

# ARCHITECTURAL PATTERNS OF *ILLOMS* OF NAMBOOTHIRI BRAHMINS IN KERALA

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## Abstract

Namboothiri houses are variously called *Illom*. *Illoms* are, in general, constructed according to the principles of Vedic architecture. Size of the *illoms* represented the richness of the Namboothiri families. Namboothiri Brahmins houses were isolated from other castes for maintain the purity. The implementation of the Land Reforms Act and the disintegration of the joint family system into nuclear family units have resulted in the sale and demolition of many *Illoms* under the pressure of severe financial stress.

**Key words:** *Illoms, Jenmi, Namboothiri, Tarawad, Urallor, Vasthu Vidya*

## Introduction

*Keralolpatti*, the Brahmin chronicle holds an exegesis of the legend of Parasurama upon the pavements of religion and culture. Parasurama created land between Gokarnam and Kanyakumari purely for the settlement of Brahmins. Brahmins started their settlement in sixty-four gramams or "villages". Half of them occupied the tulu-speaking region and the remaining half the Malayalam- speaking region in Kerala. The latter group came to be known as Namboothiri Brahmins. It is the common assumption that the formation of organized Namboothiri Brahmin settlements in Kerala took shape between the closing years of the sangam age and seventh century A.D. The social and religious ambience in Kerala was fertile for the rooting of the Brahmin settlements. The Brahmins emerged to the position of exploitative leadership as they had the knowledge, institutional devices, ideology, historically contingent cultural powers of social control and magico-religious charisma .Brahmins gradually popularized their ceremonies, beliefs, practices, traditions and mythology in Kerala. By the end of the 13th Century on the ruins of the old Chera dynasty the Nambuthiris who had been initially responsible for the temple lands or uralars , proceeded to establish themselves as single landed proprietors with hereditary rights - the *jenmis*. It developed a structure where *illom*, or extended Nambudiri family, had been the *jenmi*, and the Nayar *taravad* had been the tenant. A large number of temples were built in different parts of Kerala under the order of the Namboothri Brahmins. Gradually they were able to convert these institutions into the nerve centers of social and political life in Kerala. The land of Kerala was covered by a network of temple-centered Brahmin settlements. While the

religious nexus of the Brahmins paved the way for their hegemonic status, their social living patterns, especially the housing styles were rich and affluent.

The Namboothiri Brahmin houses are called as *illoms* or *manas* or *madhoms*. Namboothiris choose places of natural beauty to build their houses that were isolated from other castes. The *illom* or *mana* compounds would be lush and green with a variety of trees and medicinal plants. The Namboothiri houses had their characteristic architectural designs. Generally there would be one or more ponds in the *illom* campus and also a serpent grove, which added beauty as well as gave a mysterious atmosphere to the *illom* environment. *Illoms* are, in general, constructed according to the principles of *Vasthu Vidya* or Vedic architecture. *Vaastu shastra*, the ancient science helped these structures to get the natural benefits freely offered by the five basic elements of the universe. For instance, the concept of *Thachi* underlines that as timber is derived from a living form, the wood, it has a life of its own when the same is used for construction, and that it should be synthesized in harmony with its surroundings and people who dwell inside it.

Architectural patterns of *illoms* make possible a categorization as *Naalukettu*, *Ettu kettu*, *Panthrandu kettu*, and *Pathinaru kettu*

#### ➤ *Naalukettu*

The central room with the courtyard flanked by pillars is *Naalukettu*. It is a traditional architecture pattern that is a archetypal rectangular arrangement where four halls are joined together with a central courtyard. The four halls on the sides are called as *vadakkini* (northern block), *padinjattini* (western block), *kizhakkini* (eastern block) and *thekkini* (southern block). The amenities provided by a *naalukettu* were ideal for large families of the traditional *tharavadu*, who had the traditional practice of living under one roof.

- *Kizhakkini* - The Pooja or prayer room is in the eastern wing or *Kizhakkini*
- *Thekkini* - Southern block for human dwelling
- *Padinjattini* – Western block for storage purpose.
- *Vadakkini* - Northern block is used for performing the daily rituals. To the north of *Vadakkini* is another complex with a centre courtyard. This courtyard is smaller. On one side of this courtyard is the Kitchen with a well. The rooms surrounding this courtyard are used by the ladies of the family.

The building design and site planning were monitored by a learned master builder who combined the technical matters of astrology and science. Velanezhi Jathavedan Namboodiri was a famous master builder of *Naalukettu*. The four halls were divided into several rooms for different exercise such as food preparation, dining, sleeping, studying, storage of grains etc. The building has one or two upper storey

depending on the size and priority of the household. It also has a further enclosed courtyard by a repetition of the *naalukettu* to form an *ettukettu* (eight-halled building).

The doors, windows and the wooden granaries were usually made of teak wood and anjili wood (wood of wild jack tree). A *naalukettu* has verandahs supported by huge wooden pillars, a *padippura* (a gate house) and cattle sheds. The *padippura* resembles a *gopuram* (a monumental pagoda at the entrance of temples) which may contain one or two rooms for guests. Besides, bathing tanks, wells, farm buildings, grain stores etc. are there which are enclosed with a compound wall or fence.

Akavoor Mana, Chemmangaattu Mana etc are examples of the *Naalukettu* pattern of architecture. Akavoor Mana is located on the northern bank of river Periyar, in Vellarappilly near Kalady of Ernakulam district. The present building complex in the *Mana* consists of a spacious *Naalukuttu*, dining hall, a set of dressing rooms and two bungalows. *Naalukuttu* has not been raised with upper floors. Apart from bathing ghat near the river bank, there are also separate ponds inside and outside the complex. Around 1980, Akavoor Mana was completely demolished and depleted.

The Bhattathiris of Chemmangaattu Mana were the owners of *Naalukettu Illoms* surrounded by sprawling compounds at three places: one, to the south and adjacent to the Brahmakkulam temple, near Guruvayur; another one, on the northern side of the temple complex and yet another one, close to the southern side of Engakkad temple, near Wadakkancherry, all in Thrissur district.

When the family partition took place in 1939, another new *Illom* was constructed north of the old one. By 1980, the old *Illom* and adjacent compound was sold off and the new *Illam* was reconstructed, on modern concepts discarding the *Naalukettu* style. The properties of Brahmakkulam and Engakkad were sold.

### ➤ *Ettukettu*

*Ettukettu* was the home of some aristocratic Namboothiris who could afford to have larger and bigger houses. *Ettukettu*, means a house which has eight halls with two central courtyards. Altogether, they have 8 blocks in the cardinal directions and these houses had about 120 rooms with attached toilets known as *Chayppukal*.

Olappamanna Mana and Panayil Paazhoor Mana are *ettukettu* constructions. The famous Olappamanna Mana is located in Vellinezhi near Cherpulassery in Palakkad district. This *Illom* is about 500 years old. The *Illom* was originally a *Naalukettu*, which was subsequently expanded into an *Ettukettu*. There were four outhouses around the house. Among them the *Kacheri* was later demolished. A portion of the house is now being used for Home Stay for tourists. Panayil Paazhoor Mana is located in Panayaalikkara village of Maanikkamangalam situated three kilometers east of Kalady, the place blessed by the birth of Sree Sankaraacharyar in Ernakulam district. According to legends, the *Illom* was inhabited since 1,500 or more years ago. The *Illom* was an *Ettukettu* with the *Padinjaatti* and *Thekkini* raised by a storey. The

building was about 120 years old. It was a gorgeous combination of ancient and modern architecture, but has been completely demolished. Only the *Pathaayappura* of the old main building remains unbroken.

#### ➤ ***Panthrandu Kettu***

*Panthrandu Kettu* means a house which has twelve halls with three middle courtyards. Kaanippayyoor Mana and Kootallor Manas are panthrandu kettu of Twelve halls patterns. Kaanippayyoor Mana is located in Kanippayur near Kunnankulam in Thrissur district. The building compound of the *Illom* consisted of a *Panthrandu Kettu*, with a storied out house, two outhouse and a large hall for performing arts. In 1875, the thatched roofs were replaced with tiled-roofs, and the southern and western wings were raised with an upper storey each.

Kootallor Mana is situated in Naagalasseri village near Koottanad in Palakkad district. The *Illom* had a three-storey ladies quarters, a three store rooms, a separate two storey spacious men's quarters, four ponds and a Vadakke Madhom for those marrying outside the community. For hundreds of years it remained as a centre of scholastic excellence. This *mana* has been completely demolished.

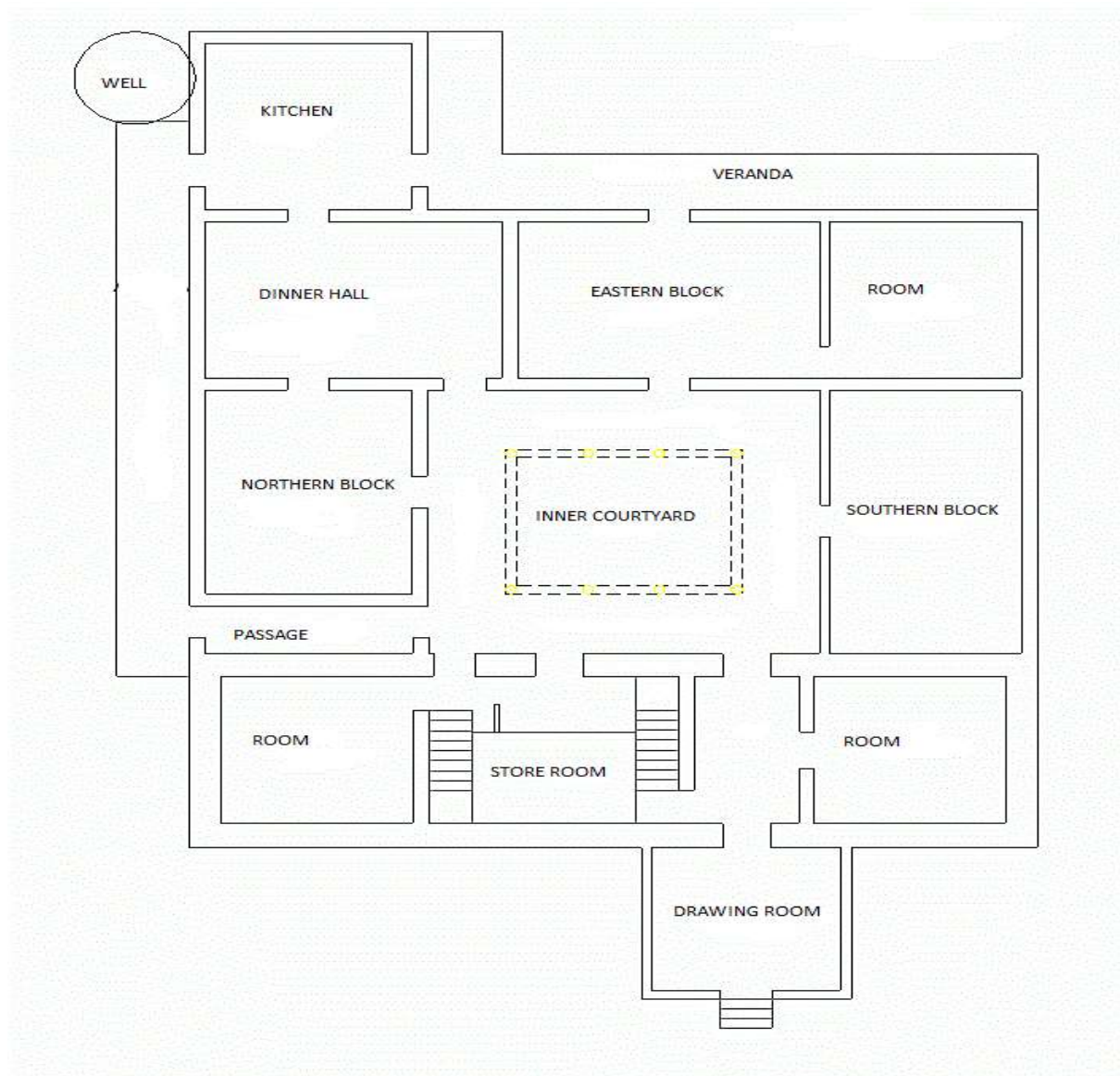
#### ➤ ***Pathinaaru Kettu***

*Pathinaaru Kettu* means a house which has sixteen halls with four central courtyards. Some super structures have three courtyards, which are known as *Pathinarukettu* or sixteen blocked. These structures had well advanced site plans that helped the architects come up with elegant and symmetrical constructions.

Desamangalam Mana, Killimangalathu Mana and Poomulli Mana are the examples of Pathinaaru Kettu. Desamangalam Mana was located in Desamangalam in Thrissur district. In this village, the main building which was a *Pathinaaru-Kettu* stood with grandeur in a 13-acre compound for a short span of 55 years. In 1929 it was constructed on the basis of plans and calculations made by the famous *Vaasthu Vidya* expert, Kanippayyur Damodaran Nambudiripad. This *illom* was demolished and sold in 1985.

The Killimangalathu Mana is located 10 kilometers south-east of Cheruthuruthy, in Thrissur district. The old residence was a *Pathinaaru Kettu* with the *Padinjaatti* raised by three stories. The building was remodeled and remained around 40 years, after which the whole structure was sold. A small concrete house has been built on the foundations of the demolished one.

Poomulli Mana was supposed to be the principal and richest among the aristocratic *Illoms* in Kerala. The main *Naalukettu* was a three-storied building, marvelously planned as a model of *Vaasthu*-aesthetics. It had an aesthetically built portico, a play hall, *Vadakkini*, bathroom and a spacious central courtyard. Associated with the main *Naalukettu*, there was a *Vadakkekettu* meant exclusively for the use of the female inmates, and two other smaller *Naalukettu*. Poomulli *Illom* was a great example of *Pathinaarukettu*. When the *Mana* was demolished, 15,000 cubic feet of wood was retrieved.

SITE PLAN OF A TYPICAL *ILLOM***Conclusion**

During the medieval period of Kerala Namboothiri *illoms* represented the power, prestige, hegemony and wealth of Namboothiri community. But the land and social reforms coupled with resultant changes in social order and family structures led to the disintegration of the hegemony of Namboothiri Brahmins during the post-independent period. With a lot of joint family members, especially those who required employment in the distant places, staking assets to common property, the vast buildings began to come separately. Edamana Grandhavari describes an incident of a Namboothiri Brahmin named Tevan Narayanan who was involved in a lot of loan settlements for refurbishing *illom*. Nowadays many *illoms* were morphed into museums, ayurvedic health care centres and home stays in the ensuing struggle for survival, a few on the verge of collapse continue to be used for dwelling even today. Kanippayur mana, Kallanthaattil Idamana *Illom*, Kootalloor *illom*, Maranaattu *illom* etc are the examples of *illoms* which faced demolition.

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## Key words

<i>Illoms</i>	:	Residence of a Namboothiri
<i>Jenmi</i>	:	Feudal Lord
<i>Keralolpatti</i>	:	Origin of Kerala
<i>Namboothiri</i>	:	Malayali Brahmin who rank high in the caste order
<i>Pathaayappuras</i>	:	Outhouse
<i>Tarawad</i>	:	A matriarchal joint family
<i>Urallor</i>	:	Trustee of an endowed temple
<i>Vasthu Vidya</i>	:	Knowledge system of architectural