

Aspects of the Festival of Love in premodern Kerala



God Manmatha (Kāma),
wood-carving, Trivandrum,
Govt. Art (Napier) Museum

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Festivals of (the God of) Love (*kāmotsava*) in ancient India, their links with larger spring festivals (*vasantotsava*), and the survivals of the latter in modern Holi (*holākā*), are subjects which have already been discussed at length by scholars.

See:

- Raghavan, V. *Festivals, Sports and Pastimes of India*, Ahmedabad: B. J. Institute of Learning and Research, 1979 [based on a 1972 series of lectures], pp. 86-88, 193-204.
- Anderson, Leona, “The Indian Spring Festival (Vasantotsava): One or Many?”, *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 69/1, 1988, pp. 63–76.
- Id. *Vasantotsava. The Spring Festivals of India: Texts and Traditions*. New Delhi: D. K. Printworld, 1993.
- Devarajan, T. *Kāma and Kāma Worship*, Delhi: New Bharatiya Book Corporation, 2011, pp. 64-88.
- Sheshadri, K.G. “Gleanings of Kāmadeva Rituals in Ancient Indian Literature and Culture”, *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, Kolkata, Vol. 56/1-2, 2014, pp. 81-84.
- Rajendran, C. & alii (Eds), *Festivals of India*, Delhi : New Bharatiya Book Corporation, 2024, *passim*.

In Kerala, popular forms of *kāmotsava* still survive, especially through the *pūrotsavas* (“Pooram”; Mal. *pūraṁ* tadbhava of Skt. *pūrvaphalgunā/ī*, the 11th lunar asterism-*nakṣatra*, on the day of which the celebration ends) conducted in several places of northern Kerala like in Payyannur region (Kannur district).
See:

- Sahapedia (dir. Sudha Gopalakrishnan):

<https://www.sahapedia.org/community-meal-poorakkali-festival-valiyakanji>

“Pooram or Poorakkali festival is a nine-day festival celebrated in parts of northern Kerala in March and April. It is a spring festival that celebrates the spirit of love. During the festival, devotees sponsor meals in temples as an offering to the deity. The community gathers in the temple to prepare and distribute the meal. The food is very austere, consisting only of rice gruel and a few dishes. Conversations and laughter fill the air; while the performers of the Poorakkali dances, which will take place later in the evening and over the next days, rehearse in the background. The whole exercise augments the festive mood and strengthens the community bond. The video was shot for Sahapedia at Kannur in 2017.”

<https://www.sahapedia.org/final-ceremony-poorakkali-festival-pooram-kuli>

“The ritual bathing of the idol or *pooram kuli* is the final ceremony of the festival where the priests carry out the idol to the temple tank for a holy cleansing. The video documents the *pooram kuli* ceremony observed at the Madayikaavu Bhagavathy Temple, Kannur, in 2017.”

This paper concentrates at first on certain sexual aspects of Kāma festival and worship related to the courtesan milieu, as described in an anonymous *bhāṇa* and in a *saṃdeśakāvya*, two works composed in Central Kerala sometime in the first half of the 14th century, possibly by one and the same poet.

These aspects reflecting most probably local real practices are, contrastively, not found in the conventional picture of the Festival given in a *nāṭaka* (on the subject of Kṛṣṇa's son Pradyumna, that is Kāma reborn) penned by a South Kerala pious king around 1300 AD, whereas a Keralan poet and commentator of his time warned of the dangers of *kāma*. Nevertheless, the last two authors indirectly allude to the “licentious” sexual aspects evoked in the former works.

The *Viṭanidrā-bhāṇa* (abbr. VNBh) or “The Gallant’s Sleep” *bhāṇa* appears to be the earliest preserved *bhāṇa* composed in Kerala. The *bhāṇa* is a theatrical genre of comic monologue, composed on the model of the *Caturbhāṇī*, a “quartet of causeries” of the classical age also fortunately preserved in Kerala (ed. 1922). The action of the VNBh takes place in the courtesan quarter of Mahodayapuram, the capital of the former Cera kings (present day Kodungallur). The narrator and main character of this *bhāṇa* is a *viṭa*, that is a “gallant” (some call him a “pimp”, or a “playboy”, etc.), viz. an educated and respected man managing the courtesans’ affairs. He describes with humour his day-walking and successive encounters in the hot quarter.



Viṭanidrā-bhāṇa, edition T. Devarajan with a detailed introduction, Ezhukone (Kollam): Sree Sruthi Publishers, 1989.

Already in the *nāndī* (the initial benedictive stanza pronounced by the *sūtradhāra* from behind the curtain), in which Kāma is praised, there is a reference to the Festival of (the God of) Love.

jayati sukr̥taiḥ prācyair vṛttair mithaḥkalahotsave

jhaṭiti dayite jātōtkampaṃ praṇāma-vidhāyini |

vicalitakucaḥ sāraṅgākṣyā vilolitakuntalaḥ

śirasighaṭitaḥ pādāghātaḥ sanūpurānisvanaḥ || 1 ||

hariṇī; anvaya + padapāṭha : jayati, *kaḥ* : [kāmaḥ] vicalita-kucaḥ (vicalitau kucau yena) vilolita-kuntalaḥ (vilolitaḥ kuntalaḥ yena) *kasyāḥ* : sāraṅga+akṣyāḥ (sāraṅgasya iva akṣīṇi yasyāḥ), *api ca saḥ* : śirasi-ghaṭitaḥ (śirasi ghaṭitam yena) pāda+āghātaḥ (pādānām āghātaḥ yena) sanūpura-nisvanaḥ (sanūpuraḥ nisvanaḥ yena), *kadā* : mithaḥ - kalaha+utsave, *api ca* : jhaṭiti dayite praṇāma-vidhāyini jāta+utkampam (jātaḥ utkampaḥ yena tam), *katham* : sukr̥taiḥ prācyaiḥ vṛttaiḥ.

He [= God Kāma] is triumphant, by means of the/his old good practices, during the Festival of the couple quarrel, as soon as the lover pays homage to the One by whom the/his agitation arose; He by whom, for the deer-eyed girl, the breast is shaken and the hair dishevelled, and by whom there is connection at the level of the head, beating of the feet, sounding of the anklets.

In the compound *mithaḥkalaha-utsava*, *mithaḥ-kalaha* has to be understood, like the compound *mithoyodha* (“hand to hand fighting with one another”), as a “quarrel together”, that is in the privacy of the couple. And this (poetically) conventional lover’s quarrel is a mock or feigned one.

Such a “Festival of the love quarrel”, *Praṇaya-kalahotsava* or simply *Kalahotsava*, is still currently held in several South Indian Vaiṣṇava temples, e.g. of Śrīraṅgam, Ālvār Tirunagarī or Tirupati. However, in those cases, we are not dealing, like here, with a Festival of (the God of) Love. It is the (real, not feigned) amorous quarrel (ending of course in reconciliation) between Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī which serves as the referring frame to these *praṇaya-kalaha(-utsava)* one-day (or -night) temple ceremonials, at the end of which the Lord pacifies his angry Consort(s).

See the detailed study of Ewa Dębicka-Borek, “Viṣṇu the Saviour: On the Festival of the Romantic Quarrel (*praṇaya-kalahotsava*) in the Pāñcarātra *saṃhitās*,” (*Religions* 13/8, 2022), who, following the description of this type of temple festival in two Pāñcarātra *saṃhitās*, throws light to the Śrīvaiṣṇava reinterpretations of its prescriptions.

Moreover, this Praṇaya-kalahotsava is performed on the 9th day of the Brahmotsava in some temples, or, for instance in the Tirumala temple, two months after the Brahmotsava, that is either in September-October or in November-December.

See M.S. Ramesh, *The Festivals and Rituals at Tirumala Temple*, Chennai: T.R. Publications, 2000, pp. 125-126

Differently the (*mithaḥkalaha*)-*utsava* in the VNBh is supposed to be performed in March-May, during the spring season. This is confirmed by the second stanza of the introduction of the VNBh (pronounced from behind the curtain by “someone” = the *viṭa* himself, while the *sūtradhāra* is briefly on the stage), which compares (by means of sexual double entendre) the *vasanta* season, i.e. Spring, with the *viṭa*, viz. the Gallant, the hero of the play.

manojñaiḥ sallāpaiḥ parabhṛtavadhūnām vyavaharan

parāgaiś cūtānām nibiḍam anuliptaḥ surabhilaiḥ |

vilobhyadvandvānām kalahakaluṣānām ghaṭayitā

vitannann ānandaṁ viṭa iva vasanto vijayate ||2||

śikhariṇī; anv. + pp. : vijayate, kaḥ : vasantaḥ, viṭaḥ iva, katham : vyavaharan kena : manojñaiḥ sallāpaiḥ kāsām : parabhṛta-vadhūnām (parabhṛtavadhūḥ kokilāyām vā veśyāyām vā), katham ca saḥ : nibiḍam anuliptaḥ kena : parāgaiḥ surabhilaiḥ (mal.) kasya : cūtānām (cūtaḥ āmre vā cute vā), api ca saḥ : ghaṭayitā vilobhya-dvandvānām (vilobhyaḥ = vilobhaniyaḥ) kalaha-kaluṣānām, vitannann ānandaṁ. .

“He is occupied with the charming chats of the female cuckoos (/of the women nourished by others = the courtesans); he is densely anointed with the fragrant pollens of the mango-trees (/by the fragrant powders of the asses); he joins together the couples to be connected when displeased by quarrel; he brings happiness: like the Galant, Spring is triumphant. ”

Spring is commonly celebrated in *bhāṇas*, in the early classical ones such as the *Ubhayābhisārikā* (“The Mutual Elopement”) of Vararuci, which has its setting in this season, or the *Padmaprābhṛtaka* (“The Lotus Gift”) of Śūdraka, which opens with a description of spring — see V. Raghavan, *Ṛtu in Sanskrit Literature* (1972), pp. 86-88; as well as in the later ones, such as the *Śāradātilaka* of Śaṅkarakavi (“Spring Pastimes of an Indian Gallant”, cf. Baldissera 1980 pp. viii-ix: “the whole play is charged with the mood of spring”), the *Vasantatilaka* of Varadācārya (alias Ghaṭikāśatam Ammāḷ from Kāñcī, in the 15th c., according to Janaki 1989, p. xi), and, from Kerala, the *Śṛṅgāramañjarī* of Ratikara or the *Vasantotsava* (unpubl. manuscripts).

However, spring does not necessarily mean Spring Festival or Festival of Love as it is more specifically referred to in the VNBh.

In the beginning of the VNBh, the Gallant meets in the morning the courtesan Kaliṅgasenā who is bringing her daughter, still a teenage girl, to worship Kāma as a birthday auspicious rite.

adya duhitur janmadinam iti kusumodyāne manmathaṃ devaṃ draṣṭum iti |

“Today, for the birthday of [my] daughter, [we are going] to see God Manmatha (Kāma) in the flower-garden.” (she tells)

The Festival conducted for Kāma is also called Vasantotsava. For the youth, it is marked by sexual intercourse. In the flower-garden when the image of Kāma is installed, courtesans and lovers gather to worship him and co-mingle in a kind of competition.

This is reminded by the *viṭa* to the brahmin Kokāmukha when he meets him later on during his walk:

**tarhi dr̥ṣṭacarō 'si | nanu kusumodyāne nivartitavasantotsave, ahamahamikayā sametāsu
vicitraveṣarūpamanoharāsu vāravilāsinīṣu yuvajaneṣu ca sakalayoṣinmakuṭaratnabhūtāyāś
caturikāyāḥ saṃnikarṣavartī yauvanonmiṣitaveṣakāntir āsthitaḥ |**

Yes, indeed, I have seen you before. Was it not in the flower garden, when the Spring Festival was being performed, when in competition came together the most charming ladies, attractive through their beautiful ornaments and forms, and the young men: with Caturikā, who among all the women was then crowned, you was engaged in a close union, having displayed a beauty of dress which had caught the eyes of the young [girls].

The compound *yauvanonmiṣitaveṣakāntiḥ* (constructed with *āsthitaḥ*) can be analysed as a *vyadhikaraṇa-bahuvrīhi* with a second member *-kānti* “having the lustre/beauty of“ (*yauvanonmiṣitaveṣasya kāntir yasya saḥ*) and a first member consisting itself of a substantivized bvr. in *-veṣa* “the one whose dress is shining (*unmiṣita*- adj.) for the (or because of his?) youth” (*yauvana+unmiṣito veṣo yasya tasya*); or, with *unmiṣitam* subst. nt. (“a look, glance”) in an (unsatisfactory) attribute position, as *yauvanonmiṣitaṃ veṣa-kāntir yasya saḥ* : “[you] whose dress-beauty [was = caused] the glances/the opening of the eyes of the [female] youth”; or with *-veṣa* = *-(pra-/ā-)veśa* ifc. “entering” and a better *unmiṣitam* object, as *yauvanonmiṣita-veṣā kāntir yasya saḥ*: “[you] whose beauty penetrated the glances of the youth”. The summary of Kunjunni Raja (1972, p. 159: “fashionably dressed and in the company of the most beautiful courtesan-girls”) does not clearly indicate his own interpretation.

Later during his walk, to the courtesan Sunandā who has to look for a better lover, the *viṭa* says:

**nanu viśvānugrāhiṇi mānmathahome suratasampātaḥ | kenātrānubhūyate | kiṃ bravīṣi |
nāham atra sthitā bhāvāya vijñāpayāmi | yuṣmadudavasitam upagamya niḥśeṣaṃ
yāvad vadāmīti |**

Is there not in the oblation (*homa*) to Manmātha (Kāma), favourable to all, the occasion for a [new] sexual encounter? With whom [else] will there be enjoyment there? What do you say?

— “I am not there [yet but] I shall keep the gentleman informed: I will come to your house to talk about it in more detail.” (she tells)

In Lakṣmīdāsa's *Śukasamdeśa* "The Message of the Parrot" (a Kerala *saṃdeśakāvya* to be dated from the early 14th century, whose author might be the same as the one who composed the VNBh), at the end of the second part, within the message to the loved courtesan, a similar competitive peculiarity of the Festival is described:

pum̐bhiḥ strīṇāṃ manasijamahe puñjitānāṃ nikete

bhūyaḥpuṣpāpacayakalayā jāyamāne vivāde |

var. -*puṣpāhṛtijayavidhau*

ālīhaste vinihitapaṇau bhūṣaṇair nūpurādyair

āvām eva tvaritam aviśāvāntarudyānavīthīm || 2.81 ||

This stanza has been variously translated:

When during the festival of love in our abode

With ladies and lovers assembled, a conflict arose

On reaping of flowers, we pledged with our friends our anklets

And quickly entered the bowels of the pleasure garden. (Tr. K.P.A. Menon 1996)

At the festival of Cupid, when the ladies had assembled at the residence with their partners and there arose a discussion regarding the results at gathering flowers, both of us, placing the anklets and other jewels as a pledge in the hands of our friends, quickly entered the recess of the garden. (Tr. G. Pattabiraman 1984)

On the day of the festival of love-God when many couples assembled in the house, do you remember the bet we laid by pledging the sound-producing ornaments like bangles, anklets etc., with your friends in connection with the competition of plucking of flowers, and that we reached the interior of garden immediately. (Tr. K. Chandrasekharan Nair 1985)

On the occasion of a festival of cupid, when the ladies had assembled at the residence with their partners, there arose a discussion regarding the gathering of flowers. Both of us placing the anklets and other jewels as pledge in the hands of our friends quickly entered the recess of the garden.” (Tr. N.P. Unni 2016)

With the help of Mānaveda’s *Vilāsinī* commentary on the stanza, it is possible to understand the scene more precisely.

The poet here reminds us how he, together with his beloved (courtesan), took part in the Festival of Love (*manasijasya kāmasya **mahe** pūjārūpe **utsave***): when the group of (courtesan-)girls gathered with the group of boys (***pumbhiḥ** saha **puñjitānām** rāśīkṛtānām **strīṇām***) in the waiting place (***nikete** mandire*: an appropriate place somewhere near the entrance of the garden of flowers) and when there arose a (sort of ritual?) conflictual discussion (*vivāda*) regarding the quantity of many flowers collected (by each couple for the God? or by each lover for his beloved? ***bhūyasām** bahūnām **puṣpāṇām** **apacaye** **kalayā** sāmārthyena hetunā **vivāde** “kṣaneṇa prabhūta-puṣpa-saṃpādena tvatto ’py aham eva samarthaḥ na tu tvam” ityādi-rūpe **jāyamāne**)*, they both, placing the pledge (***vinihitaḥ** nyastaḥ **paṇaḥ** glahaḥ parājaya-deya-dravyam ity arthaḥ, tad yābhyām tādṛśau santau*; in this case the (floral) matter which had to be given for the victory) or the price (due to the winner, viz. to the girl who received the most flowers: *yad vā **paṇaḥ** **bhūyaḥ****puṣp**ādātur deyam mūlyam... anena svacchanda-v<yava>hāra-yogyatvam **āly-anugamana-niṣedhaś ca vyajyate***) in the hands of the girl-friend (***ālī-haste** sakhī-kare*; viz. the girl’s “female friend”), they two alone (***āvām eva***, as winners of the competition), with the (girl’s) ornaments, such as her anklets etc., sounding (***bhūṣaṇair nūpurādyaiḥ... saśabdaiḥ***), promptly (***tvaritaṃ** satvaram, anena saṃbhoga-tvarā sūcitā*) went on (***aviśāva***) the inner pathway of the (flower/pleasure) garden (***antar-udyāna-vīthīm** udyānavīthyā antarbhāgam*).*

* Cf. the variant reading *puṣpāhṛtijayavidhau* “by means of/concerning the victory in the bringing of flowers” (cf. Pattabiraman)

Thus, in the VNBh as in Lakṣmīdāsa's *Śukasamdeśa*, at the issue of a competition involving a group of courtesan-girls and a group of boys, a girl is elected for going with her boyfriend to the pleasure-garden of flowers and have sexual-intercourse there with him, which, trivial though it may seem, is an appropriate manner to honour Kāma, the presiding deity of her community.

These aspects reflecting most probably local real practices are, contrastively, not found in the conventional picture of the Festival of Love given in a *nāṭaka* (on the subject of Kṛṣṇa's son Pradyumna, that is Kāma reborn) penned by a South Kerala pious king around 1300 AD, whereas a poet and commentator of his time warned of the dangers of *kāma*. Nevertheless, the last two authors also allude, indirectly, to the “licentious” sexual aspects evoked in both the VNBh and the ŚS.

In the south of Kerala, around 1300 AD, “moral” forces, defending a strict *dharma* to be followed by brahmins and kings, were active at the court of the Kūpaka king Ravivarman Kulaśekhara (ca 1266-1317).

King Ravivarman has himself authored a *nāṭaka* type of drama entitled *Pradyumnābhyudaya* “The Felicity of Pradyumna” (tr. Austin), which was composed for the sake of being enacted at a procession festival (*yātrā-utsava*) in the Śrī-Padmanābhasvāmī temple in Thiruvananthapuram/Śrī-Anantapuram (Viṣṇu-Padmanābha being the personal deity of Ravivarman), and which narrates the heroic deeds of Pradyumna the son of Kṛṣṇa and supposed remote ancestor of the *yadu-nātha* royal author. Pradyumna is at the same time well known as being the rebirth of Kāma, which allows a rich double entendre in the play.

However, here it is a “martial” Kāma (and behind him the noble figure of Pradyumna) which is associated with spring in a stanza of the Prologue reminiscent of (but prior to) VNBh st. 1 and 2. The beauty of Pradyumna-Kāma is described several times (ex. II st. 1, 7, 12), but it is only in the *nāndī* of the “play-within-the-play” (*garbhāṅka*), performed before and for the Asura king, that Madana is celebrated, for himself (*śṛṅgāra-daivata*), as the main (demonic) deity (III st. 7).

In the beginning of the fourth Act, we hear that the heroine Prabhāvatī, when in the outer garden during the Festival of the God of Love (*madanamahotsava*), has seen (which is a “Great Festival” in itself) Kāma in person (*pratyakṣamadanasya darśanamahotsavenaiva sa madanotsavaḥ saṁvṛttaḥ*, [chāyā] p. 51 fn. 147), i.e. the handsome hero Pradyumna, and since then is suffering from the pangs of love (ex. st. 4), longing for a “Great Festival of seeing the Lord again” (*tasya mahābhāgasya punardarśanamahotsavaḥ*, [chāyā] p. 53 fn. 169). And Pradyumna experiences the same burning feeling (ex. st. 13, 24) after having “seen her playing together with her retinue of people in the outer garden, amidst the handsome demons (she is the daughter of the Asura king) who were engaged in the Festival [of Love]” (*bāhyodyāne saha parijanaḥ tatra saṁkrīḍamānā dṛṣṭā madhye danujasudṛśām utsavavyāpṛtānām*, st. 9ab).

Obviously for the pious Vaiṣṇava devotee, king Ravivarman, the true “Great Festival” of Love was in the *darśana* itself, viz. in the “seeing of the Lord” and in the “mutual seeing” between the noble hero and the shy heroine, who, during the (demonic?) Festival of Love (“what need of [such] a Madana Festival!”, *kiṁ madanotsavena*, [chāyā] p. 52 fn. 158, says the heroine’s girlfriend), meet in the outer garden or in the pleasure grove where, however, effective sexual union does not occur.

Pūrṇasarasvatī, a commentator and poet from Kerala who has to be dated to the first half of the 14th century, a bit before Lakṣmīdāsa, appears to have belonged to a group of Vedāntin-and-Yogin *smārta-bhakta* ascetics linked to the Southern shrine of Anantapuram and, through it, to the same king Ravivarman.

His *Kamalinīrājahaṃsa*, an allegorical *nāṭaka* named after its hero and heroine, the Royal Swan and the (Day) Lotus Plant, was presented to an assembly of brahmins in Vṛṣapura (Thrissur), at the occasion of the Vasantotsava. However, if both the city (as a Śaiva sacred place) and the festival are celebrated in length in the Prologue, no direct reference is made to some related Kāmotsava. Nevertheless, as if the author was directly challenging Lakṣmīdāsa, there is a clear allusion to the peculiar sexual custom that we have seen before connected with the Festival of Love, here cleverly adapted. It is indeed declared that:

“living in the heart of this [city, compared to Kāśī], the courtesan Salvation enjoys with the ones desirous of liberation the prize/binding result of the pledge (*paṇa-bandhana*; cf. the discussion of the term *paṇa* above) consisting in the knowledge of non-duality” (*advaitabodha-paṇa-bandhanam antarāpi yasyā vimuktigaṇikā bhajate mumukṣūn*, st. 6cd).

Moreover, there is in Act IV (p. 65) a noteworthy passage referring to a lovers’ quarrel: the villain king Kālamegha (Black Cloud), whose wife Saudāminī (Lightning) has manifested some anger towards him (*prarūḍhaprauḍha-praṇayakopā*) because of his bad behaviour, wonders if she is still in love. Puromāruta (Headwind), the companion of the king, confirms that the queen told him she is angry because of the king’s extra-marital affairs with other women such as the she-crane whom he made pregnant (*antarvatīm akṛta na cirād iṣṭapatnīm balākām*) and the garland of waves (*vīcīmālā*) whom he embraced and kissed (st. 29). In order to calm the queen’s anger, Puromāruta cleverly replied to her by citing the three divine examples of Kṛṣṇa’s sixteen thousand girl-friends, of Viṣṇu who once enjoyed an unchaste woman carnally (*bheje kulaṭa-taruṇīm*) and of Śiva who has another wife “born from the mountain”, which must make the king still dear to her despite his hundred defects (st. 30). Such an amoral discourse is of course here put, in a humorous tone, into the mouth of the villain.

Leaving aside these “noble” counter-examples, if we want to try to identify the other characters of the Spring Festival of Love as performed in the courtesan milieu of medieval Kerala, the enquiry had to be enlarged to the contemporary “courtesans” literature in Maṇipravāḷam of the 13th-15th centuries: the *Vaiśikatantram*, whose stanzas constitute instructions from a courtesan to her daughter; the three *acci-caritaṃs* – *Uṇṇiyaccī-*, *Uṇṇiccirutēvī-* and *Uṇṇiyāṭī-* – devoted to the courtesans after which they are respectively named; the *Uṇṇunīli-sandēśaṃ*, bearing the name of the courtesan to whom the message is sent; a few other minor poems devoted to such ladies, and the *Candrōtsavaṃ*. The inquiry should also include Dāmodara’s *Śivavilāsa* (2nd part of the 14th c.), a mahā-kāvya (on the daughter of a local king with an actress), and the later Sanskrit and Malayalam *bhāṇas* and *saṃdeśakāvyas* from Kerala.

On this courtesan culture as expressed in Maṇipravāḷam literature of Kerala, see the enlightening anthropological view of Richard Freeman 2003, pp. 453-457, 469-475, and the chapter “Of Ubiquitous Heroines and Elusive Heroes: The Cultural Milieu of Medieval Maṇipravāḷa Kāvyas from Kerala” of Kesavan Veluthat 2018, pp. 77-105.

In terms of the description of the festival(s), the results are unfortunately less rich than expected.

Yet, at the twilight of the Maṇipravāḷam “courtesans” erotic genre, the late 15th c. *Candrōtsavam*, “The Festival of the Moon”, is interesting in the fact that its heroine, the courtesan who is the divine (moon-light) Candrikā reborn (after the latter’s curse by the Moon-god Candra whom she mystified), calls together a grand assembly of all the famed courtesans (of the other poems), who lament the decline of the great tradition of courtesans and free love in Kerala, the favoured land of the God of Love himself, and express the conviction that holding the Festival of the full Moon (*pūrṇa-candrōtsavam*) will help to revitalise it. This gives the opportunity for the author to satirically describe the brahmin and higher- and-lower castes elite then assembling for the Festival, held during six days in the spring season. The poem mentions (III,68) no less than three great festivals prescribed to be celebrated by courtesans in honour of Kāma, viz. the *candrōtsavam* (where Candra the Moon-god, here involved in the celestial prologue of the story, acts beside the God of Love), the *māramahotsavam* (Māra being here another name of Kāma) and the *vasantōtsavam*. In the Festival celebrated in the poem, the courtesans who come to attend it bring with them several noble partners and engage in sexual pleasure with them.

From all these early testimonies, the following characteristics of the Festival can be pointed out:

- The fact that, at the least in the quarter of the courtesans (which is at first concerned by the VNBh), the worship of the image of God Kāma takes place in a special garden of flowers devoted to him. No reference is made in the VNBh to a real temple for the god: one can imagine a kind of altar or platform for the idol. The *Candrōtsavam* mentions a statue of Kāma situated on a jewel-platform (*maṇi-maṇḍapa*-) devoted to him within a shrine of the Goddess.



- The bringing of young girls, before puberty, for propitiating the god.

This is a common feature of several forms of Kāma festivals, including all the Poorams of North Kerala.

See the Sahapedia illustrative video:

<https://www.sahapedia.org/poorakkali-festival-northern-kerala-worshipping-kama>

“This video [shot at Kannur in 2017] documents the ritual of worshipping Lord Kama. The festival starts with the ritual of *kamane veykal* or creating Kama. On every morning, throughout this nine-day festival, young girls create Kama’s figure in houses with native flowers, cow dung or clay. Specific places within and outside the house are assigned to create the figures. On the last day, the figure is gathered up and Kama is released with a request to come back early next year.”

Cf. Edgar Thurston (1909), on Nambudiri girls during Pooram:

“The god of love, represented by a clay image, is propitiated by unmarried girls with offerings of flowers seven days successively. The image is finally given, together with some money, to a Brāhman, who drops it into a well. The flowers which have been used to decorate the image are placed by the girls at the foot of a jāk tree.”

(Compare this final plunging into water of individual images, with the final ceremony of *pūrakūḷi* ritual bathing of the idol)

No such a picture in the VNBh, which also does not show an organised ritual procession for all the young girls like seen in the modern Poorams: it is only, during the Festival time, the visit to the God of one girl, led by her mother, at the occasion of her birthday. The collecting of flowers is in modern times a ritual specifically ascribed to the young girls.



Girls in search of flowers



Flower idol of cupid(kama)

• What seems to be a competition between a mixed group of sexually-mature girls and boys for electing the most beautiful girl (VNBh) and/or in regard to the result of collecting flowers (ŚS). Though comparable, this is very different from the types of exclusively male performances that make up the present-day Pūrakkali dance with songs, or the related Maruttukkaḷi verbal contest and chanting competition, of the northern Kerala Poorams, which concern Nayars and a few other lower-castes groups. See the Sahapedia videos:

<https://www.sahapedia.org/poorakkali-festival-moosarikoal-bhagavathy-temple>

“The festival is marked by rituals, mirthful worship through dance and intellectual discourse. It is a unique form of cultural expression engaged in mainly by the marginalised communities like Thiyya, Asari, Maniyani and Saliar. The video brings to you glimpses of festivities from Moosarikoal Vadakathy Bhagavathy Temple in Kannur [in 2017]. It shows snippets of ritualistic ceremonies and poorakkali, the dance, performed by men as part of the festival.” [Note that here a few young girls are seen in the Pūrakkali dance]

<https://www.sahapedia.org/poorakkali-festival-muchilott-bhagavathy-temple-payyannur>

The dance of Poorakkali is performed by men as part of the Poorakkali Festival in northern Kerala. (...) The dance has several categories and begins with invocations to deities like Ganapati, Krishna and Saraswati; followed by obeisance to elemental forces. This video shows an extract from the Poorakkali dances performed at Muchilott Bhagavathy Temple at Payyannur as part of Pooram Festival of 2017. The performers dance the first and the most important category of Poorakkali called *pooramala*. Pooramala has eighteen modes of songs called *nirams*, all invoking Lord Vishnu, and ending in 'Narayana Hari Narayana'. They are played out one after the other.”

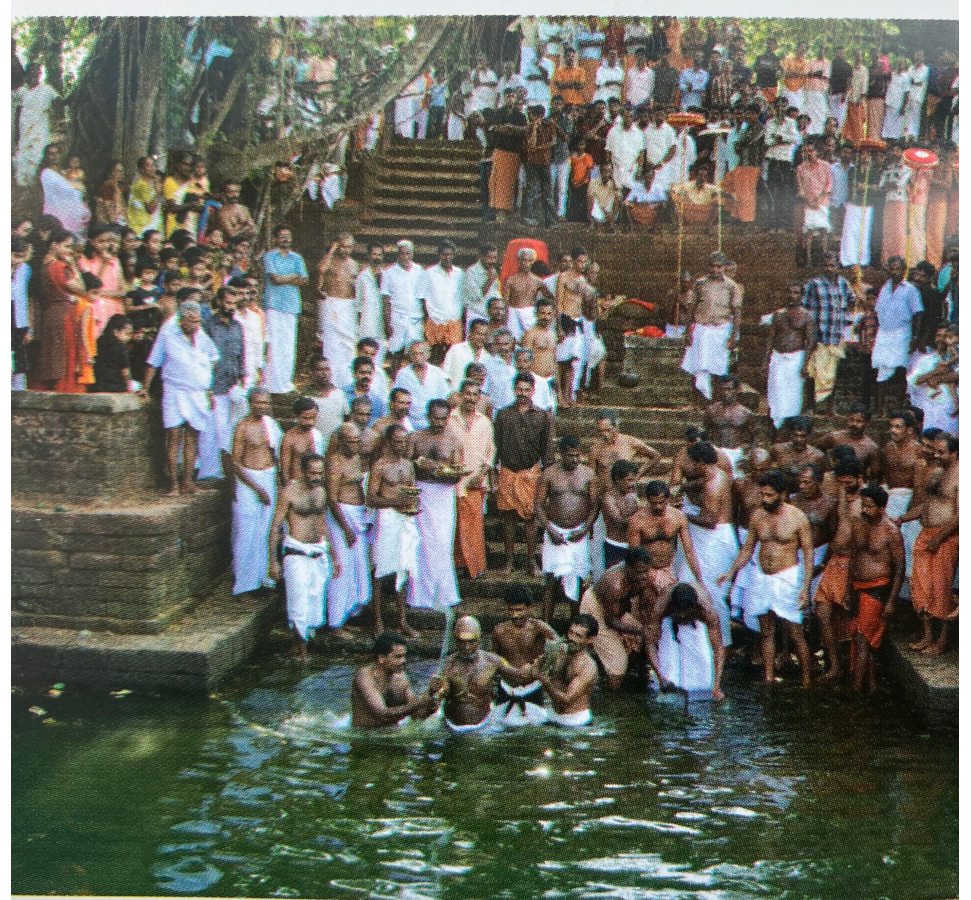
On Pūrakkali and Maruttukkaḷi, see:

Kurup, K.K.N. ed. 2017, *Poorakkali and maruthukali: a performance of male dancers in the Bhagavati temples of Malabar, based on Malayalam and Sanskrit literature* New Delhi : National Mission for Manuscripts - New Bhartiya Book Corporation.

Krishna Sharman, G. Sudev. 2019. “Marattukali of North Malabar.” In N. K. Sundareswaran (ed.), *Regional Traditions of Sanskrit: Contributions of North Kerala*, pp. 91-102. Calicut: Calicut University, Sanskrit Series no. 59.



Poorakkali performance in forth niram



Holy bathe in neeram festival

However, Pūrakkali dance with songs, which is conducted in the precincts of temples of the Goddess by men (dressed as practitioners of the Kalarippayattu martial art – the kalari/gymnasium is also used for Pūrakkali training), is performed according to 18 different musical modes themselves associated with 18 girls (called “actress” in the following table) and different types of flowers + 5 sorts of dances etc..

POORAMALA PRAYER AND RAGAS AND RAGATHALAM											
Division	Actress	World	Raga	Janya Raga	Rhythm	Time	Shruthi	Metre	Letters	Flower	Dance
1	Ramba	Heaven	Poovali	Harikamboji (Thrisram)	Panjari	Madyamam (Saptha Raga)	Samboorna	Anushtup	8	Red Lotus	Neranga
2	Urvasi	"	Poornahari	" (Chaturasram)	Chembada	"	" Agnikala 1	Agnikala	10	White Lotus	Earadi
3	Menaka	"	Kshethrahari	"	"	"	"	"	10	Golden Lotus	"
4	Arundhathi	"	Vanahari	"	Misram	Misram	"	Thidi	15	Black Lotus	"
5	Tilotama	"	Kanakahari	"	Sakram	"	"	Purana (18)	18	Water Lotus	"
6	Chitralekha	"	Madyamahari	"	"	"	"	"	18	Vata Lotus	"
7	Ratnavi	"	Aahari	"	Thripura	"	"	"	18	Little Lotus Nadanam	Irulkal
8	Ahalya	Earth	Sankaravarni Sankarabaranam	Nadan (Thrisram)	Folk	"	"	Agni	10	Malathi	Neranga
9	Drowpadhi	"	Saindavi	"	Panjari	"	"	"	10	Mallika	Adinerangam
10	Seetha	"	Bhudanandi	"	Chembada	"	"	"	10	Mulla	Earadi
11	Thara	"	Bhutarakshi	"	"	"	" (Manukkal 14)	Manu	14	Konna nadanam	Irulkal
12	Mandodari	"	Butaleela	"	"	"	"	Indu(Indukala)	16	Mandaram	Naladivattam
13	Bhumidevi	Patalam	Manjari	"	" (Thrisram)	Talamilla (Shadvam)	Shaddam (Srayaprasam)	Surya	12	Chemandhi	Nerangam
14	Gangadevi	"	Malahari	"	Chembada	Madyamam	"	Indu	16	Chengazhi	Irukalanadanam
15	Va gdevi	"	Margi (Margini)	Panjari	"	"	Puranam	"	18	Chembakam	Iradinadanam
16	Ratidevi	"	Salini	Dwijavanthi	Chembada	"	"	"	18	Chembakam	Iradinatanam
17	Sreedevi	"	Sariravi	Nadan	"	Vilambitham	"	Surya	12	Asoka	Irukalanatanam
18	Girikanyaka	"	Malavika	"	"	"	"	"	12	Chekki	Maladivattam

Courtesy : A.N. Kodakkat Poorakkali and Panikkars (2009)

As for Maṛuttukkaḷi verbal contest and chanting competition, it takes place in the courtyard of the temple of the Goddess. Two groups of men, representing two temples, participate in a Sanskrit poetic/scholarly debate under the leadership of two Paṇikkars (a Nayar sub-caste of scholars) following a fixed series of topics. The questions from each group are answered by the other group. The main/central topic of the debate concerns the mythology of Kāma (“Does Kāma possess a body [aṅga-ja] or not [an-aṅga]?), his burning to ashes by Śiva after he had raised the latter’s sexual feelings. Related topics are *vasantotsava-pūjā* about the subsequent request made by Viṣṇu to virgin girls to observe Kāma-pūjā, and the invocation of spring festival itself.

Both Pūrakkaḷi and Maṛuttukkaḷi trace their origin to Kāma, celestial girls and plucking of flowers. According to some collected versions, Pūrakkaḷi was instituted by (five or more) celestial women (viz. apsaras: Urvaśī, Rambhā etc.) who themselves had performed it for the gods and then came to the earth. Another version tells that after Kāma’s burning to ashes, Viṣṇu advised 18 virgin girls to adore the body of Kāma made out of flowers and obtain his blessing. A traditional Malayalam song narrates the story of these girls plucking flowers as follows:

The eighteen girls with vows plucked flowers / Made out of them the beautiful body of Cupid.

With different and placid musical rāgas / Offered songs and propitiated him duly.

They were beautiful and played together / And recited the pūvali songs.

The songs were different and eighteen. / It was recited by Rambhā and others,

In the three world in heaven before Indra. / In the middle world by Ratī and four others,

Under the earthen world Ahalyā and five others.

The tenth rāga was completed by Manoratha, and played duly as the spring offering.

As seen in the table before, the seven celestial dancers are said to be Rambhā, Urvaśī, Menakā, Citralekhā, Arundhatī, Tilottamā and Ratnavī. The five earthen dancers Ahalyā, Draupadī, Sītā, Tarā and Mandodarī, and the six “magical worlds” dancers are Bhū-, Pārvatī-, Gaṅgā-, Śrī-, Vāc- and Ratī- devīs. And each one is associated with a special sort of lotus or flower.

There appears some confusion here: the 18 mythic (apsaras etc.) dancers should have been mature girls, not “virgin girls”, but they are probably qualified as such because the collecting of flowers became in the festival the exclusive task of young girls.

The question remains if the sexually marked aspects of the Festival of Kāma observed in the ancient sources were restricted to the highly-educated and -eroticised urban courtesan culture of that time, or expanded over the whole traditional Nāyar society, which, as it is well known, was matrilineal and characterized, for the women, by sexual freedom and polyandry, including occasional unions (*sambandha*) with Nampūtiri brahmins.

See the anthropological studies of Kathleen Gough 1954, pp. 69-75, and 1961, pp. 358-372; Joan P. Mencher 1965, pp. 170-177; Christopher Fuller 1976, pp. 2-6 (cf., with reserves on polyandry, K. M. Panikkar 1918, pp. 266-272, 293). To the 16th-19th centuries European testimonies provided by these authors is to be added the one by the Jesuit Antoine Thomas (Namur, 1643-1709, Beijing), who on his way to China, passing in Goa in 1680, wrote from Siam, in 1681, within a report on Christianity in India, that: “The very great propensity to lustfulness is so great and so free among the Malabars, that the very wives are openly common property, and the Queens themselves are granted to others, the Kings their husbands allowing this indulgence; hence, among them, the heir-apparent is never the King’s son, his origin being doubtful, but the son of the King’s sister. And this they always observe.” (*Status Indiae Orientalis*, ed.-tr. Hosten 1938, p. 511).

Although, concerning the sexual aspects of the ancient Festival of Love as they were hinted here, there is no parallel in the nowadays popular forms of the festival represented by the Poorams of northern Kerala, it is nevertheless not impossible that libertine practices were in existence until the 19th century, especially when Nāyars and Nambudiri brahmins were together involved.

The (Basel) missionary Herman Gundert in his Malayalam-English dictionary, issued in 1872, defines *pūraṁ*, *pūravēla* and *pūrakkaḷi* as “the Saturnalia of Malabar”, so possibly alluding to licentious aspects of the festival still preserved at his time and which have now disappeared.