the Piṭārars. Photo by Maciej Karasinski-Sroka.

4. Bālāviṃśati—Its Sanskrit and Malayalam Commentaries

A well-known Keralan commentary of *Bālāviṃśati* was written by Rāghavānanda and published by Ganapati Sastri in 1897. However, Sastri also refers to another voluminous commentary, *Laghubr̥mhaṇī*, by a Parameśvarācārya (Sastri 1917, preface). Many Keralan commentaries on *Bālāviṃśati* can be found in an intertextual dialogue with their contemporary philosophical and Tantric scriptures. Kaikkulangar Rama, in his study of the *Bālāviṃśati*, refers to a Sanskrit commentary titled *Sarvārthacintāmaṇi*, and a Malayalam commentary written by K. Vasudevan Moos. Perikaman refers to two obscure commentaries: *Kulacūḍāmaṇi* by an unknown author and an untitled commentary by an anonymous Jaina scholar (Namputiri 2016, p. 8). Three other Keralan scholars have also written commentaries of *Bālāviṃśati*: Kandiyyur Mahadeva Shasthrikal wrote *Bhāṣābhāṣyaṇi*, Kaikkulangara Ramavarier composed *Rahasyakalpataru*, and K. Vasudevan Moos wrote *Bālāpriyā*, a simple but lucid commentary aimed at uninitiated scholars.

In the present study, we attempt to interpret the *Bālāviṃśati stotra* with the help of the Keralan commentaries and reread it in the context of modern Tantric practices. By doing so, we intend to show a multifarious image of the Kerala Tantra. We would like to indicate how the beliefs encoded in the traditional chants and tantric texts have been enlivened by modern practitioners in their observances.

5. Interpretations of *Bālāviṃśati* in the Context of the Śākta Tradition

5.1. Stanzas 1–10: *Bālāviṃśati* and a Process of Decoding Mantras

The first verse of *Bālāviṃśati* describes the goddess Bālā and elaborates on the three syllables that encapsulate her powers: *aim kḷiṃ sauḷ*. Bālā, the text teaches, appears to shine with various colours to empower the adept. Thus, the author observes, if an adept chants the Bālā mantra, the syllables travel within their subtle body, energizing it. This process of a spiritual charging of the body should be controlled through specific meditations. Hence, an adept is instructed to first move their awareness to the crown of the head (*sahasrāra*) and meditate on the goddess shining with cool, whitish rays like the rays of the moon. Afterwards, the adept should focus on the third eye (*ājñā cakra*) and contemplate the goddess shining with the brightness of “Indra’s bow”, that is, the rainbow. Finally, the adept should bring their awareness to their heart (*anāhata cakra*) and imagine the goddess emanating the rays of the Sun.⁸

The Keralan commentaries of *Bālāvīṃśati* explain the importance of this visualization and ascribe the method of meditation to a specific tradition. Kaikkulangara Ramavarier (Namputiri 2016, p. 83) notes that the three points of meditation (*sahasrāra*, *ājñā*, and *anāhata*) are specifically used by, what he calls, the Avadhivādin tradition of Bālā worship. Ramavarier refers to an obscure text of an unknown author titled *Śaivāgamarahasya*, which divides the mode of worship of Bālā Tripura into two sub-traditions: Avadhivādin and Adhiṣṭhānavādin. While the Avadhivādin tradition insists that one should start the meditation by concentrating on the *sahasrāra*, the Adhiṣṭhānavādins first focus on their lower *cakras*: the goddess is first visualized in the *mūlādhāra cakra* then in the *anāhata cakra* and afterwards in the *ājñā cakra*). Hence, Kaikkulangara Ramavarier concludes that the author of the *stotra*, Laghubhattāraka, belonged to the Avadhivādin sect, like the Piṭārakas.

The value of the Bālā Tripurā mantra is further explained in the *stotra*: the second and third verses discuss the powers of its first syllable, *aiṃ*. The text teaches that the internal spiritual energy, *kuṇḍalinī śakti*, resides in the four-petalled lotus of the *mūlādhāra cakra* of the human body. *Kuṇḍalinī* is compared here to the tendril of a cucumber plant. The text explains that the syllable *aiṃ* may activate *kuṇḍalinī*. One should therefore chant *aiṃ* and visualize the internal spiritual energy as a viny tendril that grows with every repetition of the mantra. Similarly, the commentary of Shasthrigal says that the four petals of the *mūlādhāra* lotus hiding the *kuṇḍalinī* can be energized simply by chanting the diphthong “ai”, as in the syllable “aim” (Namputiri 2016, p. 26). According to the Sanskrit grammar rules, the “ai” sound is formed by a combination of two vowels: “a” and “e” (*Aṣṭādhyāyī* 6.1.88). Shasthrigal indicates that, according to Tantric belief, the vowel “a” stands for *ādhāraśakti*, the *kuṇḍalinī* “asleep” in *mūlādhāra cakra*. Thus, by chanting this phoneme in a prescribed manner, adepts can realize the power of *kuṇḍalinī* within their bodies. The commentator explains that the remaining component of *aim* is “e”, a vowel which, according to the grammatical rules of Sanskrit, is composed from “a” and “i” (*ādguṇaḥ*; *Aṣṭādhyāyī* 6.1.87). Moreover, the Sanskrit vowels can be long or short, and therefore “a” here stands for both “a” and “ā” and “i” represents “i” but also “ī”. Collectively, these four vowels are to be identified with the four petals of the lotus of the *mūlādhāra cakra*. Hence, the chanting of vowels supposedly resonates with the subtle energies of the *cakra*, represented as lotus petals.

In verse 3, the author proclaims that the *Bālā* mantra has enormous powers and, even if misarticulated, can bring about powerful effects. Thus, the *stotra* reveals, if one chants the syllable *aiṃ* without its final nasal sound (*anusvara*, ṃ), or if one chants only “ai”, they may still receive the blessing (Malayalam: *anugrahaṃ*) of Bālā. This statement is later supported by another claim that even if one mispronounced the syllable but chanted it with devotion, they would surely be granted all their wishes. The text implies the superiority of *bhakti* (devotion) over perfect pronunciation or mastery of the Tantric technicalities.⁹ Shasthrigal’s commentary (Namputiri 2016, p. 28) corroborates this claim with a myth from *Devībhāgavata* about Satyavrata—a foolish Brahmin who moved to a forest to do his penance. Once, when he was trying to meditate, he saw a hunter killing a wild boar. Terrified by the violent scene, he screamed “ai, ai!” and was instantly transformed into an eminent scholar.

The fourth verse of *Bālāvīṃśati* details the powers of the second syllable (*bīja*) of the mantra, that is, *klīṃ*. The text explains that *klīṃ*, known by the name *kāmarāja* (the one that fulfils all desires), consists of three phonetic units: “k”, “l” and “īṃ”. *Bālāvīṃśati* suggests that the sound “īṃ”, even without the “k” and “l”, is as powerful as the holy syllable *Om*. Commenting on this statement, a Keralan scholar, P. A. Shankaran Nampoothiri (Nampoothiri 1991, p. 24), quotes a verse from *Yajurveda* that tells a story of Brahmins chanting the mantra “īṃ” on the day of a new moon. Nampoothiri concludes that the *klīṃ* mantra must therefore derive from the Vedic tradition. Finally, the fifth verse of *Bālāvīṃśati* discusses the third syllable, *sauḥ*, which can be divided into two components: “s” and “auḥ”. In the Keralan commentaries, there is a poetic verse explaining that the “auḥ” phoneme should be imagined as a submarine fire which can evaporate the vast waters of

human ignorance (Namputiri 2016, p. 112; Moos 1961, p. 14). Furthermore, *Bālāviṃśati* affirms that there are different methods of reciting the Bālā mantra and, since devotional piety is the key, they are all equal. Hence, the mantra can be recited with or without vowels, nasal sounds, or aspiration (*visarga*). Apparently, the mantra can also be chanted without consonants, with syllables joined together or separated, or even in reverse order. This ostensibly exaggerated claim is seemingly an attempt to praise the inherent powers of the mantra. This thesis is elaborated in the commentary of Rāghavānanda (Sastri 1917, p. 15), who adds that the mantra can be recited with or without giving due regard to ṛṣis (sages), *chandas* (metre), *devatās* (gods) and *gurupāduka* (the feet of gurus). This statement refers to a long-standing tradition according to which mantras have the above-mentioned three identifiers. The mantra is ascribed to a particular deity or spiritual being and has a distinguishable metre and a patron—a sage who received the mantra in meditation or by supernatural means (Hanneder 1997). These elements, according to the commentary, can again be omitted, and the traditional rules of recitation changed accordingly. A similar remark is found in a Śrīvidyā text, *Varivasyārahasya*, of Bhāskararāya. There, the author states that the names of sages, the metre, and the names of deities and other technicalities of recitation are indeed only the “external limbs” of the spiritual practice (*Varivasyārahasya* 2000, 2.160, p. 123). Rāghavānanda concludes that mantra can be recited by devotees regardless of their gender and caste (Sastri 1917, p. 15).

From the seventh verse onward, *Bālāviṃśati* deliberates on various visualizations of the goddess Bālā. The author mentions her many perfections and states that one cannot attain poethood without meditating on the goddess who shines like fresh camphor and jasmine flowers. Hence, if one intends to become a poet, they should meditate and visualize the goddess as gazing with her beautiful eyes that are like fully ripened lotus petals. The goddess holds in her left hand a sacred scripture (*grantha*) and shows *abhaya-mudrā*, a gesture of fearlessness. In one of her right hands, she holds a garland of crystals, and her other right hand shows *varada-mudrā*, a gesture of dispensing boons. Shastrigal also warns that this visualization of the goddess is essential for those who attempt to chant her mantra (Namputiri 2016, pp. 16, 37).¹⁰ These verses on meditation segue into the next, which give other images of the goddess—the visual representations of the mantra’s syllables. Curiously, in the next stanzas (verses 8–10), the syllables of the mantra are given in reverse order. Thus, in the eighth verse, the text elaborates on the third syllable, that is, “sauḥ”, which is called *śakti bīja*, a power-seed syllable. Shastrigal (Namputiri 2016, p. 38) explains that the poetic stanzas of *Bālāviṃśati* are codified instructions for mantric chanting. The reverse order of the syllables refers to the popular practice in Kerala of chanting the mantra as a six-syllable formula, that is, consisting of three syllables in the normal order and three pronounced backwards. This practice is generally considered more auspicious as it removes possible faults and curses of the mantra (*mantradoṣa*). The method of visualization requires one to focus on the highest *cakra*. Therefore, according to the commentators, the author again confirms his adherence to the Avadhivādin tradition.

Bālāviṃśati also teaches another method of meditation on the goddess, a patron of the syllable *klīm*. The goddess invoked with this syllable should be imagined as residing in the adept’s *mūlādhara cakra*, the lowest energy centre. She should be holding an arrow and showing gestures of *abhaya* and *varada*. Her complexion is reddish-like vermilion, which radiates from her body and fills the sky around her (Namputiri 2016, p. 127). One can argue here that this picture is a symbolic representation of *kuṇḍalinī*. The vibrant red colour symbolizes the power of the *kuṇḍalinī śakti*, which stays curled in the lower *cakra*, but once awakened, flows upwards, piercing and activating other energy centres. The arrow of the goddess can therefore be interpreted as the symbol of the activation of *kuṇḍalinī*. Arguably, *abhayamudrā* may refer to the fearlessness of the adept, a prerequisite for a spiritual quest. The text also refers to the *varada mudrā*—the wish-fulfilling gesture—by stating that the mantra practice will grant all wishes and make a person attractive to the opposite sex. Finally, in the tenth verse, the text discusses the syllable *aiṃ*, known as the Vāgbhava or Sarasvatī syllable, the mantra of the power of speech. Meditating on this syllable, one

should imagine the goddess as adorned with golden bangles, studs, shoulder bracelets, a waist chain, and a garland of lotus flowers. According to a commentary of Kaikkulangara Ramavarier, the goddess should be visualized as a beautiful woman sitting in the adept's heart. She is holding a noose (*pāśa*) and a goad (*aṅkuśa*) and showing *abhaya* and *varada* gestures.¹¹

The text further elaborates on meditative techniques and in verse 11 there is a visualization that should be correlated with the chanting of the “īṃ” part of the *klīṃ* syllable. The goddess, a patron of “īṃ”, holds a noose, a goad, flowers, and a sugar cane. She is sitting in a yogic posture (*āsana*) called Ārbhaṭikā, which is interpreted by Rāghavānanda as a sitting *āsana*, with one thigh placed over the other. The name of this *āsana*, is not found in known Haṭha yoga treatises, and curiously, its name is derived by the commentator from a Kanarese verb Ārbhaṭa, which means to cry aloud.¹² Nevertheless, in *Nāṭyaśāstra* (1934, p. 87), there is also a reference to Ārabhaṭī vṛtti, a form of acting that is energetic and which includes presentations of tough, warrior-like characters. Hence, if we accept Ārbhaṭikā as a variant reading of Ārabhaṭī, the Ārbhaṭikā āsana may be interpreted as the seating posture of a warrior or a distinguished person. According to Keralan traditional explanations and customs, sitting with one thigh placed upon the other is a sign of superiority, which means that children and women are not allowed to sit in this pose in public. Thus, the goddess, by sitting in the Ārbhaṭi āsana, boldly shows her prominent position. Moreover, the goddess is visualized as sitting upon the corpse (*pretāsana*) of Paramaśiva, who himself lies upon the serpent Vāsuki. This visualization is again reminiscent of popular adages about *kuṇḍalinī śakti*: the human body without this spiritual energy is believed to be dead (*preta* or *śava*).¹³

5.2. Stanzas 11–15: *Bālāviṃśati* and the Keralan Śākta Tradition of *Valāyanāṭukāvu*

The many visualizations and meditative couplets found in *Bālāviṃśati* are of vital importance to the religious life of Śākta communities in Kerala. For instance, the 11th verse of *Bālāviṃśati* is one of *dhyāna śloka*s (prayers of invocation) chanted to invoke the goddess in *Valāyanāṭu kāvu*, one of the Śākta temples located on the outskirts of Kozhikode city (Krishnanunni 2014, p. 13). The previously mentioned legends include:

Valāyanāṭu kāvu is in the list of 13 temples of the Bhaṭṭarakas.¹⁴ Since the 14th century C.E., the *Valāyanāṭu* temple and its surrounding groves (*kāvu*) were patronised by the royal dynasty of the Zamorins (Sāmūdiri).¹⁵ As per legend, a Zamorin king was instructed by a local goddess to build a temple at the place (*nāṭu*) where her anklet (*vaḷa*) had been found. The temple today is still an important centre for the descendants of the royal house of Kozhikode, Samuthiri Kovilakam, and a Śākta Brahmin family—the Mūssats.

The Mūssats, like the Piṭārars, introduce themselves as followers of the Kashmirian Krama system of Kālī, as well as adepts of Śrīvidyā. As mentioned in several studies on the Tantric traditions of Kerala, Śrīvidyā influenced many Śākta family traditions that flourished in Kerala and can be regarded as a linkage between them. The term Śakteya is frequently used in Malayalam as the name for local Śākta families, such as the Mūssats, and their rites, which include offerings of meat, fish, and alcohol (Karasinski 2020).¹⁶

The main authority of the Śākta temple worship is vested upon the senior member of the clan called Mūṭta Piṭārar. It is said that Mūṭta Piṭārar receives the highest initiation called *adhidīkṣā*, which is supposed to bestow upon him the secret teachings of Śrīvidyā. Other members of Śākta clans receive *mantra-dīkṣā*, that is, the mantra of Bālā Tripurā, which grants access to the inner circle of believers. Praising the importance of the mantra, some believers refer to the 15th verse of *Bālā viṃśati* which presents the Bālā Tripurā goddess as the mother of all sounds and mantras, and as the origin of the universe.¹⁷ As with sounds, all the beings, including great gods like Brahma or Viṣṇu, originate from her and dissolve in her at the end of time. She is, therefore, the beginning and the end of everything.

The Keralan goddess of Śakteya traditions has many manifestations. Hence, even though the priests of *Valāyanāṭu kāvu* praise her with Bālā Tripurā invocations, she is also venerated in the same community as a warrior in her solitary fight against a demon called

Ruru. So-called *Rurujitvidhāna*, the worship of the goddess in her form of a warrior who vanquished the demon, is a distinctive feature of the temple ritualism. The warrior goddess is imagined wearing a garland made of the heads of demons; she holds in her hands a shield (*kheda*), a skull (*kapāla*), a snake (*pannaga*), a bell (*mahāghaṇṭā*), the head of the demon, a staff with a skull at the top (*khadvāṅga*), a trident (*triśikhā*), and a sword (*khadga*) (Sarma 2015, p. 556). The fierce goddess residing in the holy grove is also called Bhairavī and for some Śrīvidyā adepts, she is Tripurabhairavī, the frightening incarnation of the Tripurā goddess. For many local devotees who go each day to pray in Vaḷayanāṭu kāvu, she is simply “amma” (mother or goddess), a compassionate mother and protector of the land. The temple ritualism of the Vaḷayanāṭu kāvu also includes the rites of Tantra of Keralan Brahmins derived from the popular treatises: *Tantrasamuccaya* and *Śeṣasamuccaya*.¹⁸ The various layers of the ritual practice are visible in both public (temple) and private forms of worship in Vaḷayanāṭu kāvu. The private worship of the Śākta families and the secret rites performed in their temples are rooted in Krama and Śrīvidyā orthopraxy. One should remember that Krama and Tripurā cults have always been closely connected through their scriptural traditions.¹⁹ The connections between Krama and Śrīvidyā receive additional meaning in Kerala, where the Piṭārar and Mūssats²⁰ combine mantras and ritualistic practices of both systems. The worship of sequences (*krama*) of the Kālīs was evident in the earliest strata of their ritualism, but the cult gradually changed its original character: complex rituals were simplified, and the adoration of *navayoni cakra* was introduced.²¹ Nevertheless, the Mūssat family refers to their tradition by several names, such as Raudra (the Fierce [tradition]), Kaula and Mahārtha (The Great Aim). We would suggest that the authority of the Mūssat family relies on three factors: (1) the importance of their Brahmin tradition; (2) the Kashmirian Śaiva roots; and (3) the knowledge of Śrīvidyā and expertise in mantras. Interestingly, the family also legitimizes its practices as well as its religious and social power through its possession of a considerable body of manuscripts pertaining to all the above-mentioned traditions. The priests of the family also point to *Śeṣasamuccaya* as another source of their *Rurujitvidhāna*. In this respect, *Śeṣasamuccaya* insists that the Rurujit goddess is in fact Kālī in her form of Bhadrakālī. Coincidentally, a formula often used to invoke Bhadrakālī in Keralan Brahmanical traditions also consists of the Bālā mantra: *aim klīm sauḥ hrīm bhadrakālyai namaḥ*.

5.3. The Mūssats' Tradition: Bālāvimśati, Śrīcakra and Rites of Power

Moreover, certain aspects of Śrīvidyā iconography can be found in the Vaḷayanāṭu kāvu temple. In the *sanctum sanctorum* are granite representations of seven mother goddesses and an ancient *śrīcakra* (Jayashanker 2008, pp. 245–46). According to the priests, the *śrīcakra* of Vaḷayanāṭu kāvu was engraved by a Śaiva saint, Śivayogi Tayyāvūr Śivaśaṅkar. Tradition says that the act of consecrating the *śrīcakra* also marked a change in the ritualism of the Mūssat community. According to local legend, the ancestors of modern Mūssats lived in the Western Kozhikode known by the name Poḷanāṭu, which was ruled by the Porḷātiri dynasty.²² Traditionally, Mūssats, loyal to the Porḷātiri kings, served as the *ūrālar* (trustees and administrators)²³ of the Tali Mahākṣetraṃ, one of the oldest Śiva temples of Kozhikode. When, in the 14th century C.E., a Zamorin king tried to conquer Poḷanāṭu, his army killed the Mūssats who resided in the temple.²⁴ The massacre happened near the western gate of the temple, which in modern times remains closed in remembrance of those who were murdered. According to the tradition, a Śaiva priest Kokkunnattu Śivāñṇal²⁵ persuaded the Zamorins to repent for the bloodshed and the desecration of the Tali Temple. Hence, the Zamorins, after claiming the whole of Kozhikode, decided to organize a literary competition, the Rēvati paṭṭattānam (Figure 2), which gathered scholars, literati, and poets from across Kerala and soon became a major annual event.²⁶ Moreover, as another act of repentance, the Zamorins appointed the Mūssats as priestly assistants to the Tali Temple.²⁷ Some devotees from Kozhikode argue that the consecration of *śrīcakra* in Vaḷayanāṭu kāvu temple, which happened afterwards, marked a change in the Mūssat tradition, which from

that time onwards became more Śrīvidyā-oriented. Certain Śākta rites are performed in secrecy in the household of the Müssat family and *Mahārtha pūjā* (a śākta rite with meat and alcohol offerings to the goddess Kālī) is conducted at midday in the inner precincts of the temple. However, at the time of the annual festival, the midday rites are conducted at the Müssat household, and temple rituals are performed by the Nampūtiri Brahmins of Cennas illam who are also the main priests of the Tali Temple. Another symbolic act is performed during the festival: a sword (the legendary weapon dedicated to the goddess) is taken from the Tali Temple of Kozhikode and ceremonially transported to the Vaḷayanāṭu. Hence, one may suggest that there is a particular interplay between the rites performed by Nampūtiri Brahmins and Müssats and perhaps a power play between the two Brahmin traditions.



Figure 2. A Vedic scholar receives an award from the Zamorin of Calicut at the Rēvati paṭṭattānam (2020). Photo by G. Sudev Sharman.

The annual event includes rites of purification conducted by the Nampūtiris and “rites of power” (Śākta-Kaula offerings of meat and alcohol performed according to the Müssats tradition). This is important, as *Bālāviṃśati*, in the 14th verse, discusses the different methods of worshipping the goddess employed by people of different castes. *Bālāviṃśati* says that Brahmins give milk, kings satiate the goddess with ghee, merchants offer honey, and others make an offering with liquor. The text assures the readers that whatever they pray for will be instantly granted. Rāghavananda comments that Brahmins can use ghee if milk is unavailable, and honey if neither milk nor ghee can be found. Finally, liquor can be offered if none of the other substances are available.²⁸ If liquor cannot be found, one can offer *gandhodaka* (perfumed water).

K Vasudevan Moos (Moos 1961) observes, in his commentary, that every person, regardless of caste or creed, is eligible to worship the goddess. Nevertheless, the modern Müssats introduce themselves as Brahmins and defend the “impurity” of their ritual offerings (e.g., wine) by calling themselves Śākta Brahmins. Similarly, in his commentary on *Bālāviṃśati*, Moos (1961, p. 30) explains that people may use various tools and give different offerings, but they all will surely benefit from the worship of the Bālā goddess and from chanting her name. In the Keralan context, Moos’ statement has an additional undertone. In contemporary Kerala, Tantric paths are generally considered open to all.²⁹ On the other hand, secret mantras and special rites of passage are traditionally performed only by members of a given family. Hence, for instance, while a potential adept (*sādhaka*) may choose a guru according to their preference, a member of a particular Tantric clan may be required to undergo Bālā initiation and perform rituals for her in a traditional manner (e.g., *kaula*), as a part of their family tradition.

The question of eligibility for Bālā worship is also raised in a protective chant, *Bālā kavaca*, found in a manuscript collection of Chattangottupuram Kaḷari Panikkars (Figure 3). According to the members of the family, the *kavaca* was formerly chanted by the ancestors of the clan. Their complex rituals, like the ceremonies of the Mūssats, have been simplified in modern times, and the chant is no longer used ritually. On the other hand, another clan of Panikkars, Areekkulangara Kaḷari Panikkars of Kozhikode, continues to perform Śākta rituals for the Bālā goddess in their family *kaḷaris* (traditional martial arts centers) and praise her with chants at their monthly ceremonies. Areekkulangara Kaḷari Panikkars recite *Bālā kavaca* as well as *Bālāviṃśati* and *Devīmāhātmyam* during their ceremonies. *Bālā kavaca* proclaimed that various castes and communities may benefit from worship of Bālā. The text implies that it is necessary for a Brahmin to chant the *kavaca* to gain all knowledge and protection. The Kṣatriyas³⁰, if they repeat the *kavaca*, will receive many kingdoms, and the Vaiśya³¹ may multiply their goods and become prosperous. The text says that even Śūdras, the lowest of the four social classes of ancient India, would benefit greatly from chanting the *kavaca*. *Bālā kavaca* also explains that multiple recitations may bring even more prosperity. This is again confirmed in verses 12 and 13 of *Bālāviṃśati*. There, the text highlights the powers of the Bālā mantra by recalling a story of Śrīvatsa, a king who was born in poverty and, with the blessing of the goddess, became the ruler of the whole world. Thus, the text continues, all hardships that one may need to endure while serving the goddess in this life will lead to a better birth, and in their next incarnations, those diligent devotees will be born with auspicious signs on their hands. They become emperors of the world, praised by entourages of Vidyādharas. Rāghavānanda describes the Vidyādharas as those who possess knowledge of the Vedas. Hence, the commentator concludes, *Bālāviṃśati* implies that the followers of Bālā Tripurā will become powerful leaders, scholars, and masters of all branches of knowledge (Sastri 1917, p. 24).³² The reference to the Vedas is also of importance here—many Tantric families in Kerala are in fact Brahmins (e.g., the Mūssats) educated in Sanskrit and Vedic literature. However, in their tradition, Tantric lore is seen as complementary (rather than as contradictory) to the Vedas.³³



Figure 3. A traditional *kaḷari* of the Panikkars. Photo by G. Sudev Sharman.

5.4. Stanzas 16–20: The Name Tripurā and Nāmapārāyaṇa Upāsana

The worship of Tripurasundarī has been described as tripartite, that is, centred on *pūjā* (ritual), mantra (chanting), and *cakra* (meditation on the sacred diagram). These three types of worship correspond to the three forms of the goddess, which are her physical form (*sthūlarūpa*) represented in anthropomorphic images, her subtle (*sūkṣma*) or mantra form,

and her transcendent, supreme (*parā*) form (Lidke 2017, p. 15). In a similar fashion, in the 16th verse of *Bālāvimśati stotra*, the author provides an etymology of the word Tripurā. The text refers to threefold divisions and triads of Indian philosophy and mythology. Thus, she embodies and gives her name to three worlds, three lines of sacred *gāyatrī* chant, sacred thread, and even the three Vedas. According to the commentary of Rāghavānanda (Sastri 1917, p. 34), the triple entities and principles found in the world create the *aparā* (inferior) form of the goddess. She transcends all of those in her supreme form (*para*) that encompasses everything.³⁴ Similarly, Shasthrigal (Namputiri 2016, p. 54) states that it is not only the name of the goddess that refers to the three worlds, but anything that can be divided into three is her abode (*trīṇi purāṇi yasyāḥ sā*).

However, *Bālāvimśati stotra* indicates that the goddess manifests herself in various forms and under many names. The 17th verse states that to obtain the best results, one should choose a name depending on the situation or place of worship. Hence, the text prescribes people to worship her as Lakṣmī in the royal house but to invoke her as Jayā in times of war. She should be called Kṣemaṅkarī by a wanderer following lonely tracks but addressed as Śabarī when attacked by wild beasts or serpents. A hiker in the mountains should call her Durgā and pray to her in her form of Bhairavī when accosted by ghosts and demons.³⁵ If in danger amidst water, one should call her Tārā. Nevertheless, when unsure, one should simply call her Tripurā.³⁶ This verse again reminds us of one of the complexities of Tantric worship that we could observe in the Vaḷayanāṭu Temple. There, the goddess was invoked with *Bālāvimśati stotra* and mantras of Śrīvidyā and Krama but imagined in her various guises, for instance, as the solitary heroine fighting with demons. Shasthrigal confirms these statements in his commentary and adds that when Tripurā is imagined as a 9-year-old girl, she is Bālā; in the form of a 15-year-old girl, she is Śrīvidyā; and when she is visualized as a 16-year-old girl, she is Ṣoḍaśī or Mahāṣoḍaśī (Namputiri 2016, p. 57). It is worth noting that a synonym of Bālā, Kumārī, is found in verse 18, and in fact, the word Bālā is never stated in the text except in the title. Moreover, the 18th verse gives other names of the goddess. However, according to the commentators, they refer to various mantric syllables used in the Tantric practice. Consequently, the 19th verse explains the principles of *mantroddhāra* (creation of mantras) and states that there are 20,000 combinations of vowels and consonants that form the various names of Tripurā.

The two Keralan commentators, Kaikkulangara Ramavarier and K. Vasudevan Moos, elaborate on the rules of these phonetic transformations. They observe that 16 vowels (*svara*) of the Sanskrit alphabet can be combined with 35 consonants (*vyañjana*), creating a total of 560 combinations. These 560 combinations can, in turn, be joined with consonants to create 19,600 new mantras.³⁷ Finally, by adding vowels to the 19,600 phonetic combinations, one can create 20,160 names of the goddess. Concluding this elaborate derivation, the commentators agree that the title of the *stotra* is an apt one because an initiated practitioner may derive 20,000 names of the goddess from the 20 verses of the text. The process of derivation, the construction of the mantras, and the subsequent chanting of them in a prescribed manner is considered a spiritual practice (*upāsana*) known as *nāmapārāyaṇa upāsana* (Namputiri 2016).

The last verse of *Bālā vimśati* proclaims that an initiated devotee and a scholar of mantras should deconstruct the first verse of the *stotra* and derive the Bālā mantra from it. In the Tantric tradition, the mantra cannot be studied from a text but should be given by a guru. Therefore, those who have already realized the potency of the mantra will benefit from chanting the *stotra*, finding the many names of the goddess and her multiple powers within each of the *Bālā vimśati*'s verses. The final verse of the *stotra* also contains the author's apology for possible mistakes and omissions that might be found in the poem. The author hopes that these errors may be forgiven as the text is filled with his devotion and therefore communicates spiritual matters that are more important than linguistic accuracy. This statement is analyzed by Rāghavānanda who indicates its "lightness" (*laghutva*) in contrast with the serious theme of the *stotra*. Consequently, Rāghavānanda calls the author

Laghubhaṭṭāraka and points to the quality of the text itself, which employs various *rasas* (sentiments) and *alaṅkāras* (poetic ornaments) combined in a superb and flawless manner.

6. Bālādīkṣāpaddhati and the Transmission of the Bālā Mantra

6.1. Bālāviṃśati stotra and Bālādīkṣāpaddhati—Mapping Śrīvidyā onto the Keralan Cultural Landscape

The reading of *Bālāviṃśati* through the above-mentioned Sanskrit and Malayalam commentaries shows how the Bālā mantra and her cult were encoded in the local cultural matrix. In the second part of our paper, we would like to focus on the transmission of the mantra as an act of perpetuating the tradition and an act of empowerment. The two texts discussed here seem complementary: while the *Bālādīkṣāpaddhati* instructs how to impart the mantra, the *Bālāviṃśati* explains the purpose of its chanting and decodes its deeper layers of meaning.

Berliner and Sarró (2007, p. 10) indicate two modes of religious transmission: a transmission of religious practice through a frequently repeated, standardized form that relies on explicit verbal knowledge stored in semantic memory (sermon type), and the imagistic mode that includes initiations and involves highly emotional arousal that activates episodic or flashbulb memories. In the context of Tantric rites, *dīkṣā*, a ritual of initiation, is an example of the second mode, and, according to belief, it enables an adept to participate in ritual acts of a tradition and helps them to attain liberation. The theme *dīkṣā* is not new to the academic study of Tantric traditions. Tantric traditions have always promised liberation from the suffering of life through rites of initiation by a guru, a liberated master. According to Tantric traditions, mantras are not to be chanted without initiation, and the practice of mantra after initiation leads an adept towards union with the divine and, in some cases, induces states of ecstatic or religious bliss (Urban 1997, p. 11). In the act of transmitting the mantra from guru to adept, the mantra is given together with a *mantra-vīrya*, the energy (*śakti*) of the enlightened consciousness of the teacher (Müller-Ortega 1989, p. 83). In many traditions of Śākta Tantra, adepts are empowered with goddesses' mantras, and a process of initiation (*dīkṣā*) involves a *Śaktipāta*, the awakening of *śakti* within practitioners' bodies (Caldwell 2001).

The initiations involve a drastic reconfiguration of one's life aims, forsaking previous identities and gaining a new status within a religious community. In some cases, a *dīkṣā* requires an adept to leave the ordinary lifestyle or even "travel" to other spiritual worlds, receive blessing from the guardians of the tradition, and prove their worth by surviving trials. Tantric gurus often indicate the secretive nature of Śākta Tantric initiatory rituals that are conducted within the hermetic circles called "families" (*kula*). Indeed, in Kerala, a Tantric community is often either a particular clan or family-like group, with a guru being a spiritual parent and senior adepts playing the roles of elder siblings and helpers. Tantric groups, like many secret societies, forged their identities based on the concept of secret revelation that is available only to the members of the tradition who are on a quest towards spiritual upliftment. The initiations mark the adepts' path towards liberation in life (*jīvanmukti*) or for supernatural powers (Wallis 2008).

Initiations play a crucial role in the Tantric traditions of Kerala but are rarely discussed in the textual sources. Sarma observes that while some early Tantric ritual manuals of Kerala (e.g., *Prayogamañjarī*)³⁸ explain the rules of initiation, later ones either omit the subject of *dīkṣā* or discuss it briefly, giving it less importance than the previous texts (Karasinski 2020). In time³⁹, the complex rites of initiation were replaced in the texts with a simple transmission of the mantra (*mantra-dīkṣā*) or consecrations (*abhiṣeka*). This is especially true in the case of *Tantrasamuccaya* and other ritual manuals that deal with temple rituals and are designed for priests officiating in the temples (Sarma 2010). In contemporary times, the living Śākta traditions of Kerala initiations are vital—they allow an adept to enter a community of practitioners and to assume a new identity and spiritual guidance. The rules of these initiations are also found in a few obscure Tantric texts that belong to certain Brahmin families or Śākta communities. In the case of *dīkṣā* of the Bālā mantra, the first

initiation of the Śrīvidyā tradition, its procedure differs from one guru-lineage to another. In this study, we present a succinct manual *Bālādīkṣāpaddhati* and compare the methods of initiation found therein with those revealed by modern gurus of Kerala.

6.2. *Bālādīkṣāpaddhati: The Rules of Initiation*

The text of *Bālādīkṣāpaddhati* was found in the collection of P. Gopalakrishna Nambi from Chalappuram. The manuscript itself is a transcript copied by Ramachandra Sharma, a Brahmin who resided in the so-called Cākyār maṭham (literally: a property of the Cākyārs), a religious centre built by the authorities of the Tali Temple of Kozhikode. The Tali Temple has remained an important spiritual centre of Kozhikode and has organized various artistic festivals and literary traditions.⁴⁰ The Cākyār maṭham (was used by the Cākyārs, a caste of storytellers and bards who were often invited to temple festivals to recite the ancient legends.⁴¹ After the time of prosperity, the Cākyārs' property was bought by Tamil Brahmins, who turned it into a library and a study. One of them, Ramachandra Sharma, resided in the maṭham in the 1920s and devoted his time to transcribing palm-leaf manuscripts related to rituals, poetry, and Tantric studies.

In the 1970s, after the death of Ramachandra Sharma, his successors donated his rare collection of transcripts to their neighbour P. Gopalakrishna Nambi, an academician and a Sanskrit scholar well versed in Tantra and astrology. In his transcript of *Bālādīkṣāpaddhati*, Ramachandra Sharma indicated that the original manuscript contained more than one text: it opens with *Bālādīkṣāpaddhati* and continues with Sanskrit commentary on the mantras of various Hindu goddesses (Vāgvādinī, Rājamātāngī, Bahalā and Vārāhī). It includes a short Sanskrit chant, *Svayamvarakavaca* (a chant for the protection of marriage), and a long treatise on *Mantraśāstra* (magical incantations) written in the Malayalam language.

The *Bālādīkṣāpaddhati* prescribes an initiation into the ritual system of the Bālā goddess for deserving adepts (*adhikārins*). Having selected an adept for initiation, the guru should go to a temple or sacred ground and make offerings to the goddess in Bālā *cakra*. The *cakra*, drawn on the ground, should have a central point (*bindu*) surrounded by a triangle, a six-angled figure, a circle, and a square. Inside the diagram, a guru should cast a handful of paddy rice and, above it, place a decorated vessel that must also be perfumed, filled with water, and enveloped with a newly prepared piece of cloth. The guru should place a leaf of the mango or coconut tree, a holy image, and gems into a jar decorated with flowers. The text cautions that the guru should perform the ritual only on an auspicious day and gives astrological requirements for the day of initiation.

The next step prescribed by the text is the *kalaśapūjā* or “honouring of the vessel”. The guru should make a vow to perform the *kalaśapūjā* by saying: “I will perform a rite of the vessel for the Bālā goddess as stated in the manual of Bālā, the highest goddess”.⁴² The guru must then make another vow to honour the vessel and a conch used in the ritual. After giving offerings of perfumes, flowers, and unhusked rice (*akṣata*), the guru visualizes Bālā sitting in the lotus of their heart. Next, by performing *prāṇāyāma* (breathing in through the right nostril), the guru imagines the goddess in the vessel, visualizing therein her limbs (*aṅgas*), weapons, and her divine entourage. Then, the guru chants the main mantra of Bālā composed of six syllables,⁴³ and by doing so, invokes the goddess into the vessel. The mantra is also mentioned in the text as pure wisdom (*Śuddha-vidyā*), as she represents pure consciousness. The invoked goddess is then treated like a guest, and the guru addresses her with the following words that correspond to polite requests given to a special visitor:

Avahitā bhava—please come here

Samsthāpitā bhava—please be seated

Sanniruddhā bhava—please come and listen (literally: allow me to command you)

Summukhī bhava—grace me with your look (literally: please face me)

Suprasannā bhava—be serene

Varadā bhava—grant my wishes

The guru summons the deity through a combination of mantras, visualizations, and specific *mudrās*, ritual gestures. Once the deity is visualized as appearing and taking her seat at the designated spot, the guru invites her to stay and listen to the prayers. He then performs a *prāṇa pratiṣṭhā*, a rite of consecration in which the vital force (*prāṇa*) of the deity is invoked into the said vessel. This ritual is done with the following mantra: “Let the *prāṇa* of Bālā descend into this vessel and stay pleasantly and long”.⁴⁴ One should then, according to the text, honour the seat with 16 services (*upacāras*). The *upacāras* differ from tradition to tradition but usually include: invocation (*āvāhana*), the offering of a seat (*āsana*); water for washing the feet (*pādyā*); the offering of water admixed with several ingredients (like sandalwood paste or raw rice grains: *akṣata*) to honour the guest (*arghya*); water for sipping (*ācamanīya*); sweet light food (*madhuparka*), usually a mixture of honey and clarified butter; bath (*snāna*); clothes (*vastra*); ornaments (*bhūṣaṇa*); perfumes or fragrances (*gandha* or *candana*); flowers (*puṣpa*); incense (*dhūpa*); light (*dīpa*); food (*naivedya*); sometimes water is given again to rinse the mouth and hands (*punar acamana*); finally, prostrations (*praṇāma*) or circumambulations (*pradakṣiṇā*) are performed. Sometimes, the ritual includes offering flowers and mantras (*mantrapuṣpāñjali*) or betel leaves and betel nuts (*tāmūla*) before the formal act of farewell (*visarjana*) (Bühnemann 1988, pp. 102–3).

As observed by Bühnemann (1988, p. 137), the offering of *āsana-pādyā-arghya-ācamanīya* can be traced back to an old Indian custom of honouring distinguished guests (*arghya*) by giving them a place to sit, water to wash their feet and hands, and water to drink. These 16 services are inscribed in a paradigm of invocation or welcoming of the divine guest and the act of farewell. Afterwards, the guru should honour the elements (*tattva*) of the universe and chant the main mantra of the goddess again. Next, the 16 services should be repeated, and this part of the ritual should be concluded with a water satiation (*tarpaṇa*). The satiation is followed by flower offerings carried out 108 times. After this, the guru is instructed to perform a *homa*, a fire offering for the goddess Bālā. The text reminds us that the guru should have prepared a Bālā *yantra* (a mystical diagram) on the right-hand side of the fire pit, and above this, they should place a decorated vessel for the adept who is to be initiated. Then, the guru takes a vow to perform a fire offering and sanctify the vessel and conch.

Tantric *homa* rituals are usually performed to purify and protect a person (or a place) from various dangers and negative influences. The ritual space itself should also be designated and protected. Hence, the text instructs the guru to decorate the fire altar with flowers and incenses and worship the eight guardians of directions (*aṣṭa-dik-pāla*) in the following manner:⁴⁵

indrāya namaḥ (east)
agnaye namaḥ (southeast)
yamāya namaḥ (south)
nirṛtaye namaḥ (southwest)
varuṇāya namaḥ (west)
vāyave namaḥ (northwest)
somāya namaḥ (north)
īśānāya namaḥ (northeast)

Having worshipped these guardians, the guru should meditate on the goddess Bālā and visualize her in the sacred fire pit. He then worships the pedestal (*pīṭhapūjā*), places the vessel upon it, and uses the Bālā mantra again to invoke the goddess therein.

Then, the guru is supposed to perform various forms of *nyāsas*—the imposition of mantras on their body. The text mentions *ṛṣi-nyāsa* (the imposition of names of sages),⁴⁶ *kara-nyāsa* (the empowerment of hands with mantras); and sixfold *nyāsa* (the imposition of mantras on six limbs of the body). In *kara-nyāsa*, the guru recites mantras ascribed to their fingers; they recite a mantra and move the thumb from the base to the tip of the finger. In the case of the thumb, the *nyāsa* is done with the index finger, which should press the thumb

from base to the tip. The *kara-nyāsa* is concluded with one hand swiping across the other. In *aṅga-nyāsa*, the six limbs are touched with various combinations of right-hand fingers. The act of the sixfold *aṅga-nyāsa* can be interpreted as a practice of moving awareness to various points of the body and enclosing one body within a sacred space. With various *mudrās*, the Tantric guru touches their heart, head, tuft of their hair, the three eyes (with three fingers), crosses their hands on their chest, and ends the *nyāsa* by uttering the *astra* (weapon) mantra for protection. The last act is often performed with a gesture imitating shooting an arrow and bidding the direction (Bühnemann 1988, pp. 122–23). By imposing the mantras, the body of an adept is purified, empowered, and finally divinized. Afterwards, the guru should prepare vessels with melted butter and milk and place a tuft of grass near them. The guru is instructed to chant the mantra of the goddess twice and set the grass on fire. Afterwards, the goddess is invoked into the fire and presented with the offerings again. The text teaches that the fire should be fed with wood: either Bastard Teak (*palāśa*), *aegle marmelos* (*bilva*), *sindura* (vermilion), *guḷūcī* or *durva*. The guru adds two ladles of ghee to the fire and performs fire oblations 28 times with the mantra: *aim klīṅṅ sauḥ bālāparameśvari svāhā*. The procedure is then repeated 28 times with milk. Finally, the guru should make offerings with a drop of water from the vessel into a water pitcher and into the fire. All this should be done with the main mantra of Bālā. Afterwards, the guru makes offerings of *pūrṇa pātra hūti*, a burnt offering at the close of sacrifices. The text says that the *pūrṇāhūti* is the last of the offerings. Interestingly, the term *uttamam* used in this statement can mean the last but also the best. The text explains that with this offering they acquire everything they need. The *pūrṇāhūti* is done with a single drop of clarified butter offered into the fire. Thus, the fire ritual is concluded. When the *pūrṇāhūti* is completed, the *dīpārādhana*, the waving of a lamp, should be performed. After this, in a process of *visarjana* (bidding farewell), the deity leaves all the places in which she was previously invoked, that is, the vessel, fire, and the worshipper's heart. In the end, the sanctified food is collected, and an adept awaiting initiation is called. The guru should sprinkle the adept with water from the conch, saying:

ātmatattvaṃ śodhayāmi—"I purify the principle of Self (*ātma*)."

vidyātattvaṃ śodhayāmi—"I purify the principle of Wisdom (*vidyā*)."

In this way, the guru purifies the elements or principles (*tattvas*) of the adept's body. According to *Paraśurāmakalpasūtra* (6.18), there are three main principles: *ātmatattvaṃ*, *vidyātattvaṃ* and *śivatattvaṃ*. In fact, *ātmatattvaṃ* is again subdivided into 24 elements from *kṣīti* to *prakṛti* and *vidyātattvaṃ* is divided into 7 from *puruṣa* to *māyā*. All these elements are supposed to be purified with the sanctified water of the conch. Afterwards, the guru makes an offering with *pañcagavya*, the "five products of cow",⁴⁷ saying:

yat-tvag-asth-igataṃ pāpaṃ

dehe tiṣṭhati mām-eka[m]

prāśanaṃ pañcagavyasya

dahato-agnir ivēndhanaṃ

"By taking of the five products of the cow, the sin that has entered into the skin and bones shall be burned, like fuel on a fire".

Next, the guru should cleanse the body of the adept with the holy ash and invoke the Bālā goddess into the body of the adept by performing the *māṭṛka-nyāsa*, the casting down of Sanskrit syllables of the goddess' mantra. In fact, the goddess in the Śrīvidyā tradition is often called Māṭṛkadevi (*Vāmakeśvarīmata* 2005, verse 1.11) and praised as Parā Vāc, the Supreme Speech. Then, the guru gives five offerings again to honour the goddess. This is the time when the adept awaiting initiation is requested to stand near the guru facing east in the place where the water consecration (*abhiṣeka*) should be performed. The guru needs to stand in front of the adept, showing the light of the lamp (*nirāñjana*). While doing so, the guru chants a mantra that says:

antas-tejo bahis-tejaḥ

*ekīkṛtyâmitaprabham
sambāhyâbhantaram jyotir
dīpōyam pratigrhyatām*

“The inner light and the external light are one that shines bright,
with inner and outer flash, I accept this lamp”.⁴⁸

In this context, the *kula* may also mean “family”, as the ritual virtually introduces a new adept into the Tantric community. According to *Bālādīkṣāpaddhati*, after *nirañjana*, the guru should perform an *abhiṣeka*, that is, pour the water from the vessel onto the head of the adept while chanting a mantra. Interestingly, the mantra used here is derived not from Tantric but from the Vedic tradition (*Taittirīya-Brāhmaṇa*):

*devasya tvā savituh prasave aśvinor bāhubhyām pūṣṇo hastābhyām aśvinor bheṣajena
tejase brahma—varcasenā nandādyen ā bhiṣīcāmi | |*

“On the impulse of god Savitr, with the arms of the two Aśvins, with the hands of Pūsan, with the healing power of the Aśvins, with the power of the sacred knowledge and so forth, for the illuminating light, I besprinkle [you]”

After the *abhiṣeka*, the guru should again show the light of the lamp (*nirañjana*) and again make an offering with five products of the cow. Then, after the *abhiṣeka*, the adept should change into new clothes. Besmeared with ashes, with their *tattvas* purified with the water, the adept appears again in front of the guru with a thread-bangle (*pratisarā*) in their right hand. At this time, the guru should recite a *br̥hatsāma* mantra:

*br̥hat-sāma kṣatra-bhr̥t vṛddha-vṛṣṇiyam |
tr̥ṣṭubh-aujaḥ śubhitam ugra-vīram | |
indra-stomena pañca-daśena madhyam | idam vātena sagareṇa rakṣa | |*

“Br̥hat is a sacred verse (*sāman*), a supporter of the dominion, of great strength, [it has] power adorned with the *tr̥ṣṭubh* [meter] and [a retinue of] powerful men. O Indra, with the fifteenfold *stoma*, with the wind and air protect this [that is] in the middle”.

Chanting that mantra, the guru should tie the thread around adept’s left hand. After this, the guru should whisper the Bālā mantra into the right ear of the adept. The text instructs the performer of the rite to honor the tradition from gurus to *pīṭhas* and offer food to the goddess.

After communicating the mantra to the adept, the guru should perform the *dīpārādhana*: the worship of the goddess by waving a lamp. The guru then honors the vessels used in the ritual for the last time and recites a *Śāntistava*, a hymn of peace. The ritual of initiation is concluded with the sanctified food being distributed among the community. The text says that it is customary for an adept to give *gurudakṣiṇā* (gifts or tokens of gratitude) to the guru. In modern Kerala, adepts who request the tuition of a Tantric guru usually offer him or her a cloth (*dhoti*) along with the guru’s fee placed on a leaf. This *gurudakṣiṇā* is, in most cases, a voluntary fee.⁴⁹ The money is put on a leaf with a coin on top, and then the leaf is placed on a folded loincloth. A disciple would kneel before the guru to give the *gurudakṣiṇā* and receive the mantra (Karasinski 2020).

6.3. The Vessel on Guru’s Head: Bālādīkṣāpaddhati in the Context of Living Traditions

According to Van Gennep’s classic theory, the rituals facilitate an individual’s passage from one social grouping to another. They “dramatize that transformation by holding the person in a suspended ‘betwixt and between’ state for a period of time, and then reincorporate him or her into a new identity and status within another social grouping” (Van Gennep 1960, p. 25). Van Gennep proposes a threefold pattern of the rites. The first phase is called “separation” and usually involves series on minor acts of purification and symbolic “losing of identity”. The separation phase may include bathing or a change of clothes. The second stage is the transition—a person undergoing the ritual is symbolically

kept outside the lay conventions or sociocultural laws. In this phase norms and ordinary routines are neglected and new rules introduced. The third and final stage involves welcoming the adept into a new community or status (i.e., a new birth of the new self). In this state, a person may receive a new name, symbolic marks, or insignia. The phase is usually concluded with a communal meal and integration with other members who have already passed the ritual.

The initiation described in *Bālādīkṣāpaddhati* is an example of Van Gennep's three-stage patterned rite. The acts of purification performed with ablutions, prayers, and *nyāsas* prepare the adept for a new role: becoming a member of a Tantric community. The stage of transition in the case of the Tantric *dīkṣā* is marked by the learning of new rules of purity and ritualistic routines. The adept's new identity is finally created by the guru, who often gives the adept a new name and with it, their new status.

In the first statement, the *Bālādīkṣāpaddhati* insists on choosing a dedicated adept who deserves initiation. This aspect is mentioned in almost all the Tantric texts dealing with initiations and, in many cases, the scriptures prescribe tests and tasks to verify the adept's aptitude. Thus, for instance, *Māṭṛsadbhāva* (pp. 33–34) enumerates the qualities of an adept (e.g., bravery, wisdom, persistence in their spiritual quest, etc.) and insists on their dedication not only to the study of Tantra but, more importantly, to their guru.⁵⁰

A Tantric Śākta guru in the Vadakara region⁵¹ described a very similar process of initiation performed in his tradition. According to the guru, in the Vadakara Tantric Community, the Bālā mantra is given as the first mantra for a worthy adept. This embodied transmission of sacred knowledge (*vidyā*) is therefore performed within strict social and religious norms that dictate who can be taught and entrusted with mantras. The guru refused to call his tradition Śrīvidyā, instead used the word Śākta to indicate the importance of the traditional Keralan mode of worship of Śrīvidyā deities. Similarly, he talked about "giving the Bālā mantra", not the *dīkṣā* of the Bālā mantra. "The *dīkṣā* comes later," he said, explaining that this term was reserved, in his tradition, for the full initiation (*pūrṇa dīkṣā*). This full initiation happens, he went on to clarify, after a long period of spiritual practice whereby an adept proves to be worthy of a higher, more esoteric mantra of Śrīvidyā, that is, the *Pañcadaśī* or *Ṣoḍaśī*. In what follows, we share observations and field notes from an initiation ceremony conducted by the same guru near Vadakara.

6.4. *Bālādīkṣā* in Vadakara—Notes from a Field Research of Maciej Karasinski (March 2012)

Vadakara is a coastal town in the Kozhikode district, famous for its Hindu temples and martial arts centres, *kaḷari*. The initiation ceremony took place at the guru's own house, a small but graceful Keralan manor with a garden of lush bushes buzzing with cicadas. To get there, one was supposed to traverse a long, palm-fringed road from a dusty bus station. The adepts to be initiated were asked to arrive in the afternoon and bring two pieces of loin cloth (*dhoti*) with them. One piece was given to the guru at the time of initiation and the other should be worn by the adept after the initiation. At the time of the *Bālā mantra* initiation, adepts were asked to sit outside the guru's house on the steps leading to the main entrance. There, *abhiṣeka*, the ritual sprinkling of adepts with holy water, was performed. Once the adepts were ready, the guru, wearing an expensive-looking loin cloth and a sacred thread (Malayalam *pūṇṇūl*) across his bare chest, stepped out of the manor holding a garlanded jar. The sanctified water that was poured on the heads of the newly initiated adepts from the jar had been mixed with wine as a symbol of the fierce (*raudra*) Śākta path. The adepts were afterwards informed by their preceptor that their sins had been removed with this *abhiṣeka* from a vessel that the guru had "held on his head during his meditation".⁵²

Next, the adepts were invited to the guru's home, where they changed into new clothes and were individually taught the new mantra (as described in *Bālādīkṣāpaddhati*) and, subsequently, their spiritual routine. One by one, each adept was invited to sit in the room alone with his guru, who would pray and whisper the mantra into their right ear. In the room where the rite took place, the adepts could recognize the ritual paraphernalia

mentioned in the *Bālādīkṣāpaddhati*: the firepit, the vessels, and yantras. After the “giving of mantra,” the guru gave the adepts an opportunity to choose their new name. However, it was an unspoken rule of the community for an adept to refuse and instead ask the guru to choose their new name. After this, all initiated members were welcomed by the senior students who, up to this time, remained in other parts of the house.

After the initiates had integrated with the senior students, the whole community attended a *śrīcakra* ritual performed by the guru. The disciples were asked to sit on the floor in front of a powder drawn *śrīcakra*. Before the commencement of the ritual, the guru introduced the lineage of masters to which he belonged and talked about his teacher, who had initiated him into the secrets of Tantra years ago. The names of the masters, he explained, were to be chanted before every mantra practice: “They have a power to bless you; without their blessings your chanting may not bring any results”. The guru, sitting cross-legged near the adepts, warned everyone that the names should not be revealed to the uninitiated. As his students sitting in front of him nodded, they promised to obey the instructions, the guru placed a small *śrīcakra meru* (a *śrīcakra* in its three-dimensional form) in the middle of a decorated ritual space. “This one”—he pointed to the *śrīcakra* and inched it towards the centre of the yantra drawn on the floor—“is a special one, I have received it from my beloved guru.”⁵³

Afterwards, in the late evening, the *śrīcakra* ritual began and lasted until late. All through the night, long litanies of divine names were recited by the guru and his disciples. With each divine name being chanted, flower petals were thrown on the *śrīcakra*, the mandalic body of the goddess. The *śrīcakra* lay shining among the floral garlands and filigrees of Gaṇapati. The mantras, according to the Tantric philosophy, are gods’ sonic forms, and by repeating them one may feel a divine presence. Sitting there with all the devotees, chanting, and listening to the chants, I felt as if, with each incantation, the material world around us was ceasing to exist and the tiny *śrīcakra* was the only reality. It reminded me of the words of Clooney (2010, p. 91), who once observed that goddess hymns are indeed “acts of living speech, generative of worship”.

The ritual was a visionary journey through the enclosures of *śrīcakra* into its central point, where the followers were supposed to meditate on the goddess Tripurā. At one point, a few pages dropped from the guru’s spiral notebook that he kept open on his lap throughout the ritual. “There are some secrets here”—he gathered the scattered pages in a hurry—“and I shall recite them silently as you have all only just been initiated into the Bālā mantra”. He continued, murmuring the litanies and asked the attendees to silently chant the “om” mantra. Once the ritual was over, the victuals (fish, fried chicken, wine, and parched beans) were sanctified and distributed among the devotees. Then, the adepts cleaned the ritual place, swept the colorful *maṇḍalas* away, and got ready to call it a day. Once the guru had disappeared into the rooms upstairs, the students almost instantaneously fell asleep. Some of them, like me, lay down on the hard floor of the hall; our backpacks became pillows. Others retreated to the veranda, where they slept covered with their loin cloths. Still others huddled up to the stove in the kitchen and fell asleep with their heads on each other’s shoulders.

Bālādīkṣāpaddhati seems to suggest that the ritual should take only one day, but, in fact, in most cases in Kerala, the initiation involves night observances and morning rites. On the morning of the second day, the newly initiated adepts woke up early and washed their bodies in cold water from the well in the garden. Later, after a simple breakfast, everyone was taught a prayer for the Bālā goddess to be recited before the mantra:

raktāmbarāṃ candrakalāvataṃsāṃ samudyad-āditya-nibhāṃ tri-netrāmi |
vidyākṣa-mālābhayadāna-hastāṃ dhyāyāmi bālāṃ aruṇāmbuja-sthāṃ | |

“I meditate on goddess Bālā sitting on a crimson lotus, who has three eyes, is clad in red, effulgent as the rising sun, with a crescent moon on her forehead, who is holding a book and a rosary, showing the gestures of protection and blessings”.⁵⁴

With the morning practice done, the day after the initiation is the start of a new life for the Tantric adepts in Kerala. The newly initiated adepts converse with senior adepts, who give them advice on spiritual exercises and share their own experience. As the new members of the community leave their guru's house, they make a promise to meet again and perform rites together soon. The senior adepts would, often in an emotional, older-brother kind of talk, tell the new adepts that the three syllables of the Bālā mantra would fulfill whatever wish they had. One of the advanced adepts of the Vadakara Tantric Community explained the meaning of the mantra in the following way, counting the mantric syllables on his fingers: "Aim gives you the eloquence, *klīm* the power to overcome obstacles and *sauḥ* prosperity, all these [syllables] together make you more attractive". This popular interpretation again refers to what we previously said about the message of *Bālāvīṃśati* and its commentaries. Moreover, as with the commentators of *Bālāvīṃśati*, the contemporary practitioners point to the efficacy of the mantra that has many versions and can be pronounced in various ways.

Tantric adepts in Kerala commonly believe that a follower of Śrīvidyā may experience misfortunes soon after initiation. These hardships of the spiritual practice are thought to cleanse sins and ultimately lead to spiritual purity. An initiated adept is therefore asked to chant mantras every day for a prolonged period and face all adversities with unshaken faith. Sometimes, a guru may ask an adept to additionally recite *Lalitāsahasranāma* and *Bālāvīṃśati*, which are supposed to deepen their understanding of mantras and tradition. Moreover, *Bālāvīṃśati* is believed to instill various images of the goddess in the mind of an adept who, after longer practice, starts to consider her a close spiritual companion rather than a deity watching them from afar.⁵⁵

In this context, the goddess is idealized as transcendent yet approachable. In this respect, it is interesting to note that the goddess in the *Bālādīkṣāpaddhati* and *Bālāvīṃśati* is invoked, *inter alia*, as Mātangiṇī, the divine artist and a friendly, spirited dancer. Her nature represents the dynamism of life and a world that is in a constant dance-like flux. She is therefore a "divine playmate" who accompanies the adept in their ups and downs of life. One of the Śrīvidyā adepts in Kozhikode admitted that he had a vision of Bālā in her form of Mātangiṇī during his Śrīvidyā ritual. One afternoon he was performing the *śrīcakra* ritual alone in his old house situated in the vicinity of Vaḷayanāṭu kāvu. Suddenly, he fell into a meditative state and lost all sense of time. The humid, ocean-flavoured air was seeping through half-opened windows. Outside, lime-green fields bordered by swaying palms and ornate temples paled in the midday sun. He remembered, remotely, the sweet smell of incense and the ghee-lamps flickering in the silence of the lazy afternoon. When he woke up, he saw a girl, approximately 13 years of age, sitting in front of him. The girl, dressed in a bright sari, was smiling cheerfully at him through the long, interlocked fingers of her henna-coloured hands. He immediately said his prayers and asked the girl who she was. "Don't you know?" she giggled. "I live here". He then slowly stood up, presented the child with sweets, and observed as she ate and then danced around the room. The man closed his eyes and uttered mantras to calm himself down. When he reopened his eyes, there was nobody in the room, but the ghee-lamps were still burning brightly. "I asked around and we found out that it was a daughter of our new neighbours. But for me it was a sign from the goddess, that's how She appears in the ordinariness of our life," he concluded his story.

One might say that the young appearance and playful nature of the goddess Bālā represents the characteristics of a new adept: they are generally enthusiastic, inexperienced, and eager to follow the spiritual teachings of Śāktism. The Bālā mantra is therefore a symbol of new spiritual quests, a rebirth of an adept in a new community of believers. The potency of the mantra is recognized not only by Śrīvidyā adepts but by all the Tantric traditions in Kerala. The Tantric *dīkṣā* has a similar function to *saṃskāras*, the rites of passage in the Hindu way of life. In fact, in some Brahmin families in Kerala apart from the usual set of *saṃskāras*, young boys undergo so-called Śākta *saṃskāras*, additional initiations that give them Tantric mantras such as the Bālā mantra. In many households where *śrīcakra* is worshipped, the family members are initiated into the Bālā mantra, as it enables them to

perform the *navavarana pūjā*—a ritual of nine enclosures of *śrīcakra*. Similarly, it is required for priests of those temples in which *śrīcakras* are installed. In fact, *śrīcakras* are found in various family temples in Kerala that do not strictly belong to the Śākta, Śaiva or Vaiṣṇava tradition, but form complex systems where various deities are invoked and honored.⁵⁶

6.5. *Kaḷaris, the Bālā Goddess and Warriors' Traditions*

The Bālā goddess also plays an important role in other family traditions, for instance in the Meppāṭ Nāyar *sampradāya* (tradition) of Kannur district. According to the devotees, the Meppāṭ is one of the oldest Kaula Tantra *sampradāya* of the so-called Māntrika Nāyars. The word Nāyar is traditionally linked to the Sanskrit term *nāyaka* (army leader), as many Nāyars, such as Kaḷari Panikkars and Kaḷari Kurupps, were traditionally martial artists and warriors (Bayly 1984).⁵⁷ In fact, the Nāyars and Kaḷari Panikkars, in time, developed their own rituals and established temples in which they officiated and worshipped fierce goddesses. While many Panikkar families are also known as traditional astrologers, some Nāyars are adepts of *mantravāda*, an indigenous tradition of magic. Their temples gained religious prestige by being recognized by royal courts and soon evolved into local centres of culture.

As already mentioned, the Meppāṭs are also called Māntrika Nāyars. According to Gurukkal Nadanta Anandanatha Nair⁵⁸, the current guru of the Meppāṭ, the term “Māntrika” has been traditionally added to the names of clans known for the expertise in Tantra and can protect people against curses and black magicians.⁵⁹

Nadanta's family temple is popularly called Meppāṭ Kaḷari. The name *kaḷari*, a term used to designate a local martial arts school of *kaḷarippayattu*, suggests that the temple is a place of worship for warrior gods and goddesses. According to Devarajan Nambi, a member of the Vāḷ Nambi Brahmin community and a relative of P. Gopalakrishna Nambi, *kaḷaris* have been traditionally attached to the family households of Yogi gurukkals, Nāyars, Kaḷari Panikkars of North Kerala, Kaḷari Kurupps of Central Kerala, and Ezhuttu Asans of South Kerala. Devarajan Nambi also claims that his family (Cheruvottu Vāḷ Nambi) is the only modern-day Brahmin clan that owns a *kaḷari*. Similarly, Thurston (1909, p. 225), in his classic study on castes and tribes of Kerala, ranks Nambi Brahmins (also called Nambiyassans and Nambiyars) above Nāyars but below Nampūtiris and observes that some of them were “known to have kept gymnasias[kaḷari] and military training schools”. Thurston (1909, p. 311) suggests also that the Vāḷ Nambis are related to the Mūssats, but contemporary members of the families disagree with this statement. Even though the Mūssats do not have a martial arts tradition of their own, like Vāḷ Nambis, they still worship demon-slaying goddesses. Similarly, the term “Vāḷ” in Vāḷ Nambi means sword and refers to the martial art tradition of the clan as well as the symbol of the warrior goddess worship in the Śākta temples.⁶⁰

Many rituals in *kaḷaris* of Nāyars, Panikkars, and Vāḷ Nambis focus on the *pūttara*, a seven-stepped structure that can be called a form of altar of the tradition (Figure 4).⁶¹ In many *kaḷaris*, *pūttara* is considered as a seat of the goddess and her dynamic power (Śakti) that resonates with the adepts' internal energy (*kuṇḍalinī śakti*). The goddess, in her terrifying form, is invoked into the *pūttara* where she remains united with Śiva. Their union is symbolically shown in *pūttara* design: a conical, serpent-like pyramid with a Śiva *liṅga* on top. The symbolism can be read through Tantric philosophy: *pūttara* reminds the adepts of the goal of spiritual practice, that is, recognition of the ultimate reality as Śiva-Śakti. (Karasinski 2021). In the Śākta-Tantra communities, as explained by Devarajan Nambi, the *pūttara* represents *śrīcakra* in its *meru* form, and therefore the practitioners who worship it are required to undergo the initiation of the Bālā mantra. The *pūttara*'s apex (*kumbha*) is considered as the *bindu*, the central point of *śrīcakra*, and the remaining six steps are the upper six *cakras* of the *meru*. Hence, the daily rituals in modern *kaḷaris* (either martial arts centres or temples that grew out of the worship of fierce female deities) of many Śākta-Tantra families are also performed by members who were initiated into the Bālā mantra, the basic mantra of Śrīvidyā that gives one access to *śrīcakra* rituals. Similarly, the

Meppāṭ *kaḷari* temple houses gods and goddesses of several traditions, including Caṇḍikā and Tripurāsundarī. All these deities are visualized on the *bindu*, the central point of *śrīcakra*. This worship of the deities united within the sphere of *śrīcakra* symbolically shows Śrīvidyā as a tradition that unites Tantric cults in Kerala.



Figure 4. *pūttara* in a Nāyar *kaḷari*. Photo by Nishanth V. Kunnu.

6.6. Initiation into Bālā Sādhanā in the Meppāṭ Nāyar Clan

According to Gurukkal Nadanta, the most important act of initiation in his tradition is the *Śaktipāta*, a transfer of spiritual power from a guru to a disciple, concluded with *Śākta abhiṣeka*, an unction performed in a similar manner to that described in the *Bālādīkṣāpaddhati*. Here, the initiation can also be given to disciples who are not relatives of the guru. In the Meppāṭ tradition, once an adept is initiated through *Śākta abhiṣeka*, they become “Śākta Aham,”⁶² that is, they become aware of the ultimate identity of their soul with the goddess.⁶³ Only then can they start the proper *Bālā sādhanā* (spiritual practice) and be initiated with the *Bālā* mantra. At this stage, Nadanta calls the *ghāṭā śuddhi*, a “purification of the vessel of soma.” Here, the vessel stands for the human body, and *soma* is another name for *amṛta*, the nectar of immortality.⁶⁴ The purification process may differ from person to person, and therefore a guru needs to evaluate the initiated candidates. In fact, the adepts who stay at their guru’s house after the initiation are often observed by their preceptor in the morning. Nadanta admitted: “you initiate them, and then let them sleep. The dream they have the night after the initiation will tell you if they can continue the practice or need additional help.”⁶⁵ The help can be provided, for instance, in the form of purificatory rites, astrological remedies, or additional penance. Interestingly, Nadanta also claims that *Bālāvīṃśati stotra* was used in the spiritual practices of Nāyars before it became popular among other communities of Kerala. Even though there is no historical evidence to confirm this claim, it shows the importance of the *stotra* for practitioners of various castes (e.g., Brahmins and Nāyars) and the century-old polemics and rivalries between them.

According to Nadanta, the *Bālā sādhanā* opens new spiritual dimensions for Tantric adepts and prepares them for Śrīvidyā initiation performed with a secret mantra of 15 syllables. From this point onwards, a Tantric disciple is on the path towards unity with the goddess. The advanced practitioner is afterwards given a 16-syllable mantra that is supposed to cause a “glow of *soma*” in their body. The next stages of spiritual progress are marked with subsequent initiations that bestow one with spiritual knowledge of the Śrīvidyā Kaula path. Hence, it can be said that the Bālā goddess welcomes one to the tradition and guides adepts in their spiritual quest. It can therefore be said that the threefold goddess, Tripurā, is worshipped at various stages of the adepts’ spiritual quest. Bālā Tripura is the spiritual guide of the neophytes. and Tripurasundarī is the goddess of the initiated. Tripurabhairavī can be seen as another emanation of the warrior mother goddess of the Keralan holy groves (*kāvū*).⁶⁶

7. Concluding Remarks

The term Kerala Tantra designates a complex amalgamation of tradition but also implies a wide disparity and variability in ritualistic practices and beliefs. In this article, we have tried to draw attention to the complexity and modalities of the Bālā mantra encoding in the cultural matrix of Kerala. We have attempted to indicate the dynamics of textual transmission of the texts related to the Bālā goddess and the significance of this goddess in modern Kerala. The Bālā goddess of Kerala is not always the young benign deity of Śrīvidyā; she appears at times as a local mother goddess or a warrior demon-slaying deity of Vaḷayanāṭu *kāvū*.⁶⁷

Even though *Bālādīkṣāpaddhati* was found in the library of a Brahmin family, the methods of initiation given in the text are followed by other Tantric communities of contemporary Kerala. Similarly, *Bālāvīmśati* not only functions as a hymn to be chanted during public religious observances and celebrations, but it is also considered a learning tool for the initiated. By its legendary authorship, the text is anchored in both the teachings of Kashmirian mystics and the religious traditions of Kerala. In the words of Mundoli (2010), Keralan legends tend to be “a society’s soliloquies; they are self-directed articulations of its identity, its character, and its desires. Lacking specific authorships or stable texts, these public discourses express the wider changing substance of a society’s mind. They are, in effect, signposts to how a society experiences its own reality”. Hence, our analysis has tried to show that the legends concerning Kashmirian masters are evident in the contemporary landscapes of Kerala through Bālā-related rites and chants of various Tantric communities. Further research into these chants may reveal various ways in which local narratives have been engaged to encode religious identities.

Bālāvīmśati shows the importance of the Bālā mantra for the spiritual adepts of Kerala. Brahmins, Panikkars, Nayārs, Śāktas, Śaivas, and other Tantric adepts consider initiation into this mystical formula as an important step in their spiritual quest and a condition *sine qua non* for participation in the secret rituals of their communities. It is interesting that some Tantric gurus follow Śrīvidyā and initiate disciples into the Bālā mantra but call themselves Śāktas to indicate the Keralan version of the tradition. As we have noted in this article, the three syllables ascribed to the goddess Bālā are used in combination with other mantras and even formulas of invocation to the goddess Kālī. Therefore, it can be suggested that through the three-syllable mantra, Bālā became integrated with other deities and impacted various ritualistic and religious traditions of Kerala. In this article we have indicated the importance of Śrīvidyā among Tantric communities and its secret *gnosis*, the central teaching of Śākta Tantras of Kerala. The initiation into the Bālā mantra is widely considered as a sign of spiritual maturity in a Tantric adept. The cult of the Bālā goddess connects castes and creeds, as can be seen in the cases of the Nayārs, Panikkars, Vāḷ Nambis, and Mūssats. We suggest that the traditional institution of *kaḷari* could be a nexus between the religiosity of the above-mentioned castes. Hence, we would like to suggest that further studies on these communities may reveal how the Śrīvidyā doctrines have infiltrated various creeds in Kerala. Unlike the most popular and authoritative Tantric

treatises of Kerala (e.g., *Tantrasamuccaya*, *Prayogamañjarī*, or *Śeṣasamuccaya*), ritual manuals (*paddhatis*)⁶⁸ such as *Bālādīkṣāpaddhati*, prescribe the rites and observances that have been followed in a particular family or clan. If studied in the context of the living traditions, these texts may shed new light on Keralan religious culture and its constant, gradual transformation. Thus, in the present study, we hope to open a broader discussion regarding Keralan Hinduism and Tantra.

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Appendix A. Bālāvīmśati (“The Twenty Verses on the Bālā Goddess”)—A Transcript and English Translation

Verse 1

aindrasyeva śarāsanasya dadhatī madhyelalāṭaṃ prabhāṃ
śauklīm kāntim anuṣṇagoriva śirasyātanvatī sarvataḥ
eṣā sau tripurā hṛdi dyutirivoṣṇāṃśoḥ sadāhaḥ sthitā
chidyān naḥ sahasā padais tribhir aghaṃ jyotirmayī vānmayī

She who holds the splendour of Indra’s bow on her forehead, pure, bright like cool rays of the moon wandering everywhere on (the devotee’s) head, Tripurā stays in (our) hearts like warm rays of Sun at the daytime. Let the goddess of light, the goddess of speech, cut off our sins with the powerful three syllables.

Verse 2

yā mātrā trapusīlatātanulasattandūsthitispardhini
vāgbīje prathame sthitā tava sadā tām manmahe te vayaṃ
śaktiḥ kuṇḍalinī viśvajananavyāpārabadhodyamā
jñātvethaṃ na punaḥ sprśanti janani garbherbhakatvaṃ narāḥ

We believe that the mora in the first syllable [of your mantra] is like the tendril of a cucumber and the śakti *kuṇḍalinī* that is always engaged in creating the universe. The people who know this will never again experience the childhood inside a mother’s womb.

Verse 3

dr̥ṣtvā saṃbhramakāri vastu sahasā ai ai iti vyāhṛtaṃ
yenākūtavaśādapīha varade binduṃ vināpyakṣaram
tasyāpi dhruvameva devi tarasā jāte tavānugrahe
vācas sūkti sudhāra sadravamuco niryānti vaktrodarāt

O Boon-giving Goddess, if, having seen a terrifying sight, one utters in a hurry the sound “ai ai” even without “m” that makes it your mantra, thereupon immediately, because of your grace, charming, tender verses will come forth from their mouth.

Verse 4

yannitye tava kāmārājamaparam mantrākṣaram niṣkalam
tat sārāsvatam ity avaiti viralam kaścit budhaṣcet bhuvi
ākhyānam pratiparva satyatapaso yatkīrttayanto dvijāḥ
prārambhe praṇavāspadapraṇayinīm nītvoccaranti sphuṭam

O Eternal Goddess, the second syllable (*klīm*) of your mantra is known as the Kāmārāja (Lord of Desire). If someone, which is rare, understands that [the mantra] is ascribed [also] to the Goddess Sarasvatī they become enlightened. [Hence] the Brahmins who recite the story of sage Satyatapa at every change of the moon, in place of OM are evidently reciting “īm”

Verse 5

yatsadyo vacasām pravṛttkaraṇe dṛṣṭa prabhāvaṃ budhaiḥ
tārtīyaṃ tadahaṃ namāmi manasā tavbījaminduprabhaṃ
astvaurvo Pi sarasvatīmanugato jātyāmbu vicchittaye
gauḥ śabdo giri vartate suniyatam yogam vinā siddhidah

The holy words revealed by the sages manifest everything instantly. Hence, [let us] pay obeisance to your third syllable that has the sight of the Moon. [Also] The word “gauḥ” (cow) that comes from the Goddess Sarasvatī even if uttered without “ga” destroys the waters of imprudence.

Verse 6

ekaikaṃ tava devi bījamanaghaṃ savyaṅjanāvyāṅjanam
kūṭasthaṃ yadi vā pṛthak kramagataṃ yadvā sthitaṃ vyutkramāt
yaṃ yaṃ kāmamapekṣya yena vidhinā kenāpi vā cintitaṃ
japtaṃ vā saphalīkaroti tarasā taṃ taṃ samastaṃ nṛṇām

O Goddess, if your flawless syllables, one by one, with consonants (aiṃ, klīm, sauḥ) or without consonants in the same order (ai, ī, au) or in the reverse order (au, ī, ai), or along with the “H” (Haiṃ Hklīm Hsauḥ) are chanted or meditated upon, all human wishes will be fulfilled.

Verse 7

vāme pustakadhāriṇīmabhayadām sākṣasrajaṃ dakṣiṇe
bhaktebhyo varadānapeśalakarām karpūrakundojjvalām
ujjṛmbhāmbujapatrakāntinayanasnigdhaprabhā¹ lokinīm
ye tvāmba na śīlayanti manasa teṣāṃ kavitvaṃ kutaḥ

O Mother, how can anyone become a poet who fails to meditate on You? You are the one who shines like camphor and jasmine flowers, who gazes with beautiful eyes just like fully ripened lotus petals, who holds in her left hands a *grantha* (book) and makes a gesture of *abhaya* (fearlessness), and who with her two right hands holds a crystal garland and makes a gesture of *varadā* (granting wishes).

Verse 8

ye tvām pāṇdurapuṇḍarīkaṭālasapaṣṭābhirāmaprabhām
siṅcantīmamṛtadraviriva śirodhyāyanti mūrdhni sthitām
aśrāntam vikasphuṭākṣarapadā niryānti vaktrodarāt
teṣāṃ bhāratī bhāratī surasarit kallolalolormivat

O Bhāratī, if someone sees You [in meditation] seated upon [their] head, graceful like bunches of white lotus flowers and sprinkling [their] head with the nectar of immortality, clear and sharp words will emerge from their mouth like the waves of the river Ganga.

Verse 9

ye sindūraparāgapuñjapihitāṃ tvattejasādyāmimāṃ
 urvīñcāpi vilīnayāvakaraprasatāramagnāmiva
 paśyanti kṣaṇamapyananyamanasasteṣāmanamgajvara-
 klāntātrastakuraṃgaśābakadr̥śā vaśyāḥ bhavanti striyaḥ

Whoever, controlling their senses, sees [in meditation] the sky as if fully covered with the redness of *sindūra* powder, your colour, and sees the earth as if immersed in the water mixed with red dye, will attract ladies exhausted with the fire of cupid's arrows, their eyes like those of a frightened doe.

Verse 10

cañcat kāñcana kuṇḍalāṃgadadharāṃ ābadhakāñcīśrajaṃ
 ye tvam cetasi tatgatekṣaṇamapi dhyāyanti kṛtvā sthitaṃ
 teṣāṃ veśmasu vibhramādaharahaḥ sphāribhavantyaściraṃ
 mādyatkuñjarakarnatāḷatarāḥ sthairyaṃ bhajante śriyaḥ

Those who meditate upon You, even for a short time, wearing golden earrings and shoulder bangles, and clad in a *kāñcī* (girdle), [will witness] a growth of the wealth, for a long time, day by day; [Their riches will multiply] with every movement of the ears of their elephants.

Verse 11

ārbhaṭyā śasikhaṇḍamaṇḍitajata jūtanṛmuṇḍasrajāṃ
 bandhūka prasavāruṇāmbardharāṃ pretāsanādhyāsanīm
 tvāṃ dhyāyanti caturbhujāṃ triṇayanāṃ āpīnatuṃgastanīm
 madhye nimnavalitrayāṅgitatanuṃ tvadrūpasamvittaye

One should meditate on the goddess whose hair is adorned with the crescent moon and jasmine flower garlands. She is wearing a dress of the colour of hibiscus and sits in a yogic posture known as the Posture of the Dead (*pretāsana*). She has four hands, three eyes, firm breasts, and, in the middle [of her body], three low abdominal lines.

Verse 12

jātopyalpaparicchade kṣitibhujāṃ sāmānyamātre kule
 niśśeṣāvanicakravartipadaviṃ labdhvā pratāponnataḥ
 yadvidyādharavṛndavanditapadaśrīvatsarājōbhavad-
 devittvaccaranāmbujapraṇatijaḥ soyaṃ prasādodayaḥ

Śrīvatsa, who was born into a poor family, and later became the ruler of all kingdoms, reached the heights [of society] and his feet were praised by retinues of *Vidyādhara*s. O Goddess, this happened due to your grace when he bowed before your feet.

Verse 13

caṇḍitvaccaranāmbujārccanakṛte vilvīdaḷolluṇḍhana-
 truṭyatkaṇṭakakoṭibhiḥ paricayaṃ yeṣāṃ na jagmuḥ karāḥ
 te daṇḍāṃkuśacakracāpakuliśaśrīvatsamatsyāñkitai-
 rjāyante pṛthivībhujaḥ kathamivāmbhojaprabhaiḥ pāñibhiḥ

O Caṇḍī, those who hurt their hands with thousands of thorns when collecting *vilva* leaves to worship your feet, in their next life are born with auspicious marks on their hands like a *daṇḍa* (stick), an *aṅkuśa* (elephant goad), a *cakra* (wheel), a bow or a *śrīvatsa*. They will become kings with beautiful lotus-like hands.

Verse 14

viprāḥ kṣoṇibhujo viśastaditare kṣīrājyamadhvāsavai-
 stvām devi tripure parāparamayiṃ samtarpya pūjāvīdhau
 yām yām prārthayate manssthiratayā yeṣānta ete dhruvaṃ
 tāṃ tāṃ siddhimavāpnvanti tarasā vighnairavighnikṛtaḥ

O Tripurā, Brahmins, kings, merchants, and others satiate you with milk, ghee, honey, and liquor respectively, and whatever they pray for with their mind focused [on you], will materialize instantly and [all] obstacles shall be removed [from their path].

Verse 15

śabdānāṃ janani tvamatra bhuvane vāgvādinītyuccyase
tvattaḥ keśavavāsavaprabhṛtayopyāvīrbhavanti dhruvaṃ
liyante khalu yatra kalpavirame brahmādayastepyamī
sā tvaṃ kācidacintyarūpagahanā śaktiḥ parā gīyase

You are called Vāgvādinī, the mother of sounds of this world. From you, Lord Brahma, Lord Viṣṇu and others originate. In the end of each epoch, all of them will vanish within you. [Hence], You are praised as Parā Śakti, the Highest Force; your real self is impossible to perceive.

Verse 16

devānāṃ tritayaṃ trayī hutabhujāṃ śaktitrayaṃ trisvara-
trailokyaṃ tripadi tripuṣkaramatho tribrahmavarṇāstrayaḥ
yat kiñcijjagati tridhā niyamitaṃ vastu trivargātmakaṃ
tat sarvaṃ tripureti nāma bhagavatyanveti te tattvataḥ

Divine triads, three sacred fires, three forces, three notes of Vedic music, three worlds, three-lined *gāyatrī* mantra, three-lined sacred thread, the three Vedas, three castes, and all things in the world that are grouped in triads, all of these are regarded as Tripurā, as they resemble the goddess.

Verse 17

lakṣmīṃ rājakule jayāṃ raṇamukhe kṣemamkarīm adhvani
kravyādadvipasarpabhāji śabarīm kāntāradurge girau
bhūtapretapiśācajambhakabhaye smṛtvā mahābhairaviṃ
vyāmohe tripurāṃ taranti vipadastārāñca toyaplave

People remove their obstacles by contemplating Lakṣmī in the royal house, Jayā in the warfront, Kṣemamkarī on the path, Śabarī once approached by beasts, tuskers, and serpents, Durgā in the mountains, Bhairavī when afraid of ghosts (bhūta), hungry ghosts (preta), flesh-eating ghouls (piśāca), and the demons causing diseases (jambhaka). [People should meditate] on Tripurā if confused and Tārā amidst waters during a flood.

Verse 18

māyā kuṇḍalinī kriyā madhumatī kālī kalā mālinī
mātaṅgī vijayā jayā bhagavatī devī śivā śāmbhavī
śaktiḥ śankaravallabhā trināyanā vāgvādinī bhairavī
hrīmkarī tripurā parāparamayī mātā kumarītyasī

O goddess, You are Māyā, Kuṇḍalinī, Kriyā, Madhumatī, Kālī, Kalā, Mālinī, Mātaṅgī, Vijayā, Jayā, Bhagavatī, Devī, Śivā, Śāmbhavī, Śakti, the favourite of Lord Śiva, the Three-eyed One, Vāgvādinī, Bhairavī, Hrīmkarī Tripurā. [You are] The one who has the nature of the highest and the lowest, the Mother and The Young Maiden.

Verse 19

ā ī pallavitaḥ parasparayutaiḥ dvidvikramādakṣaraiḥ
kādyaiḥ kṣāntagataiḥ svarādibhiratha kṣāntaiśca taissasvaraiḥ
nāmāni tripure bhavanti khalu yānyatyantaguhyanī te
tebhyo bhairavapatni viṃśatisahasrebhyaḥ parebhyo namaḥ

O the wife of Bhairava, the vowels starting with “Ā”, “Ī”, and those sounds formed with their mutual combinations, consonants from “Ka” to “Kṣa” and combined with all vowels, the sounds starting from vowels and ending with “Kṣa”, all these are the secret names of Tripurā. I bow before all these 20,000 names.

Verse 20

bodhavyā nipuṇaṃ budhaisstutiriyam kṛtvā manastatgataṃ
 bhāratyastripuretyananyamanaso yatrādyavṛtte sphuṭam
 ekadvitripadakrameṇa kathitastatpādasamkhyakṣaraiḥ
 mantrodhāraavidhirviśeṣasahitaḥ satsampradāyānvitaḥ

Let the wise men know that this eulogy is for the goddess Bhāratī, who is known as Tripurā. The method of construction of her mantra, which is thoroughly traditional, is clearly given [here], for the devotees who have keen minds, [one can find the components of the mantra] in the first, second, and the third letters of the first, second, and the third lines of the first verse of this work.

Verse 21

sāvadyam niravadyamastu yadi vā kim vānyā cintayā
 nūnam stotramidaṃ paḍhiṣyati jano yasyāsti bhaktistvayi
 sañcintyāpi laghutvamātmani dṛḍha sañcāyamānam haṭhāt
 tvadbhaktyā mukharikṛtena racitaṃ yasmānmayāpi dhruvam

What is the point of deliberating whether these eulogies are erroneous or correct? Whoever has devotion for You will surely study this work. I can think about my own [initial] humbleness that I conquered and due to my devotion for you I became a man of many words.

Appendix B. Bālākavacam (“The Armour of Bālā”)

aiṃkārāsanagamitā nalaśikhāṃ
 sau klīm kalām bidratīm
 sauvarṇāṃbaradhāriṇīm triṇayanām
 gautāhivās ojjvalām
 vande pustakapāśamaṃkuśadharām ṣaṭbāhutoścakratām
 tāṃ bālām tripurām śivena sahitām
 ṣaṭ cakrasañcāriṇīm

I worship Bālā Tripurā who is accompanied by Śiva and lives in six *cakras* [of the human body].

I praise her who has six hands and holds a sacred book (*pustaka*), a loop (*pāśa*), and a goad (*aṅkuśa*). She is resplendent, three-eyed, clad in gold, embodies the sounds “sau” and “klīm”, and emanates the “aiṃ” sound.

śiro me pātu kāmākṣī
 lalāṭe durga eva ca
 bhruvau śrībhadrakālī ca
 cakṣurmmaddhye śa⁶⁹ śāṃkarī

Let Kāmākṣī protect my head
 On [my] forehead Durgā
 On the eyebrows Śrībhadrakālī
 Between the eyes Śāṃkarī

vārāhī nāsikāṃ pātu
 jihvām pātu sarasvatī
 daṃṣtrau tu asitām pātu
 adharoṣṭhau harapriye

Let Vārāhī protect my nostrils
 Sarasvatī my tongue
 My teeth and lips, Harapriyā, the Beloved of Śiva

dantapaṃktiṃ nārasimhī
jihvāgre tu hi caṇḍike
kapolau kauśike rakṣet
karṇayoḥ kamalālaye

Let Nārasimhī protect a row of my teeth
Caṇḍikā the tip of my tongue
My cheeks—Kauśikī
My ears—Kamalā

kaṇṭhaṃ pātu mahālakṣ[m]ī
stanayugme ca pārvatī
bhujau pātu mahākālī
stanamaddhya ca pārvatī

Let Mahalaksmī protect my throat
My pair of breasts—Pārvatī
My arms—Mahākālī
Between my breasts—Pārvatī

kakṣadvator bhagavatī
pārśvaṃ me pātu māṭṛkā
kukṣīr bhagavatī caiva
nābhīṃ me pātu maṃgalāṃ

Let Bhagavatī protect my armpits
Māṭṛkā—my ribs
My abdomen—Bhagavatī
My navel—Maṃgalā

maddhyaṃ me pātu indrāṇī
nitāṃbe śarvarakṣakī
ūrū me pātu mitrāṇī
nitāṃbe tripure saha

Let Indrāṇī protect my waist
On one of my hips Śarvarakṣakī
Let Mitrāṇī protect my thigh
With Tripurā on my (other) hip

jaṃghayośca mahāśakti
jānumaddhye tu śāṃbhavī
gulphadvayośca mātāṃgī
pādaṃ me pātu yakṣiṇī

On my shanks Mahāśakti
On my knees Śāṃbhavī
On my ankles Mātāṃgī
(and) let Yakṣiṇī guard my feet

pādāṃgulī bhavānī me
nakhaṃ rakṣatu pārvatī
pūrvaka⁷⁰ pātu indrāṇī
dakṣiṇe rakṣaya rakṣaṇī

Bhavanī (guard) my toes
 Let Pārvatī protect my nails
 In the east let Indrānī stay on guard
 From south let Rakṣaṇī protect me

paścime pātu paurāṇī
 uttare pātu komalī
 ūrtthā⁷¹ rakṣatu sumukhī
 pātāle⁷² bhoginī sutā

In the west let Paurāṇī protect me
 In the north—Komalī
 Let Sumukhī, the One with the Beautiful Face, protect me from above
 In the lower regions—Bhoginī

sarvāṅga⁷³ sarvasantuṣṭā
 sarvarakṣāṃśca śāmbhavī
 jñānavṛddhimahotsāhā
 saṃgrāme vijayī bhava

In all body parts—Sarvasantuṣṭā, The One Pleased with Everything,
 Sarvarakṣā, The One who Protects All, and Śāmbhavī
 Jñānavṛddhī, The One who Causes the Growth of Knowledge
 And Mahotsāhā, the Goddess of Great Power
 In a battle let there be [with me] Vijayī, The Victorious One

araṇye parvate durge
 coravyāghrādisaṃkaṭe
 ghanadāvānalākṛānte
 mahāsāgaramaddhyage

Parvatī and Durgā—
 In a forest full of thieves, tigers and other [dangers], dense, raged with wildfires
 [and] in the middle of a great ocean

sandhyor bhagavatī rakṣet
 divārātrau ca rakṣa māṃ
 sarvavidyākārī caiva
 sarvasaubhāgyavarthnam⁷⁴

At junctures let Bhagavatī protect me
 Also, at night and during the day
 Together with Sarvavidyākārī, The One Who Gives All Knowledge,
 The one who increases all types of prosperity

āyuṣyaṃ puṣṭidā caiva
 apamṛtyuvinaśanaṃ
 putrārthī labhate putrāṃ
 dhanārthī labhate dhanam

She is the giver of health and wealth
 Protects against premature death
 Who wants a son receives sons
 Who wants wealth receives wealth

kanyārtthī labhate kanyāṃ
 mokṣārtthī labhate gatim
 sarvavedādhikāraśca
 vipro yaḥ kavacaṃ vadet

The one who prays for a daughter receives a daughter
 The one who wants liberation attains her goal
 A Brahmin, an expert in all Vedas, should recite this protective chant (*kavaca*)

kṣatrāḥ paṭhanti kavacaṃ
 bahurājyaṃ labhanti te
 vaiśyo yaḥ kavacaṃ japtvā
 dhanadhānyasamṛddhimān
 śūdrāṇāṃ labhate caiva

If a Kṣatriya recites this protective chant, they will receive many kingdoms
 Having chanted this *kavaca*, a Vaiśya will multiply their money and grain
 Śūdras also receive all prosperity

sarvasaubhāgyavardhanaṃ
 ekavāraṃ paṭhedyastu
 nityā śucikarā nṛṇāṃ
 dvivāraṇca paṭhennityaṃ
 kavitvaṃ jñānasiddhidam
 trivāraṇca paṭhennityaṃ
 aṣṭaiśvaryaṇca jāyate

If recited once, [it] forever makes people radiant with purity
 If one chants [the kavaca] twice
 It gives knowledge and poetic talent
 If one regularly chants it thrice [one] receives eightfold blessings

duṣṭamṛtyupraśamanaṃ
 duṣṭagrahavināśanaṃ
 brahmarākṣasa vetāḷa
 śakunīśākinī tathā

It protects against sinful death and vanquishes evil spirits like
 Brahmarākṣasa, Vetāḷa, Śakunī, or Śākinī

hākinnyāścaiva kākinnyaḥ
 sarvabhītivināśanaṃ
 rājavaśyā prajāvaśyā
 nārīvaśyā mahītale

[It also protects against] Hakinis and Kakinis
 It removes all dangers
 It enslaves kings, people (subjects of the kings), and women on [the whole] Earth

sarvavṛścikabādhāśca
 sarvopadravanāśanaṃ
 mṛgabādhāvināśaśca
 sarvaśatrur vinaśyati

It frees one from the hindrances of scorpions

Heals all injuries
Removes all problems caused by animals
And destroys all enemies

yaḥ idaṃ kavacaṃ nityaṃ
śucirbhūtvā mahātmanah
devyāstu sannidhau ścaī⁷⁵ va
dakṣinnāmūrttisannidhau
ekānte niyame ranye
nadītīre śucau stale⁷⁶
sarvaśāpaviśuddhātmā
brahmalokā sa gacchatiiti bālākavacaṃ samāstaṃ

Whoever [chants] this eternal chant—armour (*kavaca*) gets purification from the great souls

In the presence of the goddess and Dakṣinnāmūrti
In a pleasant, secluded, and secret place, on the bank of a river, in a pure place
He who has purified himself [and chanted this *kavaca*] goes to the Heaven of Brahma (Brahmaloka)

here ends *Bālākavaca*

Appendix C. “Bālāmantra”

(An invocation from a palm-leaf manuscript “Bālāmantra”, Folkland International Centre for Folklore and Culture Elambachi (PO), Trikaripur, Kasargod District 671311).

laḷitātanayāṃ devīṃ
bālārkakiraṇapradāṃ
caturhastāṃ triṇayanāṃ
pītavastrāṃ śucismitāṃ

sarvālaṃkāraśobhādyāṃ
sarvadevaiśsmāvartāṃ
sarvasiddhimayīṃ gaurīṃ
sarvamantrādhidevatāṃ

sarvajñānaprabhāṃ nityāṃ
sarvaiśvaryaphalapradāṃ
sarvaśṛṅgāraveśādyāṃ
sarvalokanivāsinīṃ

sāmrājyadāyiniṃ satyāpriyāṃ
cinmātravigrahāṃ
saccidānandarūpādhyāṃ
sadāśivasutāṃ parām

sarvadevaiśsukhāraddhyāṃ
sarvalokasvarūpiṇīṃ
sarvavyādhiprasāmanīṃ
sarvamṛtyunivāriṇīṃ

sarvaśatruharāṃ vande
sarvāpattirvimocanīṃ
sākṣātbrahmamayīṃ bālāṃ
kanyāmāvāhayāmyahaṃ

Goddess who is a daughter of Lalitā
 who shines with rays of the rising sun
 who has four arms, three eyes
 is dressed in yellow and smiles sweetly

who is adorned with all kinds of jewellery, surrounded by all deities,
 the brilliant one who embodies all *siddhis* (accomplishments),
 the one who presides over all mantras

The eternal one who shines with all the knowledge
 who gives all fruits of blessings
 who embodies all love
 who lives in all worlds

The one who gives universal sovereignty
 Who is the pure thought
 Who takes the form of truth, consciousness and bliss
 The great daughter of Śiva
 The one who is worshipped by all gods
 Who embodies all worlds
 Who cures all the diseases
 Who protects against death

I praise her, the one who defeats all enemies
 Who saves from all misfortunes
 The one who is really the Brahman
 I summon here [Bālā], the young goddess

Notes

- ¹ As noted by Sudyka (2018, p. 73) “During the British domination in the region lasting 150 years, Kerala consisted of three parts: Malabar, i.e., northern part of Kerala, which was a part of Madras Presidency, and the native states of Travancore (Mal. tiruvitāṅkōṭṭu, tiruvāṅkōṭṭu, tiruvitāṅkūr) and Cochin (Mal. kocchi). In 1956 they were joined and formed a state known as Kerala (Mal. kēraḷa)”.
- ² The present paper is the result of a joint work shared by both authors. All translations from Sanskrit and Malayalam are from the authors’ unless explicitly stated otherwise.
- ³ Non-directive, unstructured interviews and conversations were recorded in fieldwork notes. The notes and information from research conducted in Kerala during the years 2010–2013 are supplemented with recent (2021) interviews and fieldwork from the Kozhikode and Malappuram areas.
- ⁴ Buchta (2016, p. 357) adds that the *stotra* poems are “both expressions of devotion and works of literature” that need more scholarly attention. The poems have been neglected not only by recent scholarship but also by Sanskrit theorists like Mammaṭa (11th century), who described them as “ineffective for evoking rasa [the aesthetic experience]”.
- ⁵ The main theme of the Navarātri (“The Nine Nights”) festival is the triumph of the goddess over demons who represent the evil forces of the world. See, for instance, Hüsken (2018).
- ⁶ In the traditions of Kashmirian Śaivism, we find a concept of a sequence (*krama*) of twelve and thirteen Kālīs. See (Wenta 2021) for a detailed study on the origins of the twelve Kālīs and the doctrine of the thirteen Kālīs according to *Mahānayaṅprakāśa* of Trivandrum.
- ⁷ Such legends are popular among various other communities in Kerala. For instance, representatives of a modern Panikker family of Idakkad stress the importance of Bālā worship in their tradition by reiterating the legend of Laghu Bhaṭṭāraka, the great master of Kashmirian lore who brought the tradition to Kerala.
- ⁸ Similar descriptions can be found, for instance, in a popular chant, *Laḷitā Sahasranāma* (v. 120): “When residing in the head she is having the brightness of the Moon, when in the forehead she is like a rainbow and when in the heart she is like the Sun”.
- ⁹ According to Bhāskararāya (1690–1785), a Tantric philosopher, writer, and commentator, widely considered an authority of Śrīvidyā, there are two types of *bhakti*: secondary and primary. The secondary type includes the worship and adoration of the embodied Brahman, practices that can be combined wherever possible, while the primary type is a particular kind of love that arises from it. The former (i.e., secondary *bhakti*) also has several stages that allow one to achieve an intimate state with

Tripurasundarī through ritualistic practices and consequently develop the primary *bhakti*, i.e., love for her (Venkatkrishnan 2015, p. 230).

10 That depiction of the goddess is also found in other Śākta texts such as a popular poem ascribed to Śaṅkarācārya, *Saundaryalaharī* (1937, verse 15).

11 Kaikkulangara Ramavarier (Namputiri 2016, p. 130) suggests *Śaivāgamarahasya* as a possible source of this meditative verse (*dhyāna śloka*).

12 The Malayalam verbal root *Ārappu* has a similar meaning, that is, to scream or shout loudly.

13 We can add here that goddess Lalitā has been described as sitting on five *pretas* (*pāñca-pretāsana*), the corpses of Brahma, Viṣṇu, Rudra, Īśvara and Sadāśiva—five deities being the seat of the supreme goddess (Sanderson 2012–2014, p. 44).

14 Traditionally, 13 temples are accepted as the Śākta centers of Kerala: Māṭāyikkāvu (Kannur), Mannampurattukāvu (Kannur), Piṣārikkāvu (Koyilandi), Śrī Vaḷayanāṭukāvu (Kozhikode), Koṭikkunnu (Malappuram), Māmānikkunnu (Irikkoor), Śrī Śrī Kurumba Bhagavati kāvu (Kodungallur), Panayanārkkāvu (Mannar, Thiruvalla), Muttūrūkkāvu (Thiruvalla), Tirumāndhānkunnu (Malappuram), Kaliyāṁvallī (Kozhikode), Tiruvañcerikkāvu (Kannur), and Kaḷarivātukkal. See Ajithan (2018).

15 The temple itself has a peculiar structure. The *śrīkovil* (sanctum) houses the image of the main goddess (called Ruruji or Camuṇḍā). The image faces north, and *śrīkovil* itself is a rectangular construction whose roof is covered with copper sheets. The temple has a granite *adhiṣṭhāna* (basis). The *namaskāra maṇḍapa* (a ritual pavillion on a raised platform) has four pillars and is located near the eastern entrance. The temple has been reconstructed several times and the main *dīpastambhana* was reinstalled in 1940. The *cuṛṛampalaṁ* (the inner courtyard) has entrances from all sides. In the eastern part of the complex is a shrine of Kṣetrapāla, The Lord of the [holy] Place. Images of Gaṇapati and Śiva are installed in the north-eastern quarter (Śiva and Gaṇapati face east and south, respectively). There is a stage in the western part for performances of the traditional theatrical artform known as *cākyār kūttu*. A large sacrificial stone (*valliya ballipīṭha*) is located in front of the main entrance on the northern side. The complex is surrounded by a laterite compound wall in the shape of an elephant's hide.

16 The so-called *kaula* rites with offerings of meat and alcohol are performed in several temples of the śākta denomination by different communities of Brahmins and Nāyars. See also Freeman (1994).

17 The Sanskrit word Mātrka means both a sound and mother. Moos (1961, p. 32) also notes that the description of the goddess in her form of Mātrka is similar to the one found in *Aruṇopaniṣat*.

18 The tradition of the Nampūtiris is called Vaidika-Tantra, and it is a fusion of Vedic orthopraxy and elements of the Tantric way of worship. *Tantrasamuccaya* consists of 12 chapters dealing with temple rituals such as the installation or consecration of images. It was composed by Nārāyaṇa Nampūtiri (born in 1426 C.E.), a Brahmin from a well-respected Cennas family. The text gives importance to the worship of seven main deities: Viṣṇu, Śiva, Śaṅkarnārāyaṇa, Durgā, Subrahmaṇya, Gaṇapati and Śāstā. Therefore, it is clear that the text is a comprehensive manual that deals with ritual practices of both Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava currents. *Śeṣasamuccaya* (15th century C.E.) was composed by Śankara, the son of Nārāyaṇa the author of *Tantrasamuccaya*. Ten chapters (*paṭala*) of *Śeṣasamuccaya* explain the mode of worship (*pūjāvīdhi*) of various deities not included in *Tantrasamuccaya*. It is often referred to as a more Śākta-oriented supplement to *Tantrasamuccaya*. However, many stanzas of the *Śeṣasamuccaya* are quoted directly from *Tantrasamuccaya* (Sarma 2009, p. 336).

19 Rastogi (1996, p. 28) observes that Krama can be seen as “a transitional link between the Kula, a Śaiva system, and the Tripurā, a Śākta system.”.

20 Priests who perform the daily rites in Vaḷayanāṭu, the Mūssats, come mostly from a Vaṭṭoli clan. The main priest of the temple is the senior member of Kāṭṭumāṭam clan, and he performs three ceremonies per year.

21 The name Tripurā refers to the triadic nature of the most important yantra of Śrīvidyā, that is, śrīcakra. The śrīcakra is called the “maṇḍalic form of the goddess Tripurasundarī” and is composed of a central triangle with a dot (bindu), surrounded by sequences of triangles encircled by concentric rows of lotus petals, wheels of yoginis, and outer squares with openings on each side. However, in the case of Bālā worship, the focus is on the nine inner triangles—the *navayoni*. The *navayoni* also appear in non-Śrīvidyā Tantric texts composed in Kerala, for instance, *Śeṣasamuccaya* (*Śeṣasamuccaya* 1951, verses 7.66, 7.70).

22 According to A. Sreedhara Menon (2007, p. 152), following the demise of King Rama Varma Kulasekhara (1089–1102), Kozhikode and its surroundings was subjected by Porlātiri, after which it became a part of Poḷanāṭu. On the struggles between the Zamorins of Kozhikode, the Porlātiri and the Kurumbiatiri, see Chakravarti (2018).

23 *ūrālars* were also call *ūrs* or *ūrārs*. (Devadevan 2020, p. 143).

24 There are several versions of the legend. According to Krishna Ayyar (1976, p. 257), the event happened in the 13th century C.E. and the Brahmins were punished by the Zamorin for “smuggling an enemy prince into the palace”.

25 Some scholars like Vaṭakkumkūr Rājarājavarma (1938, pp. 2–34), the author of *Keraḷīya Samskr̥ta Sāhitya Caritraṁ*, suggest that Rāghavananda, the commentator of *Bālāvimśati* and Kokkunnattu Śivāñṇal are in fact the same person. Kokkunnattu Śivāñṇal of Taḷippampu in Kannur, is said to have been a yogi who ultimately left society to live alone in a forest. Hence, he was called Atyāśrami (the one who has transcended the four stages of life) and Koṭumkāṭukotiyan (the one who likes to live in the forest). Other scholars like Ulloor S. Paramesvarayyar and Pareekshith Ramavarma Thampuram suggest that Atyāśrami lived in Cerumukku illam of Ponnani Taluk in central Kerala (Vasudevan 2022, pp. 26–35).

- 26 Narayanan (2006, p. 188) observes that under the rule of the Zamorins, Kozhikode (Calicut) became an international trade centre that “exposed the West Coast society to the latest trends in world economy and society. An intelligent religious policy, with an open secular attitude towards all races, creeds and languages made Calicut the abode of a cosmopolitan culture”.
- 27 Haridas (1998, p. 403) gives an alternative version of the story and states that after the conquest of Poḷanāṭu, a group of men were brought from Parappunadu by the Zamorin to work in Kozhikode. They were instructed by the king’s minister to kill the Brahmins in the Tali Temple.
- 28 Here, Rāghavānanda notes the difference in rituals performed by the adepts of Vāmamārga and those who belong to Dakṣinamārga: the former consume the liquor used in rituals, while the latter only admire its aroma in the middle of the ritual (*ghrāṇabhakṣaṇa*) (Sastri 1917, p. 16).
- 29 There is a visible proliferation of schools and private educational centres teaching Tantra and Śrīvidyā in Kerala. For instance, Roopesh (2021) gives an example of Ganesa Sadhana Kendram in Kozhikode district, where a training in Śrīvidyā is given to all interested individuals.
- 30 The second highest of the four social classes of ancient India, traditionally the military or ruling class.
- 31 The third highest of the four social classes, traditionally associated with trade and agriculture.
- 32 White (1997) discusses Vidyādhara together with *siddhas* and Van Buitenen (1958) mentions them in the context of heroes and says that a Vidyādhara is “a benevolent, artistic and amorous spirit, but also a boon companion of demons and goblins and a bogy of which small children are frightened”. Bühnemann (2000, p. 134) quotes a visualization of Bālā Tripurā goddess from *Mantramahodadhi* that should be used in rites performed for attaining knowledge. For this purpose, Bālā Tripurā should be visualized as residing in the upper-most *cakra*, showing a gesture of granting wishes, holding a nectar vessel and holy scripture; she also makes a gesture of protection and sheds the nectar.
- 33 Dirks (2001, p. 13) notes that social identity in South India was determined by various factors, including affiliation to groups such as “temple communities, territorial groups, lineage segments, family units, royal retinues, warrior subcastes, “little” kingdoms, occupational reference groups, agricultural or trading associations, devotionally conceived networks and sectarian communities”. Dirks considers the above “units of identification” to be more significant than any “caste” grouping”. Similarly, Mūssats are recognised by other communities as lower-class Brahmins, but they also constitute their identity on other levels: by carrying on the tradition of Śākta-krama, knowledge of the Sanskrit language, and mastery of temple rituals and magic (*mantravāda*).
- 34 Similarly, according to *Vāmakeśvarīmata* (2005, p. 100), the goddess of Śrīvidyā is the highest *śakti* (*paramā*) but she manifests herself in subtle (*sūkṣma*) and gross (*sthūla*) forms.
- 35 The reference to Bhairava’s form is interesting as Tripurā is generally invoked in Tantric texts in her three aspects: Tripurā Bālā, Tripurā Sundarī, and Tripura Bhairavī (Kinsley 1997, pp. 43, 117). However, Kinsley adds that Tripurasundarī is said to have other forms: Kālī, Kumārī, Caṇḍikā, Bhārati and Gaurī. Moreover, the divine triad of goddesses of Kashmirian Saivism (Trika) is often presented as incarnations of Kāmeśvarī, Vajreśvarī and Bhagamālīnī of Śrīvidyā (Timalsina 2008, p. 218).
- 36 Similarly, *Bālā Kavaca* states: “Parvatī and Durgā In a forest full of thieves, tigers and other (dangers) dense, raged with wildfires (and) in the middle of a great ocean”.
- 37 Rāghavānanda (Sastri 1917, pp. 39–40) and Shashtrigal (Namputiri 2016, p. 62) also mention what they call the *pārāyaṇa* system, another system of derivation in which “a” is prefixed and “i” is suffixed to those 20,000 names.
- 38 *Prayogamañjarī* (10th or 11th century C.E.) a Tantric work of Ravi is also known as *Śaivāgamasiddhāntasāra* (Sarma 2009, p. 321).
- 39 In this context, Ajithan (2011) talks about “pre- and post-*Tantrasamuccaya*” periods indicating that initiations are not dealt with in the Kerala tantras that were written after the *Tantrasamuccaya*.
- 40 Shulman (2012, p. 152) adds that the Zamorin’s kingdom was “the first modern state on the Kerala coast and the arena for the first strong articulations of a distinctive, self-conscious Malayalam cultural identity. Powerful thematic continuities bind together the Nāyaka states of the south and east and the emergent state system of Malabar, with its innovative poets and scholars”.
- 41 Goren Arzony (2019, p. 309) describes the Cākyārs as a community “deeply affiliated with the Brahmin temple . . . who to this day are associated with the temple performance of *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* and *Cākyār Kūttu*”.
- 42 “Bālāparameśvarī paddhatiprakāraṇe bālāṃ kalaśapūjāṃ kariṣye”.
- 43 The basic Bālā mantra is composed of three syllables but it is often chanted in *anuloma-pratiloma* sequence (i.e., in regular and reverse order) to remove the *mantra doṣa* (defect). However, *Devīrahasya* (2010), verses 13–14 refers to the mantra as one that has no impurities and can be used without restrictions.
- 44 Bālādevatāprāṇāṃ asmin kalaśe āgatya sukhaṃ ciraṃ tiṣṭhantu svāhā.
- 45 Bühnemann (1988, p. 208) observes that in Smārta tradition, the order of the guardians of the directions (*lokapāla* / *dikpāla*) is always fixed as being anti-clockwise, starting from the east.
- 46 Hanneder (1997) observes that the *ṛṣinyāsa* (the act of placing the names of sages on one’s body) has Vedic origins and presents this example as in his argument for the vedāntization of Śrīvidyā.

- 47 *Pañcagavya*, the five products of a cow, consists of cow's milk, curd, clarified butter, urine, and dung. It is believed to have purifying qualities and is therefore used in various rituals of atonement and rites of purification in various Hindu and Buddhist traditions (Korom 2000, p. 193).
- 48 A similar mantra for *nirañjana* is prescribed in Rāmeśvara's commentary on *Paraśurāma Kalpasūtra* (*Paraśurāmakalpasūtra* 1950, p. 558), where the light is called *kuladīpā*, the lamp of the kula tradition.
- 49 Groesbeck (2018) indicates that the "intimacy inherent in patterns of remuneration" in the case of the *guru-dakṣiṇā* in Kerala is opposed to institutional fees. *Guru-dakṣiṇā*, according to Groesbeck, is a symbol of submission and devotion to one's guru and can be contrasted with a concept of a lesson learned for a fixed fee.
- 50 In his study on transmission of traditional knowledge in Kerala, Gerety (2018, p. 7) observes: "The total obedience of the student to his teacher, as well as the intensity of the affective bond that takes shape between them over years of study, is encoded in the Sanskrit word guru. Literally, guru means 'heavy,' and its applied meaning of 'teacher' retains a weighty resonance".
- 51 The guru and his disciples would like to remain anonymous, and therefore in this article we refer to them as "the Vadakara Tantric Community".
- 52 This element of the ritual therefore differs from what we could read in *Bālādīkṣāpaddhati*, where neither the wine nor the guru's placing of vessel on their head was mentioned.
- 53 Interestingly, on another occasion, the same guru explained that his ancestors had been Tantric practitioners, but that their tradition was long forgotten. Intrigued by the idea of the ancient Tantric lore of Kerala, the guru started to search for a spiritual teacher and finally found a local Śrīvidyā master. Hence, in this case, there is a tendency within certain communities to supplement local Tantric ritualism with Śrīvidyā orthopraxy.
- 54 A slightly different invocation is found in a *kaṇḍa*, a protective chant recited to invoke goddesses to gather around the adept and protect him or her. The recitation is accompanied by gestures of "consolidating and safeguarding the area surrounding the adept" (Gupta 2000, p. 486) and, optionally, a warding-off gesture that is aimed at banishing evil forces. The invocation is found in the *kaṇḍa* of the Pannikar family of Chathangottupuram. The goddess of Chathangottupuram is also worshipped in Tirumandhankunnu Bhagavati Temple, one of the prominent Śākta centres in central Kerala. Here, the goddess who embodies the three syllables of her mantra (*aim, klīm, sauḥ*), is three-eyed, eternally garbed in a golden robe. She has six hands and dwells in the six *cakras* of the human body. In her hands she is holding a book (*pustaka*), a noose (*pāśa*), and a goad (*aṃkuśa*). She is praised here as Bālā Tripurā and, interestingly, worshipped together with Śiva. This reminds one of a taboo popular in some Brahmin families of Kozhikode, related to the chanting of the Bālā mantra. As per these local beliefs, the Bālā Tripurā mantra should be chanted together with the *pañcākṣara* mantra of Śiva. In this mode of chanting, both mantras are combined, and their syllables are intermixed in a prescribed manner. Other clans in Kerala also refer to the formula composed of these two as the Śiva-Śakti mantra. As per a popular belief, the mantras of Śrīvidyā were cursed by ancient sages, and an adept should first chant curse-removing mantras (*Śāpavimocana*). Nevertheless, in contemporary traditions this is hardly ever practised. In most cases, the guru is believed to be the one who purifies the mantra before giving it to an adept or asks the adept to chant a *Bālāvīṃśati* to receive additional blessings.
- 55 In a Tantric manuscript from Kasargode (Northern Kerala) is a detailed invocation praising various manifestations of the Bālā goddess, for instance as a daughter of Lalitā (see Appendix C).
- 56 See Lidke (2017) for a similar observation on the importance and omnipresence of *śrīcakras* in the Tantric traditions of Nepal.
- 57 However, the Nāyar caste was subdivided into many low- and high-ranking communities with various traditional occupations. See Fuller (1976, pp. 38–43).
- 58 Gurukkal Nadanta Anandanatha Nair, June 2020, personal communication.
- 59 According to Gurukkal Nadanta, the following Nāyar traditions were known as the Māntrikas: Meppāṭ Saṃpradāya, Kīppāṭ Saṃpradāya, Naṭuvattaccan Saṃpradāya, Tuḷuvattaccan Saṃpradāya, Cittoṭattiṭam Saṃpradāya, Kokkāṭ Nāyanār Saṃpradāya, and Parippinkaṭav Saṃpradāya.
- 60 The Vāḷ Nambis were traditionally the trustees of the sword of the royal family of Kozhikode; at the time of king's demise, they would take his sword and ceremonially give it to the successor.
- 61 In *kaḷaris* is another "altar" (*guru-pīṭha*) where the whole lineage of teachers of the tradition is collectively venerated (Karasinski 2021).
- 62 "Śākta Aham" is a term used by Nadanta to indicate a particular stage of the Meppāṭ spiritual practice.
- 63 One may find similar expressions in many Tantric scriptures. For instance in *Paramārthasāra* (kārikā 47–50) aham ("I" or "myself") "signifies the 'god' who is the 'I' of all living beings" (Bansat-Boudon and Tripathi 2014, p. 212).
- 64 The term *ghāṭā* Śuddhi is also found in modern yogic schools, where it refers to the yogic methods of purification of the body (Alter 2004, p. 162).
- 65 The practice described here can be called a form of dream incubation. The dream incubation rites exist in and are valued by many cultures around the world. Those practices require an adept to sleep in a sacred place in anticipation of a god-given dream. See, for instance, Morinis (1982) on dream incubation in the Hindu traditions of Bengal.
- 66 Timalsina (2015, p. 98) observes that the "blending" of deities is a characteristic of what he calls Tantric visual culture. Thus, Tripurabhairavī is a "blended form of Tripurā- and Bhairavī".

- 67 There are very few temples in Kerala officially dedicated to Bālā goddess. There are plans to erect a new temple, in the shape of *śrīcakra mahameru*, in Perumpuzha, Kollam by 2024 (IndusScrolls 2021).
- 68 On the characteristics of Hindu *paddhatis*, see also Michaels (2016, p. 112).
- 69 Possibly “ca”.
- 70 Suggested reading: “pūrvake”.
- 71 Suggested reading: “ūrdhva”.
- 72 pātāle: substitution of the alveolar l with the retroflex ḷ in intervocalic position, possible influence of Malayalam language.
- 73 Suggested reading: “sarvāṃge”.
- 74 Suggested reading: “varddhanam” instead of “vartthnam”.
- 75 Possibly “cai”.
- 76 Possibly: “sthale”.

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