OLGA NOWICKA ⬤
Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures, University of Hamburg

Temple Arithmetic
Brother Temples of Kerala

Introduction

Nālampalam (Malayalam "four temples") is the popular name for a cluster of four temples dedicated to the sons of Daśaratha from the *Rāmāyaṇa* epic—Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, Bharata and Śatrughna—in the South Indian state of Kerala. The most famous cluster among the various *nālampalam*s consists of the Śrī Rāmasvāmi temple in Thriprayar, the Kūṭalmāṇikyam temple dedicated to Bharata in Irinjalakuda, the Śrī Lakṣmaṇapperumāḷ temple in Moozhikkulam, and the Śatrughna temple in Payammal (Vaidyanathan 2011: 123–34). The four temples are located within the Thrissur and Ernakulam districts (central Kerala), within a radius of ca. fifty kilometers.

Princess Gouri Lakshmi Bayi claims that the *nālampalam*'s founding myth is given in the Malayalam *sthalapurāṇa* of the Śrī Lakṣmaṇapperumāḷ temple; she also mentions the existence of a Sanskrit *sthalapurāṇa* (Bayi 2013: 332–33).

Fig. 1 *Nālampalam* cluster (from the left at the top: the Śrī Rāmasvāmi temple in Thriprayar, the Śrī Lakṣmaṇapperumāḷ temple in Moozhikkulam, from the left at the bottom: the Bharata temple in Irinjalakuda, the Śatrughna temple in Payammal). Photo: Olga Nowicka, 2023.
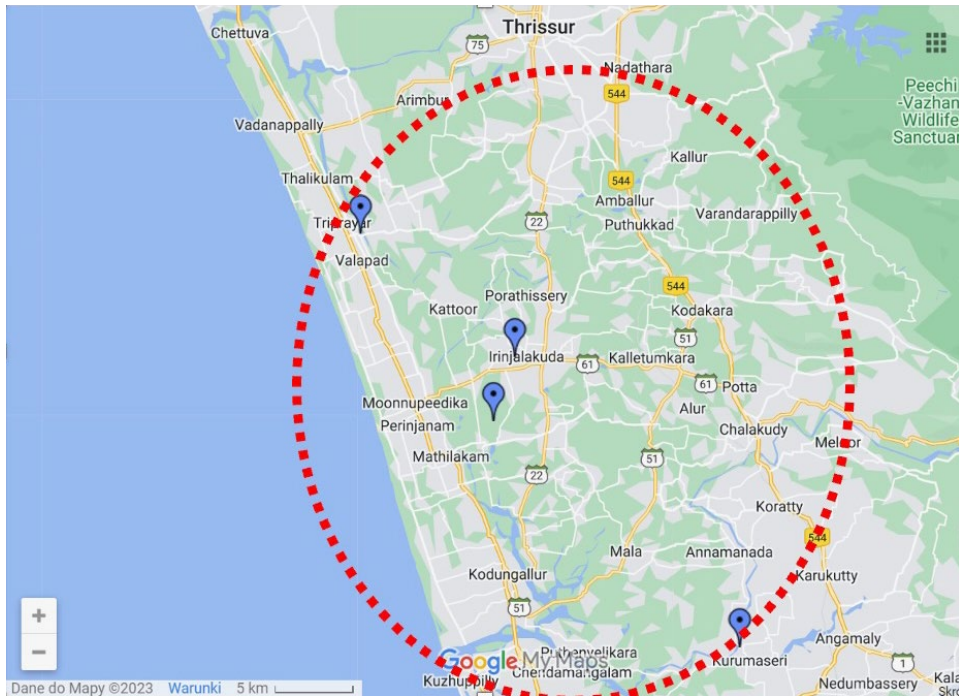
Fig. 2   Location of the *nālampalam* network, source: Google Maps.

However, the myth appears to be in circulation mostly in oral transmission.[1] Its description can be found in three modern *nālampalam māhātmya*s, i.e., *Nālampalam Tīrtthayātra* and *Sree Koodalmaanikyam: History and Legend*, both authored by T. Venugopal, and the *Nālampalamāhātmyam* by Radhakrishnan Poṭṭaykkal (see more in the section *Nālampalam in textual sources*). All three

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1   One of the main objectives of my case study was to identify and study premodern *māhātmya*s or *sthalapurāṇa*s of the temples that nowadays form the *nālampalam* cluster. However, it appears that this kind of textual sources most probably do not exist. By employing the term *sthalapurāṇa*, Princess Gouri Lakshmi Bayi meant oral narratives which remain (nowadays widely) in circulation in Kerala. She was not aware of the existence of any premodern written sources recoding the *nālampalam* founding myth (personal communication 2023). Till date, I was not able to trace any premodern *nālampalam sthalapurāṇa*s or *māhātmya*s. Moreover, the consulted senior scholars from several Keralan universities, replied to my inquiries stating that the texts that I am looking for do not exist, since the temple network—i.e., the interconnections which cause the four temples in question to figure in the collective consciousness as a coherent set of interlinked religious institutions—is a relatively recent phenomenon.

sources are consistent while citing the myth of origin of the four brother temples in Kerala; no discrepancy in the narrative is to be observed. The account relates that the icons of Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, Bharata and Śatrughna were *pūjāmūrti*s belonging to Kṛṣṇa, which he worshipped in Dvaraka. After Dvaraka sunk into the sea, the icons of the four brothers drifted to the Kerala coast, near Thriprayar. There they were caught in the nets of the local fishermen. At that time, one Vākkayil Kaimaḷ—a minister of the Ayirūr Kōvilakam of Ponnani—had a dream about the icons floating in the sea. Kaimaḷ, being an ardent devotee, hastened to the seashore. There, the fishermen who found the *mūrti*s passed them on to him. After conducting the *dēvapraśna* ritual ("question put to the deity," Tarabout 2007: 85), the proper locations for the icons' installation were selected. Thus, the temples were built in Thriprayar, Irinjalakuda, Moozhikkulam, and Payammal (Bayi 2013: 332–33).

Apart from the abovementioned temples in Thriprayar, Irinjalakuda, Moozhikkulam and Payammal, there are at least three more sets of *nālampalam* temples located respectively in Malappuram district; Ernakulam and Kottayam districts; and in the Kottayam district. These sets of *nālampalam* are arranged in more compact clusters—the temples are situated within a range of a few kilometres from each other.

The temples belonging to the clusters in question seem to be brought together predominantly by the association with the *Rāmāyaṇa* narrative. Each cluster includes four temples, each dedicated to one of the four brothers—sons of Daśaratha. Furthermore, most of the temples constituting the clusters are associated with a selected *Rāmāyaṇa* episode—an association about which devotees are informed by the modern *nālampalam māhātmya*s, temples' websites

Fig. 3 The three smaller *nālampalam* clusters, source: Google Maps.

and social media profiles (e.g., Facebook and Instagram profiles of the temples), oral narratives, etc. The connection with the *Rāmāyaṇa* theme is also articulated through the temples' ritualistic practice, which is interpreted, primarily by the modern *nālampalam māhātmya*s, in terms of its interconnections with the *Rāmāyaṇa* narrative, as, for instance, the ritual reenactments of the particular episodes during annual temple festivals. Finally, what brings *nālampalam* together and institutes them into set(s) of connected places or temple network(s) is the pilgrimage practice of *nālampalayātrā*—a custom of pilgrimage to all four brother temples during one day, following a fixed order of visiting the temples.

In this article, I focus on the multi-layered bonds that bring the *nālampalam* sets together, mostly oscillating around the *Rāmāyaṇa* theme, by analysing sources which articulate those bonds, that is, modern *māhātmyas/sthalapurāṇa*s of the temples in question, local oral traditions, temple rituals and festivals, temple paintings and sculptures, as well as tools of modern communication as, for instance, social media, online apps, etc.[2]

Temples' historical setting

The available materials on the history of the major *nālampalam* set of four temples (the Śrī Rāmasvāmi temple in Thriprayar, the Kūṭalmāṇikyam temple dedicated to Bharata in Irinjalakuda, the Śrī Lakṣmaṇapperumāḷ temple in Moozhikkulam, and the Śatrughna temple in Payammal) do not indicate any connection between particular sites that may have allowed us to see them as a temple network. It seems that the only historical materials that might aid establishing further linkage between the institutions in question are the temple murals found in the Thriprayar and Moozhikkulam, which depict selected *Rāmāyaṇa* episodes. The murals from the Śrī Rāmasvāmi temple in Thriprayar are dated to ca. eighteenth century, while the Moozhikkulam murals remain undated.

While it is often not easy to gather any more specific information concerning a history of some of the Keralan religious institutions,[3] in the case of the main

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2   The materials presented in this article have been collected by me during several fieldtrips to Kerala, which were conducted across the years 2022–24.

3   As, for instance, in the case of Śaṅkaran *maṭhas* in Kerala, which, despite being wealthy and influential religious centres for centuries, covering the entire area of the region with a network of dependent institutions, seem to have very limited number of preserved historical documents recording their past. Except for only one *maṭha*, the archives containing the monasteries' administrative documents seem to have vanished (see Nowicka 2022).

nālampalam cluster, two of the temples, i.e., Irinjalakuda and Moozhikkulam, belong to the thirty-two so called 'original Brahmin settlements' in Kerala. Thus, these two were investigated by historians such as Kesavan Veluthat, and Thriprayar temple murals were studied by M. Nambirajan and S. Suresh. Before proceeding further, I briefly locate the said temples in a historical and geographical setting by referring to the current scholarship.

According to Kesavan Veluthat, several Brahmin settlements were established in Kerala well before the rule of the Cēra Perumāḷs of Mahodayapuram (ca. 800–1124). As he explains, the Brahmins of Kerala originally settled in thirty-two *grāma*s (villages), enumerated in the *Kēraḷōlpatti* ("The Origin of Kerala", ca. seventeenth century).[4] According to the narrative, Paraśurāma created the land of Malanāṭu by throwing his arrow(s) into the Arabian Sea, thereby making the sea recede. As is stated in the account, he then peopled the newly created region—between Gokarna and Kanyakumari—with Brahmins, brought from the north, who were subsequently settled in sixty four *grāma*s, out of which thirty-two were in the present day Kerala, and the other thirty-two in Tuḷunāṭu.[5] Each of the said Brahmin villages of Kerala has been centered around a temple, which formed a social, religious, political, and economical nucleus (Veluthat 2013: 1–11).

Irinjalakuda (Iruṅkāṭikkūṭal) *grāma*, where the Kūṭalmāṇikyam temple dedicated to Bharata is located, belonged to the group of the early Brahmin settlements. The temple was extremely wealthy and possessed vast land estates. Moozhikkulam (Mūḻikkaḷam) was one of the most important Brahmin settlements in Kerala. In the Śrī Lakṣmaṇapperumāḷ temple, located in this village, there are two inscriptions of the Cēra Perumāḷs of Mahodayapuram, that is, of Indu Kota, dated to 948 CE; and of Bhaskara Ravi, dated to 1010 CE. Furthermore, inside the temple there is an undated mural depicting Rāma's coronation (Veluthat 2013: 27–28).

Regarding the other two *nālāmpalam* temples, the coastal city Thriprayar, which did not belong to the thirty-two original *grāma*s, hosts the temple dedicated to Rāma. The temple is situated on the bank of the Karuvannur River. The

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4 *Kēraḷōlpatti* is composed in prose, in Sanskritized Malayalam. It narrates, in the purāṇic style, Kerala's history since its creation by Paraśurāma (Veluthat 2009: 133). There exist many recensions of *Kēraḷōlpatti*, giving a mythical account of the origin of Kerala (*ulpatti* "origin"; *Kēraḷōlpatti* "The Origin of Kēraḷa"), like, for instance, the *ulpatti* titled *Jambudvīpōlpatti*, which is a northern recension of the narrative giving a legendary account of the Malanāṭu's beginnings (Vielle 2014: 17).

5 Tuḷunāṭu—the region spreading across south Karnataka and north Kerala. It covers the districts of Udupi and Dakshina Kannada in Karnataka, and the northern part of the Keralan Kasaragod district up to the Payasvini River. The ethnic group of this region, referred to as Tuḷuvas, speaks the Tuḷu language. See Bhat 1975.

exterior wall of the *śrīkōvil* (*sanctum sanctorum*) is covered with paintings preserved in a fairly good condition. The wall contains twenty-seven panels which are dated to ca. eighteenth century (Nambirajan and Suresh 2015: 136). The panels deal with various themes—some of them refer to the Vaiṣṇava mythology and particular *Rāmāyaṇa* episodes, such as Rāma's coronation and the *aśvamedha-yajña* performed by Rāma (p. 140, 181). Besides, the temple compound features some modern-looking murals, depicting *Rāmāyaṇa* episodes as well—the one on the left side of the main gate shows Sugrīva reclaiming the *vānara* kingdom, and Rāma's coronation. However, these murals seem to be modern productions.

The fourth temple from the main *nālampalam* cluster, the Śatrughna temple in Payammal, is the smallest and apparently least significant in historical terms. It is located in the tiny village Payammal, seven kilometers away from the Irinjalakuda temple. The temple website refers to one episode allegedly connected with the Tipu Sultan invasion (1789–1792), which sheds some light on its dating. During the period of Tipu Sultan, this temple suffered severe damages. In order to protect the icon of Śatrughna from Tipu's army, the temple priests took the *pañcaloha* (metallic alloy containing five metals: brass, bronze, copper, gold, silver) *mūrti* from the *śrīkōvil* and hid it in the temple pond.[6] If the narrated account is historically accurate, it might indicate that by the eighteenth century the temple was already in existence.

The available historical records, as well as literary sources, do not indicate any particular connections between the *nālampalam* temples of Kerala. The only material which might serve as a basis for developing further links between the four brother temples are the murals featuring particular *Rāmāyaṇa* episodes, which can be seen in the Thriprayar Śrī Rāmasvāmi temple and the Moozhikkulam Śrī Lakṣmaṇapperumāḷ temple, the former, as already mentioned, dated to ca. eighteenth century. The murals, however, do not seem to feature the episodes which are ascribed to particular temples by the modern *nālampalam māhātmya*s. They do not occur in the narrative's successive stages either. The paintings decorating the temples represent various *Rāmāyaṇa* themes. The only repeating mural is the one depicting Rāma's coronation—it is to be found both in the Thriprayar and the Moozhikkulam temples. This particular episode is in turn connected with the Irinjalakuda temple and is re-enacted there in the grand scale Kathakaḷi performance which takes place during the annual Kūṭalmāṇikyam temple festival. This might point to the presumption that the *nālampalam* concept is a later development, and of a relatively recent origin.

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6   Nowadays, the original *pañcaloha mūrti* is not traceable anymore, although efforts have been made to retrieve it from the temple pond, situated in the back yard of the temple complex.

Nālampalam in textual sources

The links between the *nālampalam* temples are mainly articulated through the modern *māhātmya* writing,[7] which narrates the founding myth shared by the four temples, regarding the icons' origin appearance, when caught in the nets of local fishermen. In addition, the modern *māhātmya*s connect selected *Rāmāyaṇa* episodes with some of the temples,[8] inform about the pilgrimage practice and the *darśana* order, explain ritual practice in particular temples in terms of inter-connections between the institutions—such as the ritual re-enactments of selected *Rāmāyaṇa* episodes,[9] and provide details on the annual festivals (*utsavam*) in each of the four temples. In this article, I have used five such textual sources, among which four are in Malayalam and one in English. All were published within the last two decades by small, local publishing houses.

These inexpensive printed pilgrim's guidebooks are available at the small book stalls situated near the temples' main entrances. As Andrea Pinkney shows,

Fig. 4   Modern *māhātmya* writing on *nālampalam*. Photo: Olga Nowicka.

7   On the modern *māhātmya* writing in the context of Uttarakhand, see Pinkney 2013.

8   *Nālampalam māhātmya*s describe the *nālampalam* temples to be connected with selected *Rāmāyaṇa* episodes, for instance, the Irinjalakuda temple to be connected with the episode of Bharata waiting in Ayodhya for Rāma's return from exile. However, not all temples constituting *nālampalam* clusters are associated with *Rāmāyaṇa* episodes.

9   Among the ritual re-enactments of the *Rāmāyaṇa* episodes there are, *inter alia*, a ritual of *setubandhana* ("the construction of a bridge") annually observed by the Thriprayar Śrī Rāmasvāmi temple, which evokes the events from the *Rāmāyaṇa*; and a grand scale Kathakaḷi performance of the *Śrīrāmapaṭṭābhiṣekam*, a ritual re-enactment of Rāma's coronation, which is staged every year during an annual temple festival in the Kūṭalmāṇikyam temple.

these booklets not only "appropriate the name of *mthe māhātmya* but also exploit the conventions of the classical genre in distinctively modern ways" (Pinkney 2013: 234). James G. Lochtefeld, who examined a series of Haridwar *māhātmya*s from the beginning of the twentieth century, described this kind of literary sources as blending site's "promotion and interpretation" (Lochtefeld 2010: 224). In addition to adopting the classical *māhātmya* conventions, the locally produced modern *māhātmya*s also introduce detailed travel information, road maps, images of gods, temples, and temples' precincts (in drawn images or photographs), distances between pilgrimage sites with travel directions (also for the use of the public transport such as buses); temples' exact addresses and contact details; descriptions of temple offerings with price lists; calendar of the temples' festivals; and texts of the *stotra*s for religious recitation. As Pinkney observes, while there are many continuities between classical and contemporary *māhātmya*s, the genre innovation lies in including the up-to-date information and travel logistics, therefore marking the difference between the said publications and the classical atemporal *māhātmya*s (Pinkney 2013: 252). Thus, the modern *māhātmya* writing crosses temporalities and is deeply rooted in particular geospaces.

Till date I found three modern *māhātmya*s of the *nālampalam* temples: *Nālampalam Tīrtthayātra* and *Sree Koodalmaanikyam: History and Legend*, both authored by T. Venugopal, and the *Nālampalamāhātmyam* by Radhakrishnan Poṭṭaykkal. The *Sree Koodalmaanikyam* is written in English, the other two works are in Malayalam. The *Nālampalamāhātmyam* was first published in 2005, and was reissued six times in 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2017, and 2019. The current edition of the *Nālampalam Tīrtthayātra* was published in 2018, yet, according to the booklet, it is the twelfth reprint. The *Sree Koodalmaanikyam: History and Legend* has no information on the date of its publishing.

Another publication that I came across, titled *Rāmāyaṇakathakaḷum Nālampalaṅṅaḷum* and authored by Kuṭṭipuḷa Ravi, which however does not belong to the *māhātmya* genre, describes in detailed manner not only the main *nālampalam* cluster, but also the smaller clusters as well. It was published in 2017.

All four texts are very recent publications, produced in the last two decades. It is important to note that earlier texts do not seem to mention the *nālampalam* concept. For example, another modern *māhātmya*, a *māhātmya* of the *Kuṭalmāṇikyam* temple, *Śrī Kuṭalmāṇikyam Caritrasaṃkṣēpam*, authored by Pāykkāṭṭu Paramēśvaran Nampūtirippāṭŭ (the current edition from 2018, reissued nine times), which was first published in the year 1963, does not refer to the *nālampalam* or *nālampalam tīrtthayātra* concept at all. It might suggest that at the time of the work's composition the four temples in Thriprayar, Irinjalakuda, Moozhikkulam, and Payammal weren't perceived as a cluster yet.

The *nālampalam māhātmya*s, like other modern *māhātmya*s, provide the devotees with the practical guiding information concerning the *nālampalayātrā*,

which, they explain, is supposed to be undertaken during the *Rāmāyaṇa māsam* ("Rāmāyaṇa month," i.e., Kaṛkkaṭakam month; July-August). They include, along with the temples' addresses, the road indications and maps sketching the route of the *nālampalam* pilgrimage, with marked landmarks, bus stops, road names, and the names of the villages passed on the way to the four brother temples. Most importantly, while informing about the temple offerings and festivals, they also interpret ritual practice in the particular *nālampalam* temples in terms of their interconnections.[10] Furthermore, these texts relate the particular *Rāmāyaṇa* episodes, localised in the Keralan geospace,[11] which they connect with some of the *nālampalam* temples (not only from the main cluster), thereby making the local pilgrimage route meaningful for the pilgrims. For instance, the Irinjalakuda Kūṭalmāṇikyam temple's Bharata is awaiting the return of Rāma from the fourteen-years long exile, having just learned from Hanumān that Rāma is already on the way to Ayodhya; the Moozhikkulam temple is associated with the episode of angry Lakṣmana intending to kill Bharata—he confused intentions of Bharata, who approached Rāma in order to pass over the reins of the kingdom, but was soon appeased after learning of Bharata's innocence—while the Thriprayar Rāma temple is connected with the episode of Hanumān returning from Laṅkā and informing Rāma that he has seen there Sītā who was abducted by Rāvaṇa. The Śatrughna temple in Payammal does

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10   To enumerate several instances: the ritual of *setubandhana* ("the construction of a bridge") annually observed by the Thriprayar Śrī Rāmasvāmi temple, which evokes the events from the *Rāmāyaṇa*; Cākyār kūttŭ performed in the Thriprayar Śrī Rāmasvāmi temple every year in the month of Vṛścikam featuring *Rāmāyaṇa* episode of Hanumān meeting Sītā in Laṅkā and subsequently informing Rāma about it; Thriprayar Śrī Rāmasvāmi offering, consisting of firing crackers (Mal. *katina*), interpreted as a commemoration of Hanumān's return after his search for Sītā and delivering a message that he has seen her; ritual re-enactment of the Thriprayar Rāma's coronation during the Kathakaḷi performance of the *Śrīrāmapaṭṭābhiṣekam* in the Kūṭalmāṇikyam temple (see section *Interconnections articulated through ritual practice*).
11   An earlier example of this mechanism can be observed for instance in *Vilvapurāṇa*—the premodern Malayalam *sthalapurāṇa* of the Vilvādrinātha temple ("Lord of the Vilva tree mountain") in Thiruvilvamala, in the Thrissur region, which is dedicated to Rāma. A palm-leaf manuscript with this text, stored in the Vaṭakke Maṭham Brahmasvam in Thrissur, is dated to 1019 year of Kollam Era, that is 1842 CE. The *sthalapurāṇa* narrates the *Rāmāyaṇa* episode where Śabarī, an elderly woman ascetic, is featured. The episode describes Śabarī, who received Rāma's *darśana* and blessing due to her devotion. After meeting Rāma, who during his *vanavāsa* came to her *āśrama*, she attained *mokṣa*. The most important feature of this particular account is the given location of the Śabarī's *āśrama* where she is visited by Rāma himself and where she subsequently attains *mokṣa*. Namely, her *āśrama* is said to be at the top of the hill, located by the Bharatappuzha river, in Thiruvilvamala in Kerala. As the *sthalapurāṇa* narrates, it is in the very place where Śabarī attained liberation, that the Vilvādrinātha temple, dedicated to Rāma, was built.

not seem to be associated with any particular *Rāmāyaṇa* episode—till date I have not found any particular association in the modern *māhātmya* literature.

The episode connected with the Kūṭalmāṇikyam temple is re-enacted during the annual temple festival in the Kathakaḷi performance of the *Śrīrāmapaṭṭābhiṣekam* ("Rāma's coronation"); the episode associated with the Thriprayar Rāma temple is re-enacted in the 12-day Cākyār kūttŭ performance, staged every year in the Vṛścikam month. As far as I know, in the Moozhikkulam and Payammal temples there are no ritual re-enactments of the *Rāmāyaṇa* episodes.

In the following sections I will present how the *nālampalam* concept is presented in the modern *māhātmya* writing, and how these source materials articulate the links between the brother temples through descriptions of common founding myth, pilgrimage route, and sequences of ritualistic practices.
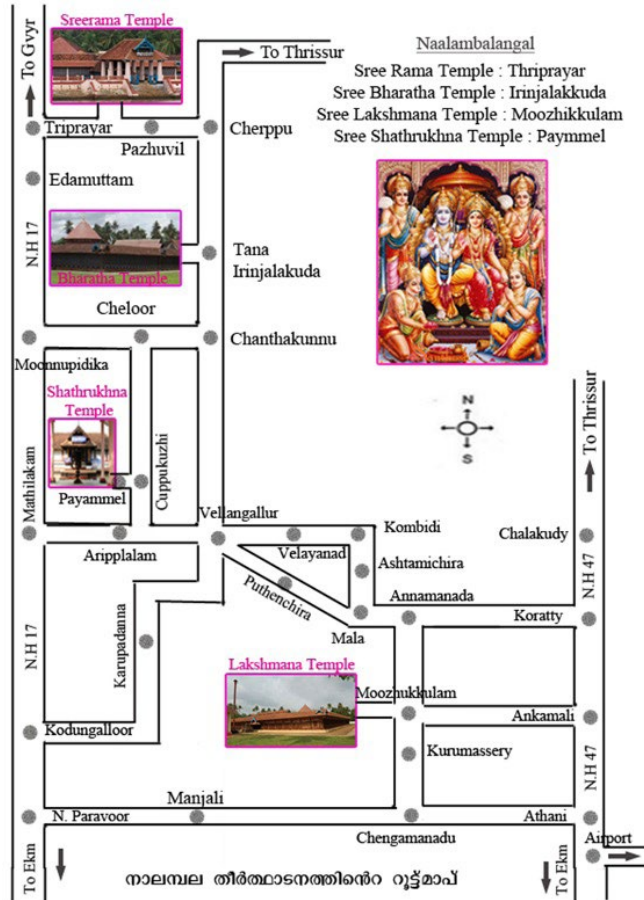

Nālampalayātrā

The pilgrimage pattern connecting the four temples (*nālampalayātrā; nālampaladarśanam*) prescribes a visit to all the shrines in a particular order, in the course of one day, sometime in the Karkkaṭakam month: one should first attend the initial *darśana* in the Thriprayar Rāma temple, then the morning worship in the Irinjalakuda Bharata temple, the afternoon worship in the Moozhikkulam Lakṣmaṇa temple, and the evening worship in the Payammal Śatrughna temple (see Fig. 5). This specific order is prescribed by the *māhātmya*s; noteworthy, each of the texts describes exactly the same sequence, together with the same timings, for visiting particular shrines by the devotees. The description of the *nālampalayātrā* is to be found in three modern *māhātmya*s: *Nālampalam Tīrtthayātra* (p. 10) and *Sree Koodalmaanikyam: History and Legend* (pp. 14–16), authored by T. Venugopal, and the *Nālampalamāhātmyam* (p. 6) by Radhakrishnan Poṭṭaykkal. Worthy of attention might be also the gradation of the importance of the deities, which is implied by the pilgrimage scheme: Rāma, Bharata, Lakṣmaṇa, Śatrughna. This gradation of importance (which is also the brothers' birth order) seems to be reflected in the contemporary prominence of the said temples—the temples in Thriprayar and Irinjalakuda attract significantly more pilgrims on the everyday basis than the temples in Moozhikkulam and Payammal.

The pilgrimage to all four temples is supposed to be conducted within a single day, which might also point to the recent establishing of this pilgrimage route, since without a vehicle it would not be possible to visit all four temples within such a short period of time.

The Karkkaṭakam month, which falls during the peak of the monsoon season in Kerala, is considered as the period of rejuvenation—physically, as the people are

Fig. 5 Nālampalayātrā, source: Moozhikkulam Śrī Lakṣmaṇapperumāḷ temple's Facebook page, accessed February 11, 2025.

following specific āyurvedic treatments during this month, and nowadays it is also often referred to as the time of spiritual purification. This latter designation is expressed by the custom of daily *Rāmāyaṇa* readings in temples and private households throughout the month, and of going on the *nālampalayātrā* pilgrimage. For instance, in the Thriprayar Śrī Rāmasvāmi temple, a priest reads *Rāmāyaṇa* every morning for three hours, from 7.00 am till 10.00 am. The reading of the whole text is usually completed within seven days and then restarted. It is important to note that the *Rāmāyaṇa* version that is read during the Kerala *Rāmāyaṇa māsam* is the Malayalam *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇam Kiḷippāṭṭu*,[12] attributed to Tuñcattŭ Rāmānujan

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12 "Parrot's song"—an indigenous literary genre, characterised by the parrot-narrator and the use of the Dravidian meters. The genre seems to have originated through this particular text (Freeman 2003: 480). Eḻuttacchan's work is a translation into Malayalam of the North Indian Sanskrit fourteenth-century *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa.*

Fig. 6 Beginning of the *Rāmāyaṇa māsam* (Mal. *rāmāyaṇamāsārambham*) marked in the Keralan calendar. Photo: Olga Nowicka.

Fig. 7 *Rāmāyaṇa māsam* in media. From the left: *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa; Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* reading; newspaper article informing about the beginning of the *nālampalayātrā* season.
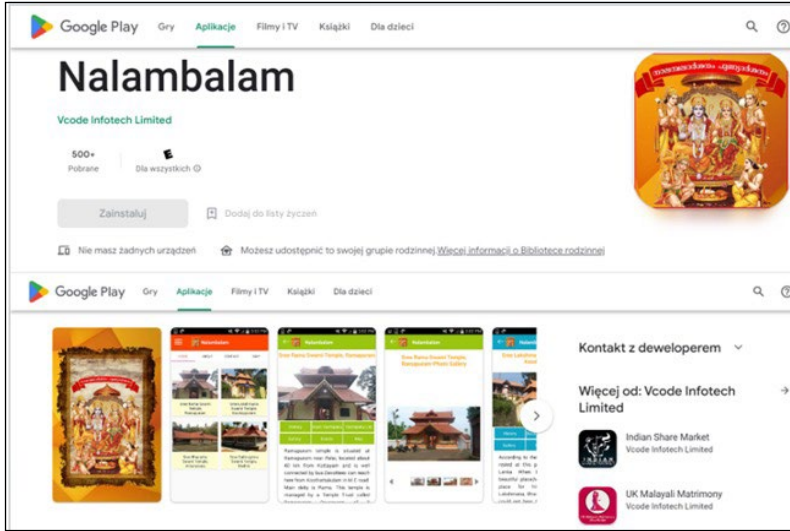
Fig. 8   *Nālampalam* App—a journal of the *nālampalam darśanam*.
It can be downloaded from Google Play.

Eḻuttacchan, roughly dated to the sixteenth century[13] (Freeman 2003: 480). Like the *nālāmpalamyātra*, the practice of the *Rāmāyaṇa* reading during the *Rāmāyaṇa māsam* seems to be rather a modern development, counting a few decades, as conducted interviews with representatives of the local community seem to show.

The concept of the *Rāmāyaṇa māsam* is interlinked with the *nālampalam* pilgrimage, and it appears to be nowadays widely present in the collective consciousness of the Keralan society, as the information about the *Rāmāyaṇa* month appears in calendars and across the media (newspapers, internet news, Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp status). In addition, the particular temples forming the various clusters actively advertise the pilgrimage, each within the cluster it belongs to. Boards with the *nālampalayātrā* map are displayed in the vicinities of the temples, numerous travel agencies and even the KSRTC (Kerala State Road Transportation Corporation) advertise and promote travel packages, not only to the main cluster but also the smaller ones. Even the smaller clusters are actively attracting pilgrims—they have well designed websites and Facebook pages, and they produce advertising posters. The temples themselves have undergone extensive renovations in the recent years due to the financial support of the visiting pilgrims. One of the smaller clusters has also launched a pilgrimage app—the *nālampalam darśanam*, which can be downloaded from Google Play.

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13   Tuñcattŭ Rāmānujan Eḻuttacchan is considered to have contributed to the development of the Malayalam language and literature.

Interconnections articulated through ritual practice

The interconnections between the *nālampalam* temples, except of being articulated by the modern *māhātmya* writing and the pilgrimage practice of *nālampalayātrā*, seem to be expressed through the ritualistic practice and temple festivals. The *māhātmya*s not only discuss in detail the rituals conducted in each of the temples in question, but also give an interpretation of their performance, which explains the links between the brother temples.

However, some of the interpretations expounded in the temple brochures appear to be misleading. One of such instances is the Pattām Udayam celebration. During Pattām Udayam ("rise of the tenth day", 10th day of Dhanu) in the Śrī Rāmasvāmi temple in Thriprayar there is supposed to take place a commemoration and an 're-enactment' of the *Rāmāyaṇa* episode in which Hanumān returns from Laṅkā after the search of Sītā and reports to Rāma that he has seen her. This episode is supposed to be alluded to by a procession (*ghoṣayātrā*) that takes place, in which the Hanumān image from a nearby temple (Erakuḷaṅṅara Śiva kṣetram) is taken to the Thriprayar Rāmasvāmi temple, crossing the Karuvannur River (*Nālampalamāhātmyam* 2005: 20). While I attended the festival, it turned out that it was in fact Dharma Śāstā (Ayyappan, son of Śiva and Viṣṇu in the form of Mohinī) who took part in the procession and was crossing the river, as I was informed by the local priests.[14] Thus, the brochure's attempt to interpret the ritual practice in this manner appears to be an example of imposing the temples' interconnections—it tries to inscribe temple's ritual practice into the *Rāmāyaṇa* theme with a view of connecting all the *nālampalam*.

Another festival, called Utram Viḷakkŭ, takes place in the Śrī Rāmasvāmi temple in Thriprayar just after the end of the biggest *pūram* (temple festival, of which an important part is an elephant procession) in Kerala, i.e., Āṟāṭṭupuḻa Pūram, which takes place at the Arattupuzha temple, where the main deity is Śāstā. For the time of this festival the Thriprayar temple's presiding deity leaves its abode in order to attend the *pūram* in Arattupuzha as the festival's main guest. It is stated in the *nālampalam māhātmya*s that during the time of the Rāma's absence, it is Bharata from the Kūṭalmāṇikyam temple in Irinjalakuda who is in charge of the temple. It is explained in the *Nālampalamāhātmyam* that Utram Viḷakkŭ performed in the Thriprayar Śrī Rāmasvāmi temple, being a recreation—on a small scale—of the Āṟāṭṭupuḻa Pūram (in which ca. thirty deities participate), is performed so that Rāma, after returning to his temple in Thriprayar, might relate to Bharata, who was guarding the Thriprayar temple during Rāma's absence, the events of the festival in Arattupuzha (*Nālampalamāhātmyam* 2005: 12–16). Just

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14   Information obtained during fieldwork conducted in Kerala (25.12.2022).

Fig. 9   Pattām Udayam: the arriving of Dharma Śāstā, after crossing the river (to the left); procession of Rāma and Śāstā (to the right). Photo: Olga Nowicka, 2022.

before the return of Rāma from Arattupuzha, a Brāhmaṇiyamma (belonging to the Ambalavāsi caste, "temple-dwellers", a group of Hindu castes customarily involved in the occupations connected with the functioning of a temple), located in the *namaskāra maṇḍapa*, where there is believed to be the presence of Hanumān, sings *brāhmanippāṭṭŭ* (songs sung in the temples during festivals, usually in the Bhagavatī temples). The songs contain *inter alia* references to some *Rāmāyaṇa* episodes, for example, Daśaratha's *putrakāmeṣṭi yajña* (oblation in desire of conceiving children), the birth of his sons, and the *annaprāśana* (rice-feeding ceremony) of the four sons of Daśaratha; Hanumān after seeing Sītā in Laṅkā; Rāma and others preparing for the battle (*yuddha*).[15]

The Śrī Kūṭalmāṇikyam Tiruvutsavam (that is, the festival of the Kūṭalmāṇikyam temple, the Bharata temple in Irinjalakuda) lasts for ten days and is one of the biggest temple festivals in Kerala. The festival's culmination is scheduled for the ninth day, called Valiya Viḷakkŭ. The day's climax is a grand scale Kathakaḷi performance of the *Śrīrāmapaṭṭābhiṣekam*, the ritual re-enactment of Rāma's coronation, from the *Rāmāyaṇa*. It lasts from midnight up to ca. 7:00 AM and engages as many as fourteen actors, a rare event for this particular performative form. Throngs of devotees attend the event. The actor who plays Rāma is treated as god's manifestation for the time of the performance. When the Kathakaḷi performance is over, devotees approach the scene from where *prasādam* is

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15   I recorded the song performance during fieldwork in Kerala in April 2023. The transcript of the recording was prepared by Dr Muralikrishnan MV, post-doctoral scholar at the DiPiKA (Digitization and Preservation of the Kerala Archives) project, Thrissur.

Fig. 10   Utram Viḷakkŭ. Photo: Olga Nowicka, 2023.

Fig. 11   Utram Viḷakkŭ. Photo: Olga Nowicka, 2023.

distributed. According to *Nālampalam Tīrtthayātra,* it is the coronation of Thriprayar's Rāma that takes place during this event (*Nālampalam Tīrtthayātra* 2018: 32).

The examples presented above show how the *nālampalam* concept is translated into the temples' ritualistic practice. However, as it was pointed out in the case of Pattām Udayam's *māhātmya* interpretation, in some instances modern *māhātmya*s seem to force this concept on the existing traditions in order to inscribe some of the temples' ritualistic practices into the *Rāmāyaṇa* theme. This specific *māhātmya* rhetoric seems to imply the modern sources of the *nālampalam* clustering.

Moreover, the temples' association with selected *Rāmāyaṇa* episodes, and in particular with the sons of Daśaratha, is expressed in its festival calendar. The particular elements of the discussed rites articulate well the interconnections between the shrines' main deities, as the mentioned close relation between the Thriprayar Rāma and the Irinjalakuda Bharata who visit each other during festival processions and actively participate in temples' ritualistic performance.

Noteworthy, the lack of symmetry between various discussed examples of the ritualistic articulation of interconnections among the *nālampalam* does not testify against it being considered a temple network or a set of connected places. One should remember that the temples in Thriprayar and Irinjalakuda are more prominent institutions than the temples in Moozhikkulam and Payammal. These are Rāma and Bharata temples which are renowned religious institutions—even when perceived outside the *nālampalam* cluster—that attract crowds of devotees all year round, and whose festivals are broadcasted live on the local television. The temples in Moozhikkulam and Payammal are currently much less known, and on a daily basis they are mostly visited by people living in the vicinity. Nevertheless, the *nālampalam* concept is imposed on those temples even though the Payammal temple seems to attract less of attention within this set. As demonstrated, the clustering is articulated and promoted mostly by the modern *māhātmya* writing and enhanced by the said temples themselves. Despite the presence of numerous shrines dedicated to figures of the *Rāmāyaṇa* epic such as Hanumān, Sītā, etc., and numerous temples dedicated to Rāma himself across Kerala, the said *māhātmya*s clearly define the set(s) of *nālampalam* by enumerating particular temples constituting the cluster(s). No other temples connected with the *Rāmāyaṇa* narrative are referred to as *nālampalam*—"four temples"—since the term explicitly refers to particular cluster(s) described by the modern *māhātmya*s. The strength of the bonds connecting those temples, despite being probably modern clustering, is testified to by the devotees' perception. The *nālampalam* concept's popularity and presence in the Keralites' collective consciousness is attested to by the large number of pilgrims visiting those temples during the Kaṟkkaṭakam month, as well as the concept's wide presence in various media.

Fig. 12   Śrī Kūṭalmāṇikyam Tiruvutsavam—Valiya Viḷakkŭ procession.
Photo: Olga Nowicka, 2023.

Fig. 13   Śrīrāmapaṭṭābhiṣekam. Photo: Olga Nowicka, 2023.

Fig. 14 *Śrīrāmapaṭṭābhiṣekam*. Photo: Olga Nowicka, 2023.

Fig. 15 *Śrīrāmapaṭṭābhiṣekam*. Photo: Olga Nowicka, 2023.

Articulating interconnections through modern media

As already mentioned, the interconnections between the *nālampalam* temples appear to be articulated also by means of modern media. Every year, as the month of Kaṟkkaṭakam approaches, the *nālampalam* founding myth is recapitulated and circulated by the leading Keralan news providers, such as for instance *Malayala Manorama*, a morning newspaper in Malayalam published in Kottayam, Kerala, which also publishes an online edition. In an article titled *The Nalambalam Yathra and its message of sacrifice* of the *Malayala Manorama* online edition, published on the 30th of June 2018, one can read:

> When Dwaraka sank into the sea, the idols that were worshipped by Lord Krishna were carried away by the current. Vakkayil Kaimal, a local feudal lord, had a dream that idols of four-armed Vishnu were floating in the sea. Next day, apparently, Kaimal was handed over the idols by fishermen. Legend has it that Kaimal, on realizing the importance of these idols, consulted with astrologers and installed them at four temples—the Nalambalam— a Rama temple on the banks of Kuleepani Theertham [Thriprayar], a Lakshmana temple on the banks of the Poorna river [Moozhikkulam], a Bharata temple [Irinjalakuda] and a Shatrughna temple [Payammal].[16]

Thereby, in this case the modern newspapers seem to fulfil the purpose of the *māhātmya* writing by promoting the sacred sites, introducing the pilgrimage pattern of the *nālampalayātrā*, and providing basic travel information.

One can learn from the article that "[a] visit to these four temples on one day during Karkkidakom is said to bring you prosperity and blessings." The author instructs: "[i]t is ideal to set aside a day for the Nalambalam journey. Start early, because you have to factor in the puja times at each temple and about 4 hours in the afternoon when the temples will be closed after the noon puja. There are plenty of small hotels and eateries along the way." Similarly to the modern *nālampalam māhātmya*s, while promoting the *nālampalam* pilgrimage, it provides the practical visualisations as maps, here created by such modern tool as Google Maps.

To the aid of those devotees who for whatever reason cannot go on the pilgrimage comes another achievement of modern technology, i.e., virtual reality. On the website created for this purpose, devotees may catch a glimpse of the *nālampalam* temples and go on the pilgrimage by means of the "Nālampaladarśanam

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16 *The Nalambalam Yathra and its message of sacrifice*, Onmanorama, https://www.onman orama.com/travel/kerala/2018/06/30/the-nalambalam-yathra-ramayanamasam-thrip rayar-koodalmanikyam-moozhikulam-payammal-religious-tourism.html [accessed July 15, 2024].
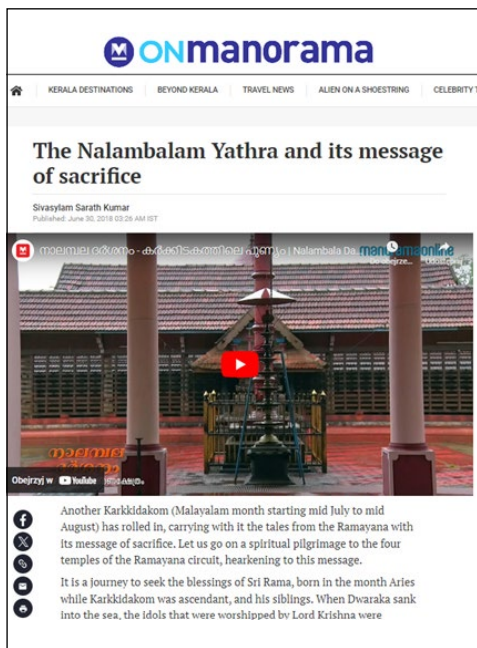
Fig. 16 Article in the Onmanorama. Source: https://www.onmanorama.com/travel/kerala/2018/06/30/the-nalambalam-yathra-ramayanamasam-thriprayar-koodamanikyam-moozhikulam-payammal-religious-tourism.html [accessed July 15, 2024].

Fig. 17 Nālampaladarśanam 360° Virtual Reality. Source: https://www.p4panorama.com/gallery-item/naalambala-darshanam/ [accessed July 15, 2024].

360° Virtual Reality." One click takes a person to—noteworthy—one of the smaller *nālampalam* clusters located in the Kottayam district. The tool allows to see each of the brother temples from the outside and from the inside in a 360° perspective, accompanied by devotional songs played in the background. The text attached to the vista guides pilgrims on the proper way of performance and its significance. The website thus promotes the *nālampalam* pilgrimage to this particular—and lesser known—Kottayam cluster.

Another practical tool created to facilitate the actual *nālampalam* pilgrimage is a mobile app launched in 2021, which, according to the description provided, is supposed to act as a pilgrims' guide. The introduction of the tool was announced in one of the leading Keralan newspapers—Mathrubhumi. The app, however, just as the virtual reality site discussed earlier, refers to the *nālampalam* cluster located in the Kottayam district only. Hence, it seems to indicate the intense efforts of this cluster's administering body to promote the four brother temples centered around the small village of Ramapuram.

Besides the already discussed modern tools used to articulate interconnections between the *nālampalam* temples and to advertise the *nālampalam* pilgrimage (which should be undertaken in the *Rāmāyaṇa māsam*), one can also observe dedicated songs and playlists on such popular portals as Spotify, and the use of the social media such as Facebook and Instagram—the particular *nālampalam* clusters have websites, as well as profiles on social media. Moreover, one may
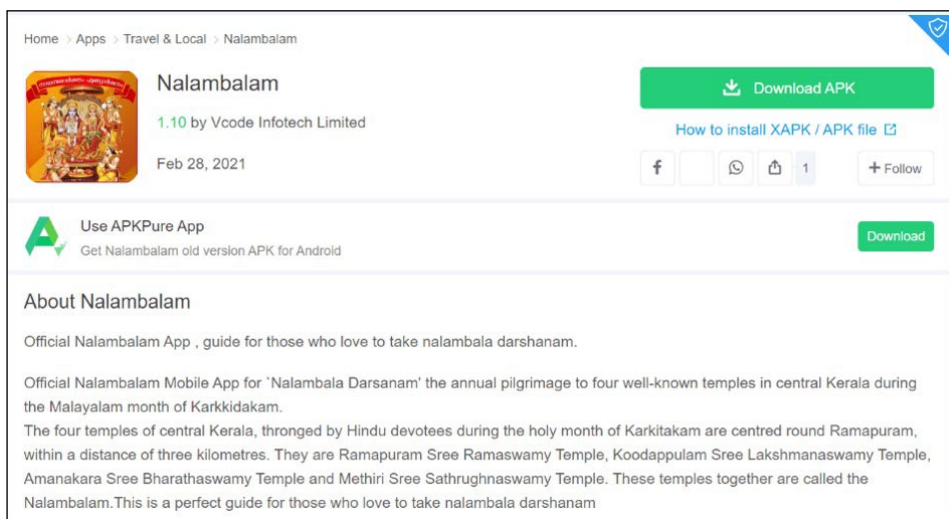
Fig. 18 *Nālampalam* mobile App. Source: https://apkpure.net/nalambalam/com.vcode.nalambalam [accessed July 15, 2024].

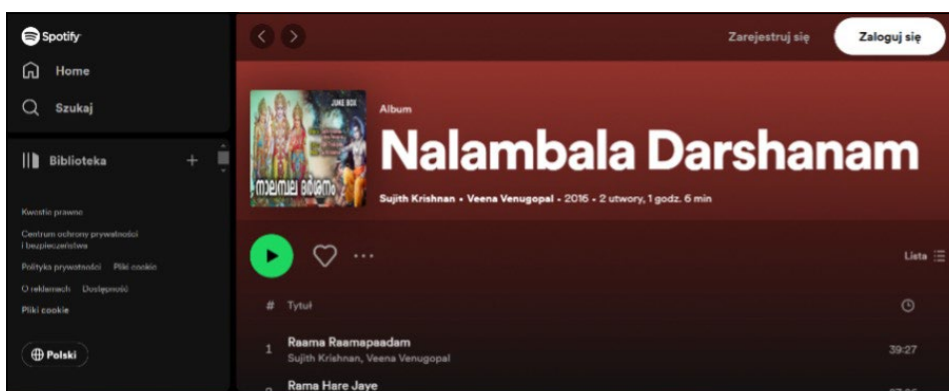Fig. 19 Mathrubhumi heading. Source: mathrubhumi.com [accessed July 15, 2024].

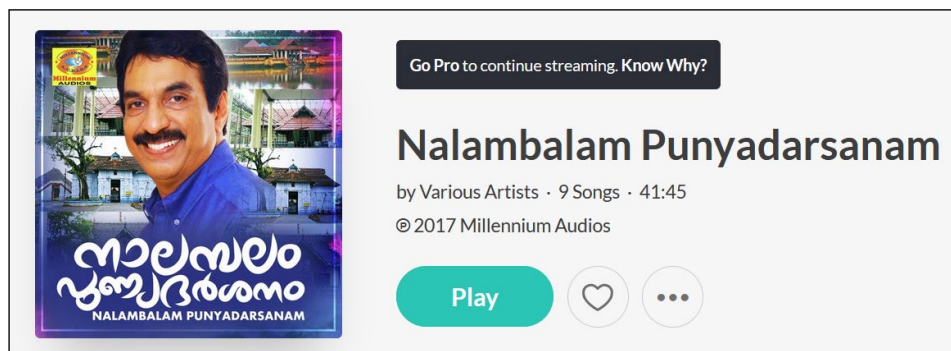Fig. 20 Nālampaladarśanam: A Spotify playlist. Source: spotify.com [accessed July 15, 2024].

Fig. 21   Cover of the music album dedicated to *nālampalam*. Source: https://www.jiosaavn.com/album/nalambalam-punyadarsanam/ybSGejHq3Tk_ [accessed July 15, 2024].
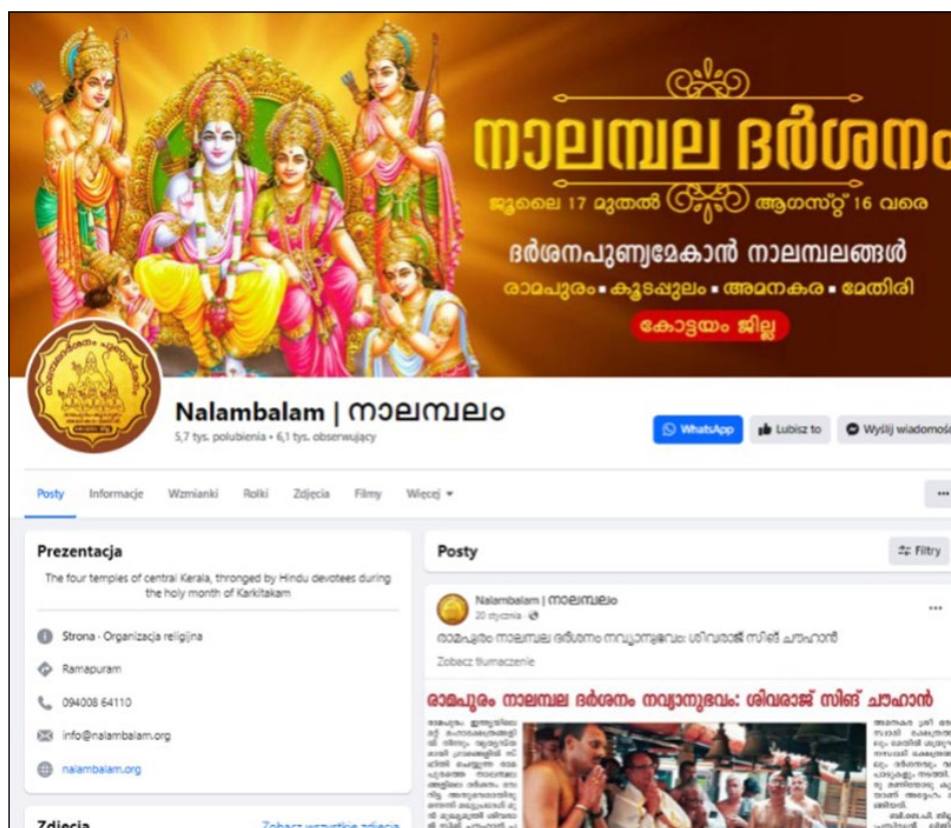

Fig. 22   Facebook page of the *nālampalam* cluster in Kottayam. Source: Facebook.com [accessed July 15, 2024].

Fig. 23 *Rāmāyaṇa māsam* WhatsApp status on YouTube.
Source: YouTube.com [accessed July 15, 2024].

also easily find on the internet dedicated content aiming at promoting *Rāmāyaṇa māsam*, such as Instagram and WhatsApp status meant to be shared with other social media users. Therefore, modern technology enables new modes of communicating the specific links between the analysed constituents of the temple network in question and translating them into the religious practice.

Replication of the *Rāmāyaṇa* geography in the local geospace of Kerala

One of the elements which are strongly emphasized in the modern *nālampalam māhātmya*s is the replication of the *Rāmāyaṇa* geography in the local geospace of Kerala, as we have seen above in the case of *Śrīrāmapaṭṭābhiṣekam*, the re-enactment of Rāma's coronation in the Kūṭalmāṇikyam temple in Irinjalakuda. Another example appears in the Thriprayar Śrī Rāmasvāmi temple, where every year in the Malayalam month of Vṛścikam (beginning mid-November), the theatrical performance Cākyār kūttŭ (performative form involving one male actor being present on the stage) takes place, featuring the *Rāmāyaṇa* episode of Hanumān

Fig. 24 Cākyār kūttŭ in the Thriprayar Śrī Rāmasvāmi temple, in the month of Vṛścikam. Photo: Olga Nowicka, 2023.

meeting Sītā in Laṅkā and subsequently informing Rāma about this encounter (*Nālampalamāhātmyam* 2019: 20–21). The Cākyār kūttŭ performance starts on the first day of the month and is presented for 12 days within the premises of the temple. The performers enact the *Aṅgulīyāṅkam* ("Act of the Ring"), which is the sixth act of the Śaktibhadra's (ca. ninth century) *Āścaryacūḍāmaṇi*.[17] A major part of the performance is devoted to a conversation between Hanumān and Sītā. It is staged in the *namaskāra maṇḍapa*, in front of the Rāma icon situated in *śrīkōvil*, and is considered an offering to the temple's presiding deity. For most of its duration, no spectators are allowed. Devotees can catch a glance of the performance, only for a short moment, during *darśana* times.

Noteworthy, one of the important temple offerings is firing of crackers (*katina*). As the modern *māhātyma*s inform, it is to commemorate the return of Hanumān after the search of Sītā, and his confirmation of having seen her. The *vaḷipāṭŭ* (offering by firing a cracker) is performed at the southern courtyard of the temple (*Nālampalamāhātmyam* 2019: 24).

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17 A play in seven acts that focuses on a number of episodes from the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

Another instance of the replication of the *Rāmāyaṇa* geography is the ritual of *setubandhana* ("the construction of a bridge"), which is annually observed by the Thriprayar Śrī Rāmasvāmi temple. The ceremony evokes the events from the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The ritual reenactment is performed by the team of temple priests at the Śrī Rāman Ciṟa—a freshwater pond, containing paddy fields, located two kilometers away from the temple. Rāma's bridge that is built during the ceremony at the Śrī Rāman Ciṟa seems to replicate the one in Rāmeśvaram. As Anne Feldhaus explains "[…] by replicating those other places […] [Keralan] holy places acquire a good deal of their sanctity from their relationships with distant places widely acknowledged to be holy" (Feldhaus 2003: 158).

The discussed ritual actions, such as *setubandhana* in the Thriprayar Śrī Rāmasvāmi temple, *Śrīrāmapaṭṭābhiṣekam* re-enactment in the Kūṭalmāṇikyam temple, Cākyār kūttŭ performance in the Thriprayar Śrī Rāmasvāmi temple, and Thriprayar *vaḷipāṭŭ* offering, seem to replicate the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s geography in the vernacular space of Kerala, i.e., they aim to transpose particular events from the epic's universum into the familiar—for the local devotees—geospace of Kerala.

The ritualistic practices in question seem to draw the connections between the discussed institutions and the *Rāmāyaṇa* narrative, thereby creating relations between the four brother temples, forming in this way set(s) of connected places/temple network.

Conclusion

As it was demonstrated above, what creates interconnections between the discussed temples and knits them into the temple network is primarily their relation to the *Rāmāyaṇa* narrative. The epic appears to be, in this case study, the effective joining tool between the religious institutions in question. Each temple in the cluster is dedicated to one of the four brothers—sons of Daśaratha. The temples are decorated with murals featuring *Rāmāyaṇa* themes, some modern, some dating to the eighteenth century; moreover, the temples' ritual practice alludes to the *Rāmāyaṇa* themes as well, consisting *inter alia* of the re-enactment of selected episodes of the epic, inscribing thereby the said institutions into the well-defined *Rāmāyaṇa*-oriented network of connected places. However, what seems to be the most powerful clustering tool appears to be the pilgrimage practice of the *nālampalayātrā*, which is enhanced by the contemporary *māhātmya* writings, as well as the modern media and travel agencies. Various sources presented above inform devotees about pilgrimage itinerary and provide pilgrims with the practical guidance. Therefore, the pilgrimage practice seems to create most explicitly the strongest interconnections between the temples of the cluster(s).

In the *nālampalam* phenomenon we can see not only the creation of the main numbered set of places, but also the multiplication of the main cluster, by the creation of three smaller *nālampalam* sets—organized in the more compact clusters where temples are located within a range of a few kilometers only. The closer study of the *nālampalam* case shows that it is not only the family ties between the brothers and the references to the *Rāmāyaṇa* epic that bring the said temples together, but also the number four and its multiplication that causes them to be perceived as a set of connected places. Therefore, there are four temples of four brothers, and furthermore, this cluster of four temples is multiplied by four—there is one "main" *nālampalam* cluster, and three smaller and less known *nālampalam* clusters, so in total there are four sets of *nālampalam* across Kerala. We obtain the equation 4×4. Hence, what we observe is a play with the number four (Feldhaus 2003: 127–56).

The particular connections between the discussed temples, which organize them into defined sets, seem to be articulated mostly through the medium of the modern *māhātmya*s. These literary sources, while informing about the temples' ritualistic practice, define the *nālampalam* set as a coherent and meaningful entity. Therefore, they constitute the medium through which the links between the temples in question are communicated to the devotees. All mentioned *nālampalam māhātmya*s appear to be recent publications, produced across the last twenty years. Noteworthy, one of the available earlier works, *Śrī Kuṭalmāṇikyam Caritrasaṃkṣēpam*, written by Pāykkāṭṭŭ Paramēśvaran Nampūtirippāṭŭ, published in 1963, does not mention the term *nālampalam* nor *nālampala-tīrtthayātra* concept. It seems to suggest that *nālampalam*, perceived as a set of connected places and pilgrimage destination, might have been a relatively recent phenomenon. Moreover, the pilgrimage practice of *nālampala-tīrtthayātra*, assuming a distance of eighty kilometres, which supposed to be traversed within one day—from morning to evening—seems to require a modern amenity such as car or bus transportation.

Therefore, the case study reveals some of the contemporary mechanisms of temple 'clustering', encouraged by the temples themselves, as the use of modern *māhātmya* writing and modern media, such as websites and social media, which appear to be effective tools to communicate with the devotees and promote new devotional practices.

ORCID®

Olga Nowicka https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0634-2955

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