

Kōlam
Form, technique, and application of a changing ritual folk art
of Tamil Nadu

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Introduction

The cultural heritage¹ of a people often survives in its folk arts. On the Indian sub-continent, it is the people of Tamil Nadu who have preserved many ancient elements of Hindu tradition in their purest form. The reasons for this are Tamil Nadu's geography and history which both are well known and need not be discussed here. *Kōlam* design is one of the folk arts of Tamil Nadu. Today, especially in the rural areas, the drawing of a *kōlam* still forms an essential part of the daily work routine of women. This art form is therefore an ideal subject for the study of ideas and customs prevalent in the Tamil tradition. In our presentation of the *kōlam*, we hope to contribute towards a greater understanding of the fundamental continuity of traditional ideas, signs, and designs in South Indian culture. The *kōlam* art as well as related arts (see below) are not well known in the western world. It is, therefore, our aim to provide the reader with as broad a view as possible of this art which is characterized by an inexhaustible variety of themes and forms. An introduction into the diverse forms of the *kōlams* and their symbolism shall be followed by a discussion of the material and of the techniques used in the design. In the second part, we shall try to show which connections exist between the original meaning of the *kōlam* and its present application. Through this we shall attempt to trace the essence of the *kōlam* art. Finally, we shall examine the *kōlam* against its ecological and sociological background. Based on the criteria derived from this study, we can venture a forecast as to the *kōlam*'s chances of survival.

The figures and photographs presented here were collected during my fieldwork in 1980 in the small town of Tiruvannamalai in the North Arcot district and in Randam (Polur Taluka), a village situated 33 kilometers north of Tiruvannamalai. For the purpose of comparison, this material was supplemented by a collection compiled in Mylapore, a traditional quarter of Madras city. It should be mentioned that, except for those of the *kōlams* collected in Mylapore (Drawing 53), all illustrations, including the drawings, are based on photographs taken during the three days of the *poṅkal* festival. This fact is of vital importance for the artistic evaluation. As this is the most important festival of the Tamil year, the artists are very careful in choosing motifs which suit the occasion and they execute the drawings with particular care and imagination.

¹ The present essay is the revised version of a lecture held in Heidelberg (1985) and Berne (1986). I am grateful to my Tamil teacher, A. Dhamotharan, Ph.D., Heidelberg University, for valuable references, and to my colleague E. Masilamani-Meyer for her substantial help in the English translation. - For the sake of linguistic clarity, Sanskrit terms are especially marked (Skt.). Except for terms in other Indian languages, such as *āpanā*, *muggu(lu)*, etc., technical terms are given in Tamil.

There are a number of works dealing with related folk arts and ritual decorations in India. There are, however, only few works which are exclusively dedicated to *kōlam* art and they are often not easily available. My comments and the discussion of the material are therefore mainly drawn from my personal observations and from interviews during my fieldwork.²

Since our main focus is on the present aspect of *kōlam* art, questions bearing on the *kōlam*'s historical origin and the sparse references to this art in classical Tamil literature and in Sanskrit literature cannot be considered here. Let us note, however, that the term *kōlam* in its meaning as "floor design" can be documented only from the 16th century onwards,³ and that the *kōlam* as an art form cannot be identified reliably with any of the classical Indian arts (Skt. *kalā*) listed in Vātsyāyana's *Kāmasūtra*.⁴ Yet this does not mean that this folk art has a later origin than the *Kāmasūtra*, which has been dated between the 4th and 6th century, nor that it was unknown amongst the Brahmins at the royal courts. Nevertheless, the above fact leads one to look for the origins of the *kōlam* art in pre- or non-Aryan cultures with matriarchal traits,⁵ for this art can be linked with the most ancient cultural expressions of India.⁶ Traditional art forms related to the

² In this regard, I am particularly indebted to G. Ranganathan, Randam, R. Venkataraman, New Delhi, and G. Krishnamoorthi, Ph.D., Madras for their kind cooperation. On account of the discretion required on my part and because of the natural shyness on the part of Indian women in the countryside it proved to be difficult to enter into longer conversation with *kōlam* artists themselves.

³ In *Maturai Mīnārciyammai Kuram* v. 25 (*Tamil Lexicon* vol. II [1928], p. 1195).

⁴ R. Schmidt, *Das Kāmasūtra des Vātsyāyana* (Schmiden 1915), pp. 44, 46, translates *taṇḍula-kusuma-vali* (*bali-* respectively) *vikārāh* (I.3.15), the sixth *kalā* as well as Yaśodhara's commentary referring to this passage too freely by "Verfertigen mannigfacher Linien aus Reis und Blumen" and "die Darstellung mannigfaltiger Streifen aus ganzen Reiskörnern von verschiedenen Farben ..." respectively (italics are ours). Cf., however, *ālekhyā* (Skt.), "painting, picture", the fourth *kalā*, and even more so *dhūlicitra*, "picture in the dust", which in the late *Nārada Śilpaśāstra* is mentioned as one of the three forms of *bhauma-citra* (Skt.), "picture on the ground" (Archana and Gita Narayanan [ed.]: *The Language of Symbols. A project on South Indian Ritual Decorations of a semi-permanent nature* [New Delhi: n.d.], p. 79).

⁵ See Archana's (*ibid.*, pp. 7, 84 ff.) propositions regarding the origins of the *kōlam*. This scholar relates the (*puḷḷi-k-*)*kōlam* to the dot (Skt. *bindu*) and the serpent, i.e. to fertility, death, and rebirth, phenomena which are intrinsically linked to the role of women since primordial times.

⁶ The ornaments of a small copper plate from Mohenjo-daro shows close affinities to the "loop" *kōlam* (depicted in B. and R. Allchin: *The Birth of Indian Civilization. India and Pakistan before 500 B.C.* [Harmondsworth (Penguin): 1968], p. 312; cf. Enakshi Bhavnani: *Folk and Tribal Designs of India* [Bombay: 1974], p. 45). John Layard: *Labyrinth Ritual in South India: Threshold and Tattoo Designs*, in: *Folk-Lore*, vol. 48.2 (1937), pp. 115-182, connects the *kōlam* with prehistoric megalithic cultures, whereas Gift Siromoney: *South Indian Kolam Patterns*, in: *Kalaksetra Quarterly*, vol. 1 (1978/1), pp. 9-14, ascribes it to medieval India: "It is quite likely that many of the designs originate from silken or coloured cord decorations fitted on wooden pillars during the Vijayanagar period which is famous for elaborate ornamentation" (*ibid.*, p. 11). The diversity of hermeneutic interpretations and propositions regarding the origin of the *kōlam*

kōlam are also known in other parts of India: the *ālpānā* in Bengal, the *jhetti* in Orissa, the *aripānā* in Bihar (including the murals and floor designs in Mithila villages), the *sañjhi* in Uttar Pradesh, the *maṇḍana* in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, the *sathiya* in Gujarat, the *raṅgoli* or *raṅgavalli* in the Deccan, the *aniyal* in Kerala, and especially the *muggu(lu)* in Andhra Pradesh. This diffusion throughout India and the fact that these arts share certain motifs and symbols point to a common origin. Furthermore, all these regional variations are related by the following factors: they are (almost) exclusively practised by women; they are intimately linked with agricultural life and village tradition; they are connected with folk rituals and archaic beliefs in magic;⁷ the material used for the designs was originally in most regions rice or rather rice flour.

I

The most important place for the floor design is the slightly elevated landing in front of the main entrance (Figs. 180, 181, 184). On festival days *kōlams* also decorate the verandah, the forecourt, and the floors inside the house, especially in the kitchen and in front of the altar. Leaving the definition of the term *kōlam* for later, let us first have a look at some typical examples from which we shall gain an insight into the underlying structures, the variations, and the symbolic language of the *kōlams*.

At a first glance, a *kōlam* may appear as a most complex geometrical design (Fig. 182). In general, however, these designs are made up of simple basic patterns and symbol motifs which are harmonized with similar or different simple patterns (Drawing 45). In other words: *kōlams* are almost always centric designs which either proceed from or are marked by a concrete motif or more frequently by an abstract pattern and which are always based on visible or imaginary geometrical figures such as quadrangles, hexagons or octagons.⁸ The salient features of the design are multiplication, proportion, symmetry, and centering (sometimes with a centrifugal effect) which lend many *kōlams* their kaleidoscopic appearance (e.g. Fig. 188). Rare are one-sided motifs and triangular basic patterns, and even fewer are free-hand (un-geometrical) drawings such as a burning oil-lamp (*kuttuvilakku*) or a bouquet of flowers. Multiplication of the basic or core-pattern is the simplest and most popular means by which the visual effect is enhanced and by which even very simple form elements and motifs are endowed with a highly decorative value

can be explained by the very complex manifestation of this art which nowadays expresses symbols and motifs of both recent and ancient origin as well as of different cultural levels and epochs.

⁷ H. Mode: 'Zu den Alpanas', in: *Indische Spruchweisheit*, transl. a. comm. by R. Beer (Leipzig: 1973), pp. 221-226, at p. 223.

⁸ Gift Siromoney, head of the Department of Statistics at the Madras Christian College, and his assistants have established some simple mathematical properties of common *kōlam* designs. They have also made use of *kōlam* designs in formulating two-dimensional formal grammars/languages in the Chomskian sense, models which are known as "*kōlam* array grammars" or sometimes as "Siromoney array grammars"; for an introduction, see *idem*: *South Indian Kolam Patterns*, pp. 12 ff., and *Perception of structure and complexity in South Indian Kolam patterns*, in: *Scientific Report* (Madras Christian College, Dept. of Statistics) 62 (1986) [with bibliography].

and an unquestionable 'fascination' (Drawing 46; Fig. 183). With regard to the nature of its design, the *kōlam* in its most typical and most frequent 'loop form' (Drawings 47, 48, 53; Fig. 182) can be defined as a pattern consisting of one continuous line or of artistically interlaced or combined forms which most often are enclosed by a frame. The multiplication or the extension of the *kōlam*'s ornamentation is only limited by the available space. This formal definition can be illustrated by examples of floor designs consisting of one continuous line which does not intersect (Fig. 184).

The symbolism underlying the 'loop' *kōlams* can be inferred by a comparison with structurally identical floor designs from other areas of Tamil Nadu as well as with those from Karnataka and Kerala. They are designs which often end in snake heads or snake-hoods.⁹ Thus we can say in all probability that the loop *kōlam* was derived from such snake *kōlams*, though its symbolism has generally been forgotten. An inherent snake symbolism in the loop *kōlam* can also be substantiated by representations of snakes (Skt. *nāga*) in temples as well as by the very popular *nāga* cult of South India, a cult involving the planting of stones dedicated to snakes (*nāka-k-ka*). We encounter such stones frequently under sacred trees such as the *pippala* or *aśvattha* (Skt.; *Ficus Religiosa*) and the *nīm* or *nimba* (Skt; *Melia Azadirachta*); we see them also in the vicinity of temple tanks and in sacred groves. The snake being a symbol for fertility, such snake stones are usually offered by women whose wish for a child has been fulfilled. On these stones are representations of a snake couple which, entwined in the act of copulation, encloses a small figure (apparently that of Kṛṣṇa), most probably an allusion to the child desired (Fig. 185).¹⁰ As we shall see later, however, the original use of the snake motif in *kōlam* art can at least partly also be attributed to the magic-apotropaic character of the snake. The polyvalent characteristics of the snake have not only led to its association with cure, life, rebirth, and immortality, but also with disease, death, and destruction and as such the snake is worshipped as a tutelary deity.¹¹

Among the figurative drawings of animal motifs birds and butterflies, the fish (Drawing 54) and the snail as well as the turtle and the peacock (Fig. 186) enjoy great popularity. The peacock (*mayil*), for instance, is known as vehicle and theriomorphic representation of Skanda or Subrahmaṇya, the young god of war, very popular among the Tamil people. The peacock is not only held to be efficacious against poison, but it is also believed that the animal, on account of its plumage, protects a person from the evil eye.

Among other, very frequently used symbols of great significance we find the hexagram. It is often combined with the *hagal*-rune, a Germanic letter and symbol of procreation,¹² consisting of three geometrically intersecting lines (Drawings 45, 51; Fig. 189).

⁹ See Archana, *op. cit.*, figs. 6, 38-40, 141-146, 157, 171-174, 258-261.

¹⁰ On the *nāga* symbolism in general and the modern *nāga* cult in South India in particular see J.Ph. Vogel: *Indian Serpent-Lore or The Nāgas in Hindu Legend and Art* (Varanasi: 1972), pp. 270-277, and *passim*.

¹¹ See Vogel, *ibid.*, and Archana, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-64.

¹² W. Blachetta: *Das Sinnzeichen-Buch* (Frankfurt/M: n.d.), p. 88, defines the *hagal* rune in the

Being represented by the hexagram or arising from it we often find the lotus flower (Drawing 49), the main attribute of Lakṣmī, Viṣṇu, and Brahmā, (deities connected with creation and the maintenance of the world), and therefore a symbol of universal cosmic life forces, of purity, and of the unfolding of divine consciousness. Another popular symbol in *kōlam* design is the *svastika* (Skt.) and its many variations. In the form of a fylfot, either turning to the right or to the left, it was known to many ancient cultures as a symbol of the sun and of fertility and as a symbol standing for auspiciousness in general (figs. 46, 50; Fig. 187).¹³

It would take us too far to delve deeper into the symbolic meaning of the above and other universal motifs in *kōlam* art, suffice it to mention that almost all the motifs are symbols of fertility and procreation or of the cosmic life force and regeneration and that all of them (including the snake in its positive aspects) are 'symbols of life' and therefore highly auspicious. This life-affirming trait of the *kōlam* also finds its expression in the choice of purely decorative forms, which, combined with symbol motifs, allow for an infinite variety of new designs. Leaf ornaments representing flower motifs and abstract frame designs are among the most common decorative forms.

When we speak of the *kōlam* technique, we have to stress again that *kōlam* art is mainly practised by women, that is, by women from all levels of the society and of every age group.¹⁴ Let us not forget, however, that the whole society takes part in this art, inasmuch as the *kōlam* is the most conspicuous artistic expression of the people and for many the only opportunity to give their houses and dwellings a decorative and appealing look.

The dexterity and agility which the women and adolescent girls display in the placing of even very large and complex *kōlams* can be explained in terms of its being a daily work, a duty deeply rooted in the life rhythm of the people, initiated before going to bed and performed in the early morning. As a rule, the preparations begin the previous evening when the entrance and the square in front of the house are cleaned with water. Early next morning, often before dusk, this area is then sprinkled with a solution of cow-

¹³ See Thomas Wilson: *The Swastika*, ed. by Jamna Das Akthar (Delhi: 1973), e.g. pp. 40-44, 186-190.

¹⁴ An exception to this rule are the *Pēṭiyar*. They form a small group of hermaphrodites who wear saris and long hair and who are largely regarded by the society as psychically abnormal people and therefore ostracized. Nevertheless, they fulfill necessary social functions as astrologers, magicians, sex therapists, reciters of funeral hymns and last but not least as masters of the *kōlam* art. Moving from one village to another they instigate women to draw *kōlams* in their houses.

dung and water (*cāni*).¹⁵ This treatment of the floor or ground enhances the effect of the *kōlam* and causes the design to adhere better than it would on a dry and dusty surface.

The material with which the *kōlam* is drawn is either a white (in rare cases coloured) stone powder or rice flour (*arici-māvu*). With the rising costs of rice, rice flour is rarely used today¹⁶ or only for small *kōlams* inside the house. For the larger designs in front of the house white quartz stone (*kōla-māvu-k-kal*, "stone for *kōlam* powder")¹⁷ is used which is either found in nature or bought very cheaply in a store. The stone is placed into a mortar (one not used for the pounding of rice) and then smashed to powder with an iron pole (*kaṭappārai*).¹⁸ In the modern, multi-storeyed houses of urban areas white chalk has become a convenient substitute.¹⁹ In connection with the cult and rituals of a deity sacred ash (Skt. *vibhūti*) was preferred in the past.²⁰

During festival days, when more than one *kōlam* is placed, the square in front of the house is first divided into sections which are then framed according to the planned design of the *kōlams*. The frame undoubtedly serves to define a ritually pure area which is thus protected against inauspicious, negative influences. Within this frame a grid of dots is placed according to a geometrical pattern. The grid can be fine or coarse depending on the size and motifs chosen for the *kōlam*. The grid constitutes the guiding principle according to which the *kōlam* is placed. My choice of the word 'place' in describing the technique of the *kōlam* is intentional. As the Tamil-expression *kōlam-pōtu*, "to put, to place a *kōlam*", indicates, the *kōlam* is not drawn or painted as with a brush. Rather it is 'put down' or 'placed' by letting the powder or flour slowly trickle down between index

¹⁵ Siromoney: South Indian Kolam Patterns, *op. cit.*, p. 11, remarks that according to literary descriptions the floor is made smooth with a paste made of *kuṅkumam* (a red paint formed of turmeric with alum and lime juice) and sandalwood (*cantāṇam*) as well as civet (*puṇuku* or *puḷuku*). Among others these materials are used for the preparation of the ground of certain *yantras* or even for drawing them (see Appendix in: S. Subrahmanya Sastri and T.R. Srinivas. Ayyangar: *Saundarya-laharī [The Ocean of Beauty] of Śrī Śaṅkara-Bhagavatpāda* [5th ed., Madras (Adyar): 1977], pp. 262-285, e.g. *yantra* nos. 8, 9, 18, 19, 58, 64, 68, 78, 82, 87).

¹⁶ A. Dharmotharan, however, attests the regular use of rice powder in the coastal region of Cidambaram even today as the *kōlam* stone is not easily available there in nature.

¹⁷ The geological analysis of the stone as well as of the material for *cemman* (see below) stems from Dr. H.-U. Schmutz (Fehraltorf, Switzerland).

¹⁸ People describe the preparation of rice powder as follows: raw rice is soaked in water for fifteen minutes and then dried in the open air in the shade. Thereafter it is fried over fire and finally ground with a pestle.

¹⁹ Cf. Archana, *op. cit.*, pp. 74 f., where also the casual use of slaked lime is mentioned.

²⁰ C.G. Diehl: *Instrument and Purpose. Studies on Rites and Rituals in South India* (Lund: 1956), p. 293, refers to a *kōlam* dedicated to Sarasvatī which was drawn with *vibhūti*. The *Kāpālikas*, too, used ashes - probably of cremated corpses - for the *kōlam*-like drawings prepared for their rites, which were performed in the cremation ground (see D.N. Lorenzen: *The Kāpālikas and Kālāmukhas. Two Lost Śaivite Sects* [New Delhi: 1972], p. 21). Consecrated ash and ash of corpses also play a role in the traditional practice of the *yantra* (see Subrah-

and middle-finger or (and) between middle- and ring-finger to form a line or double line. With the thumb the flow of powder is regulated so that the line or double line will turn out even. Starting from the basic motif in the centre, which is, so to speak, the key to the *kōlam*, connecting lines are drawn to the peripheral form elements; this is followed by a more or less detailed ornamentation (Drawing 51). The grid is placed without any aiding devices and gains in importance the larger the size of the design. For the daily designs the grid is often dispensed with, and skillful women are able to place even very intricate *kōlams* without a grid.

This most common technique, for which the grid of dots forms the basis, is called *puḷḷi-k-kōlam*, "dot *kōlam*", which thus can be distinguished from the "line *kōlam*" (Fig. 184)²¹ and the "stripe or *kōtu-k-kōlam*." The latter consists of alternating red and white stripes (red and white being the colours of the mother goddess and of light and purity respectively)²² which at the time of festivals are drawn on the walls of houses (Fig. 180) or on the outside of the outer temple walls. (Other forms and techniques such as the *sap-tasvara-* (Skt.) or *icai-k-kōlam*, "music *kōlam*", synchronized with the seven basic notes,²³ the *nīrmē-* or *nīeukku-k-kōlam*, "*kōlam* [drawn] on or in water, also called *puṇal-ōviyam*, "water-picture", as well as *kōlams* "drawn on fire"²⁴ seem to be of a more recent date and are only sporadically cultivated.) After the *kōlam* has been placed, its frame is retraced with the help of an old piece of cloth or a sponge which is dipped into a reddish brown paste (*cemman*) made from red top soil (*kāvi-k-kal*). This procedure places the frame in a sharper contrast (e.g. Fig. 182); for the same reason parts of the *kōlam* itself may be tinted red with this paste. Some more artistically inclined women try with a varying degree of success to highlight their *kōlam* designs by applying four double lines, by combining simple and double lines or by hatching one or the other plain area (Fig. 188).

If the landing, the threshold or the inside of the house have a hard ground of earth, cement or stone, to which the powder does not stick, the *kōlam* is drawn with a liquid paste made of powder and water. Here, as with the reddish brown frames, the lines are painted, the hand fulfilling the function of a fountain-pen. This 'fountain-pen' technique requires, or allows, a very quick drawing of the lines. *Puḷḷi-k-kōlams* painted in this 'wet' technique are generally not as geometrically perfect as the other *kōlams*, yet their lines will appear more sweeping and free (Fig. 182). An advantage of this technique is that this *kōlam* will last longer than the one made with powder (*mā[vu]-k-kōlam*), the latter being blurred easily by people stepping on it. A disadvantage of the wet technique is the abrasion of the finger nails.

In recent times stencils and especially tubes into which a popular motif has been perforated (*kōla-māvu-k-karaṅṅakkar*) have come into fashion. They are not only used for drawing the time-consuming frames (Fig. 186), but increasingly also for a quick and easy

²¹ Cf. Archana, *op. cit.*, figs. 38-40.

²² See *ibid.*, pp. 11 f., where a folk belief is quoted according to which purified white earth dust and red-soil (*cemman*) represent husband and wife.

²³ See *ibid.* p. 88 and figs. 238, 249.

placing of the *kōlam* itself and thus give wing to a decadent development. It has to be added, however, that already sixty years ago people complained about the detrimental influence of stencils and moulds,²⁵ but so far, these 'novelties' have not gained the upper hand. Nevertheless, the fact that these devices are not only used in small towns such as Tiruvannamalai, but also in remote villages gives rise to concern. Interesting in this connection is the fact that in the villages these devices are exclusively employed by caste Hindus and not by Untouchables (Harijans), the latter preferring in any case the wet technique. Contrary to the strict line design, which stands in a natural contrast to the red frame on the one hand and the colour of the ground on the other hand, are those tendencies by which the *kōlam* is made into a floor *painting*, namely the filling of parts or of the whole *kōlam* with coloured powder.

II

At first sight many *kōlams* give us the impression that this art is a *decorative art*, an art which mirrors the highly developed aesthetic appreciation and the artistic inclination of the Indian people. The decorative aspect of this art is already evident in the name given to this art. The first meaning of *kōlam* in the *Tamil Lexicon*²⁶ is "beauty, gracefulness, handsomeness"; as synonym *aḷaku*, "beauty" is given. The next meanings are "colour" (synonym: *niram*); "form, shape, external or general appearance" (*uruvam*); "nature" (*tanmai*), and "costume,²⁷ appropriate dress,²⁸ attire, as worn by actors", etc. Only as further meanings we have "ornament, as jewelry" (*āparaṇam*); "adornment, decoration, embellishment" (*alaṅkāram*);²⁹ and finally, "ornamental figures drawn on floor, wall or sacrificial pots with rice-flour, white stone-powder, etc.". In this connection, I should mention that I have not seen such wall paintings in Tamil Nadu, although they do exist in Andhra Pradesh and other regions of India. Earthen pots, storage containers and sometimes sacrificial vessels, which in rural Tamil Nadu form part of the bride's dowry, are still today painted with special *kōlams*.

In Tamil Nadu, the fundamental aesthetic idea of beauty is intimately linked with a traditional concept of order: for instance, *ūr-kōlam-vātal* signifies a village procession in rank and file on festive occasions, whereas *alaṅ-kōlam*, the opposite of the term, stands for various types of disorder, especially slovenness in dress or appearance. It is not surprising, then, that for a Tamil, whose sense of order is guided by his conception of

²⁵ For example, by P.V. Jagadīsa Ayyar: *South Indian Customs* (Madras: 1925), p. 88.

²⁶ Vol. II, p. 1195.

²⁷ Cf. a masked drama in Sri Lanka which is performed under this name (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 17, p. 168).

²⁸ For example, of warriors (*pōr-kōlam*), of bride and bridegroom (*maṇa-k-kōlam*), or of the dignified attitude and appropriate dressing of the holy man (*turavi-k-kōlam*).

²⁹ Skt. *alaṅkāra* denotes not only a literary means of embellishment, but also "the act of decora-

beauty, a *kōlam* is as much a part of a house as the jewellery is a part of a woman. A house without a *kōlam* is called *mūḷi*, which means "(a woman) devoid of nose-rings and ear-rings (and who, if married, is not adorned with the *tilaka* [Skt.; a dot, most of the time red, worn on the forehead])".

Kōlam art should not only be appreciated from the point of view of aesthetics. The drawing or placing of a *kōlam* also serves a pedagogical purpose. As any artistic activity, the mastery of *kōlam* art requires technical know-how, dexterity, discipline, perseverance as well as inspiration and an inner harmony, qualities which in turn act upon the artist. A high degree of concentration, the ability of abstract thinking processes and a good memory are further requirements, especially for the more demanding designs which can only be aimed at during festival time when there is enough leisure. As the following Tamil proverb shows, the *kōlam* is also associated with craftiness or resourcefulness:

nī taṭukkin³⁰ kīḷē nuḷaintāl,
nāṅ kōlattukkuk-kīḷē pōvēṅ.

"If you crawl under a tiny mat,
I shall hide under a *kōlam*."

Publications on or with *kōlam* designs meant for the common public do exist,³¹ but so far, few of them have reached the villages and they are rarely copied from. Usually, the artist draws her inspiration from everyday life in the village, from nature, and temple art.³² She creates new forms and motifs and expresses by their choice and combination, composition and ornamentation her artistic talents. In this respect, *kōlam* art, and folk art in general, offers the South Indian woman a means to develop her personality and to raise her self-confidence, aspects which due to woman's subordinate role in society are generally neglected. A woman's actions and behaviour are largely circumscribed by social and ritual factors which leave her little room for individual expression. *Kōlam* art can therefore act (though notably again within the framework of social conventions) as a means of sublimation of her frustrations and unfulfilled wishes and thereby ensure a psychic harmony. This art is not only a mirror of village culture and life, but *kōlams*, being a sort of 'handwriting' of their mostly illiterate creators, bear the artists' personal stamp. In rural areas, mothers on the lookout for a prospective bride for their sons will read from the *kōlam* a girl's maturity and suitability for marriage.

As an expression of hospitality, sometimes with the heading *vaṇakkam*, "Salutation!", or *nalvaravu* (Drawing 52), frequently in translation "Welcome!", the *kōlam* fulfills an important social function. As soon as a guest appears, the house is swept and a *kōlam* is drawn in front of it. The *kōlam* is a sign of welcome, for example, to the family of the bridegroom at the time of their traditional visit to the bride's home before marriage. Sim-

³⁰ A. Dharmotharan reads *pai* for *taṭu*.

³¹ See, for instance, the Tamil Weekly *Tiṇamaṇi Katir*.

³² For drawings and pictures of *kōlam* designs from the village of ...

ilarly, we know that in Karnataka the drawing of a *raṅgoli* was part of the reception ceremony performed for the guest.³³ According to Indian tradition, a guest is believed to have been sent by god and, therefore, he is received with greatest honours.³⁴

It goes without saying that competition with neighbours is a natural incentive to perfect the art;³⁵ yet other social interests also play a part. *Kōlam* art gives the adolescent girl a chance to show herself in public; it is a theme on which Tamil films and works of modern Tamil literature develop their popular love-stories.³⁶ In the winter month of *mārkaḷi* (Skt. *dhanus*, "Sagittarius", i.e. December/January) girls of marriageable age decorate their *kōlams* with the white or yellow flower of a particular gourd (*paṅṅki-k-kāy*, *Macaragua Indica*) which blossoms only in this season. The flower is placed on top of a small heap of cow-dung which is roughly modelled into the shape of Gaṇeśa (Skt.) or Piḷḷaiyār, the god with the elephant head who is prayed to when obstacles of various sorts should be removed.³⁷

Apart from these rather obvious aesthetic, pedagogical, psychological, and social connections, only very few artists and informants are able to explain the purpose, tradition or symbolism of *kōlam* art. As so many other customs, *kōlam* art has become a convention detached from its original meaning and function, an art which is being transmitted through the generations in its practical aspects and which lives by mere imitation. In a traditional agricultural society which has not yet entirely lost the connection to its archaic past, as is the case with Tamil Nadu, the sacred and the profane, religion and culture are not experienced as separate entities which are exclusive of each other.³⁸ This is also evident in the *kōlam* art, its motifs, symbols, and the customs and conceptions associated with it.

³³ B.P. Bayiri: *Rangavalli* (8 pts., Udipi [Chitra Kutira]: 1967-1980), pt. 8 (1980), preface.

³⁴ See *Taittirīya-upaniṣad* I.11.2.

³⁵ Furthermore, *kōlam* competitions are conducted in schools as, for example, in Tirupati.

³⁶ In Nā. Pārttaçārati's romance *Maṅṅipallavam*, for instance, the unfinished *kōlam* is used as a simile for a broken love.

³⁷ Cf. J.A. Dubois: *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies* (tr. a. ed. by H.K. Beauchamp. 1st Ind. impr., New Delhi: 1978), p. 572. This form of Piḷḷaiyār is sometimes also made with turmeric mixed in water (*maṅṅal potṭi*) or, if it is bigger, with raw rice (*paccarici*) mixed with water. Diehl, *op. cit.*, at p. 275 f., fn 1, states that in the magical invocation rituals in South India (*mantirīkam*) *kōlam* which are dedicated to Gaṇeśa are drawn in the form of a *maṅṅala* (Skt.).

³⁸ With regard to Tamil Nadu, see K.V. Zvelebil: Religion in Modern Tamil Fiction, in: A. Eschmann (ed.): Religion in Modern Indian Literature, *South Asian Digest of Regional Writing* III (1974), pp. 91-104, at p. 93, agrees with Milton Singer: *When a Great Tradition Modernizes* (London: 1972), p. 148, "that religious and cultural forms merge into each other on a single continuum of religious-cultural experience. This close relationship between religion and cul-

A house without a *kōlam*, be it even the smallest or most simple design, conveys that an inauspicious or unfortunate event has happened, often a case of illness or death. Together with *nīm*-leaves,³⁹ which are attached to the door-frame, the absence of the *kōlam* signifies that Māriyamman, the goddess of small pox and other diseases, has visited the house. When an immediate member of the family or a paternal relation dies and during the annual rites to the ancestors (Skt. *śrāddha*) no *kōlams* are drawn for the time of ritual impurity (*tīṭṭam*). Menstruating women must observe purity rules and are thus not allowed to draw *kōlams* nor to enter the kitchen, nor to prepare meals, etc. On auspicious occasions, such as temple festivals and marriages,⁴⁰ however, *kōlam* decorations with fitting symbols and motifs are not only desired, but as good omens and as a sign of ritual purity they are indispensable. One Brahmin informant explained *kōlam* art as a prayer to Lakṣmī, the goddess of good luck and wealth, but also of gracefulness.⁴¹ The peasantry today still worships this goddess in the form of ripened grain; during her festival she is therefore represented by a basket filled with grain.⁴² This worldly, life-affirming character of the *kōlam* and, as we remember, its symbolic links with fertility may be responsible for the fact that the term *kōlam* has come to denote the "ceremony of providing pregnant women with bangles in the fifth or seventh month after conception".⁴³

The *kōlam* is not only used to express auspiciousness or inauspiciousness, but also to invoke the auspicious in general and certain deities in particular (Fig. 189). Furthermore, it is used to protect from and to avert all types of misfortunes. The *kōlam*'s apotropaic function, which today is only subconsciously realized, has to be understood against the background of a deeply rooted belief in ghosts and demons still prevalent amongst most villagers: through the *kōlam* the evil eye is warded off or 'bound' and any evil spirits are prevented from entering the house. Even a neutral observer will have difficulties to extricate himself from the bewildering, yet enchanting labyrinth⁴⁴ of the loop *kōlam*. It decorates the landing immediately in front of the entrance and is therefore also called "threshold" *kōlam*. Similar to the *nāgas*, which in many temples guard the entrance to the *sanctum*, the snake *kōlams* in front of the threshold function as guardians. They act as an imaginary magic screen which protects the inside of the house, the sacred order, and purity from the world of demons, chaos, illness, and impurity.⁴⁵ This fits in well with the

³⁹ On account of the apotropaic effect attributed to *nīm*-leaves they are used in times of crisis and danger of demoniac influences, such as pregnancy, snake bite, and all kinds of diseases (see Vogel, *op. cit.*, p. 264, and Jagadīsa Ayyar, *op. cit.*, pp. 28ff.).

⁴⁰ It is significant that the leading of the bride and bridegroom to the marriage dais is also called *kōlanṅkātṭatal*, "displaying the *kōlam* (laid out there)".

⁴¹ Cf. Mānikkavācakar who addresses his god, Śiva, in the *Tiruvācakam* (V.5.3.) with *kōlamē* itself, an expression which in this context may be rendered with "O, you perfected form!"

⁴² J.J. Meyer: *Trilogie altindischer Mächte und Feste der Vegetation*, vol. II (Zürich-Leipzig: 1937), p. 83.

⁴³ *Tamil Lexicon*, *loc. cit.*

⁴⁴ See Layard, *op. cit.* (discussed in Archana, *op. cit.*, pp. 80-83), who traces the *kōlam* custom back to an old, widespread labyrinth ritual, i.e. to the early notion of the labyrinth as elementary access to future life and therefore also to success in this life.

of the meanings attributed to the term *āpanā* and this art form of Bengal, of which it has been said that it stands in close connection "with ancient cultic agricultural practices of a magic encircling and enclosing, ... of 'fencing'".⁴⁶ The *kōlam* also shares with the *āpanā* specific religious and ritual functions. Eva Maria Gupta says about the *āpanā*: "In both the non-Brahminical and Brahminical rites its [the *āpanā*'s] function is connected with the ritual purification of the place of sacrifice or *pūjā* and/or the worship of a deity."⁴⁷ With the exception of the *śraddha* rites, all ritual ceremonies seem to include the *kōlam* in one way or another. Be it a Vedic fire sacrifice (Skt. *homa*), a temple ritual,⁴⁸ a rite of passage (Skt. *saṃskāra*) or the daily *pūjā* at home, all begin with the placing of a *kōlam*. Diehl compares the *kōlam*'s ritual function, as we can observe it in initiation rites of various sects,⁴⁹ in exorcisms,⁵⁰ and in tantric practices,⁵¹ to that of the *yantra* and *cakra* or *maṇḍala*, diagrams which are central to tantric cults.⁵² Often the *kōlam* frames and thereby protects by its magic radiation sacred trees and bushes, e.g. the *aśoka* tree (Skt.; *Uvasia Longifolia*) and the *tulasī* plant (Skt.; *Ocimum Sanctum*), i.e. basil. The latter is considered especially sacred among Vaiṣṇavas, but there is the general belief that it protects from all types of evil influences.

The universal application of the *kōlam* in rituals discloses its essentially ritual nature on the one hand and its dual function in ritual practice on the other hand: the pictorial representation of congenial symbols not only protects the sacred and ritually pure sphere from evil forces or spirits, but it further strengthens it when combined with ritual invocations of positive, life-affirming forces or deities. This dual, but ultimately complementary aspect expressed by the *kōlam*'s religious and magic function is well illustrated in the belief held by *raṅgavallī* artists of Karnataka who call the dwellings decorated with such

iversity Press: 1985), pp. 3 ff.: "*Kolam*: 'The Reality at the Threshold'".

⁴⁶ Mode, *loc. cit.*: "... die Verbindung dieser Kunst mit altbäuerlichen kultischen Gepflogenheiten des magisch schützenden Einkreisens und Einschliessens, ... des 'Einfriedens' ..." Cf. E.M. Gupta: *Brata und Āpanā in Bengalen* (Wiesbaden: 1983), p. 57.

⁴⁷ Gupta, *ibidem*.

⁴⁸ With regard to the ritual installation of images in temples (Skt. *devatāpratiṣṭhā*) according to shastric prescriptions, for example, P.B. Courtright: Standing, Moving and Transforming: The Work of Metaphor in Hindu Ritual, in: *Journal of Religious Studies* 8 (1980/1), pp. 97-104, at p. 100, remarks: "Once the preparations of the ritual space are made by drawing a mandalic boundary on the floor with powdered stone..., the clay image of Gaṇeśa is placed on a low table in the centre of the ritually defined space" (cf. above fn. 37).

⁴⁹ Regarding the ritual of initiation with the Kānpḥaṭa Yogīs of North India, see G.W. Briggs: *Gorakhnāth and the Kānpḥaṭa Yogīs* (Repr., Delhi etc.: 1973), p. 54.

⁵⁰ Cf. above, fn. 37.

⁵¹ See P.K. Gode: History of the Rangavalli between A.D. 50 and 1900, in: *ABORI* 26 (1945), pp. 216-262, at p. 245 (cit. accord. to Diehl, *loc. cit.*).

⁵² Diehl, *loc. cit.*, in this context quotes Tapanmohan Chatterji: *Ritual Decoration in Bengal* (Calcutta: n.d.): "They are effective through the intricate but regular play of lines, which have a restraining power just as the Cakkarāṅkal" (Tamil plural for Skt. *cakrāṅgi*). For better understanding of this type of *kōlam* refer to such tantric texts as the *Saundaryalaharī* (see above, fn.

designs as free from inauspiciousness (Skt. *a-māṅgala*) and inhabited by god.⁵³ The *kōlam*'s magic and protective function is again evident during the winter month of *mārkaḷi*, a relatively cold time when infectious diseases are common (which is the reason that the month is also called *pīṭai-mātam*, "unlucky month"): special attention is paid to the *kōlam* ritual, disease goddesses are appeased, and Gaṇeśa is worshipped in the *paraṅki-kōlam*. Finally, *poṅkal*,⁵⁴ which presents us with the most beautiful *kōlams*, is not only celebrated as an expression of thanksgiving and joy over the rice harvest, but it also marks the end of this inauspicious month, "the month of the dying sun",⁵⁵ and of the dark half of the year and the beginning of the auspicious month of *tai* (Skt. *makara*, Capricorn, i.e. January/February) which coincides with the winter solstice. Thus *cūriya-p-poṅkal*, the second day of the festival and celebration of the sun's (re-)birth and the beginning of the solar year, is at the same time Tamil New Year. Seen from a mythological point of view, the festival represents the annual victory of good over evil and of light over darkness.⁵⁶ The *kōlam*'s, which on this occasion show predominantly *svastika* symbols, create a congenial atmosphere for and form themselves an essential part of the sun worship (Skt. *sūrya-namaskāra*)⁵⁷ of that day.

The prominence given to the *kōlam* during the inauspicious month of *mārkaḷi* reveals that there is a further aspect to this art, namely its great hygienic value. As already mentioned, the kitchen and the front of the house are thoroughly cleaned and covered with a solution of water and cowdung. It is well known that the chlorine contained in the cowdung acts as a desinfectant and keeps flies away.⁵⁸ Hygiene was one of the reasons behind the now largely forgotten custom of using rice flour for the *kōlams*. Apart from ethical considerations based on the precept of *ahimsā* (Skt.), which encourages the feeding of even ants and insects, *kōlams* designed with rice flour keeps the ants and insects away from the house. *Ahimsā* is not only understood as "the absence of the wish to

⁵³ Bayirī, *loc. cit.*

⁵⁴ For descriptions of these festivities, which for the rest of India are known and celebrated under the name of *makara saṃkrānti* and *vasanta pañcamī*, see Dubois, *op. cit.*, pp. 571 ff., Jagadīsa Ayyar, *op. cit.*, pp. 13 ff., and C.H. Buch, *Faith, Fairs & Festivals of India* (2nd repr., New Delhi: 1979), pp. 81 ff.

⁵⁵ According to popular belief, see Archana, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

⁵⁶ Accordingly, the Hindu year is divided into an auspicious and an inauspicious half (see also F.W. Clothey: *Chronometry, Cosmology, and the Festival Calendar in the Murukan Cult*, in: G.R. Welbon and G.E. Yocum [eds.]: *Religious Festivals in South India and Sri Lanka* [New Delhi: 1982]).

⁵⁷ See Jagadīsa Ayyar, *op. cit.*, pp. 20 ff.

⁵⁸ Jagadīsa Ayyar, *ibid.*, pp. 69 ff., stresses the effect of *ritual* purification of the cowdung. Buffalo dung, on the other hand, is never used as the buffalo (*erumai*) functions as vehicle of Yama, the god of death, and is associated with the buffalo demon *mahiśāsura* (Skt.). Moreover, it is used as sacrificial animal among tribes. - Prophylactic purification is, however, also attributed to rice flour itself as, for example, is evident from its use during the popular *ugadi* festival, when in connection with the appeasement of the mother goddess Ammaravu in Andhra Pradesh children apply rice flour to their faces in order to ward off evil spirits.

destroy or to do harm (to any living creature)", but also as an active sympathy with all living beings. Śrī Ramaṇa Maḥarṣi (1879-1950), a sage who felt great empathy with and love for humans, animals, and nature alike, regarded the feeding of the ants as an irrefutable duty or (*sādhāraṇa-dharma* (Skt.) and as the only purport of the *kōlam* art.⁵⁹ More than fifty years ago, Jagadīsa Ayyar, a historian of Tamil culture and a traditionalist, decried for similar reasons the use of stone powder which, according to him, was responsible for the rapid decline of this art.⁶⁰ Such information, which dates back to the beginning of our century, shows that the exchange of rice flour with stone powder cannot only be attributed to the rising cost of this basic staple food, but rather to a gradual loss of traditional values.⁶¹

We have tried to throw light on the various functions and applications of *kōlam* art and ritual as well as on the conceptions and customs associated with it. The various meanings, which we thereby uncovered, make it clear that the *kōlam* originally was - and to some extent represents even today - more than a mere aesthetically pleasing design, a decoration comparable to western floral decorations or flower-gardens. *Kōlam* art has a fundamentally ritual character and, like many other phenomena of Indian village culture, it touches almost all spheres of life, from the purely utilitarian - social, pedagogical, and hygienic - aspects to the highly developed aesthetic and ethic perceptions. It functions as part of a religious system which encompasses apotropaic beliefs, magic, and exorcism as well as devotion to and worship of a deity.⁶²

III

In this last part we wish to assess the *kōlam's* chances of survival and to work out the criteria for such a prediction. Our examples stem from the village Randam, from Tiruvannamalai, a small temple town with few industries, and from Madras city.

Environmental factors, of course, play a great role in the *kōlam's* survival. Even a casual look at *kōlam* art in Mylapore convinces us that the *kōlam* has no ground of existence in large cities. It is not so much a lack of time which can be made responsible for this; it is rather a lack of space which has led to the situation that the *kōlams* are literally being driven over. All the more we have to appreciate those people of Mylapore who despite such urban difficulties adhere to their traditions.⁶³ Their *kōlams* do, however,

⁵⁹ Suri Nagamma: *Letters & Recollections of Sri Ramanasramam* (trsl. fr. Telugu by D.S. Sastri, Tiruvannamalai [Sri Ramanasramam]: 1979), pp. 94 f.

⁶⁰ Jagadīsa Ayyar: *South Indian Customs* (Madras: 1925), pp. 83 ff.

⁶¹ Neither can the small percentage of or (about one per cent) in the quartzite, which lends the *kōlams* in stone powder a slightly glistening look, have been decisive for the change of material.

⁶² Some of these connections and meanings are confirmed in the usage of particular *kōlam* patterns (especially those drawn at the threshold) for tattooing (see Layard, *op. cit.*, and Siromoney, *op. cit.*, p. 11).

⁶³ A statistical investigation on the use of *kōlam* in Madras city (see R. Hari: Powder Patterns, in: *Madras Christian College Magazine* 43 [1974], p. 56-57) proved that about one-third of the

often suffer from a loss of ingenuity and variety. Even in provincial towns, such as Tiruvannamalai, which has more than 60,000 inhabitants (1971) and lies 186 kilometers inland from Madras, traffic has increased to such an extent and with it tar roads and its accompanying infrastructure that the *kōlam* art has been driven back to mud roads, backyards, and suburban areas. There is no doubt that the *kōlam* design can only flourish on the broad mud roads of villages where it originated and where it is most effective. On festival days, almost every available space in Randam, as in other villages, is covered with *kōlams* so that the designs on the streets look like a seamless carpet reaching from one house to another and from one side of the street to the other. One is always amazed by the ability which the artists display in adjusting the designs to the given surroundings. It is perhaps not surprising that the people of Randam have been able to maintain a harmonious bond with nature and a traditional life style, considering the fact that the first houses of this village (Population: 1,351 in 1971) received electricity only in 1972; that the village itself was opened to public transport only in 1979, shortly before our visit; and that only half of the houses are supplied with water; and that a telephone, a physician, and a hospital are at a distance of only 15 kilometers.

With regard to social criteria, we first have to remind ourselves of the orthodox situation prevailing in the caste system of Tamil Nadu. Among the innumerable castes, professional groups and sub-groups, we can roughly distinguish three main strata: 1. the Brahmins, who nowadays are not only priests but also work as cooks, officials, and teachers; 2. the non-Brahmins, i.e. the land owners, tenant farmers, merchants, artisans, and other service groups; 3. the Harijans or Untouchables, i.e. the landless agricultural labourers (often heavily indebted), the leather workers, and those working in cemeteries and cremation grounds. In the metropolis Madras, where the *kōlam* makes only sporadic appearances and where such arts in general undergo a levelling process, we do not find as great a cultural differentiation between Brahmins and Untouchables as one might expect. The *kōlams* of Untouchables near Mylapore show only small differences in execution from those of Brahmins. The *kōlams* of the latter exhibit exact and careful execution, but at the same time they are marked by a certain sterility, betraying the artists' lack of imagination (Drawing 53). The picture in the provincial towns is not very much different. Yet here the Brahmin *kōlam* not only distinguishes itself by its precision and perfection - as if it were drawn with measuring rod and ruler -, but also by a greater range of variations and ideas which make it artistically satisfying (Figs. 187, 188). It differs from the *kōlam* of Harijans insofar as the latter is somewhat awkwardly drawn and shows a limitation of motifs, but not in technique and materials (Drawing 54). Among the *kōlams* of non-Brahmins, those of higher caste groups, such as the land-owning Kauntars, are almost as beautiful as those of Brahmins, whereas those belonging to the lower caste groups are less carefully executed. It should be pointed out that *kōlam* art is

per cent who were quite disinterested. Siromoney, *op. cit.*, p. 14, summarizes the results as follows: "About three-fourths of the women were found to use the old patterns but there were others who designed new patterns. Apart from the traditional styles, new patterns, including those taken from embroidery design books, were used. Some used coloured powder to fill in the designs and such designs are called *raṅgōli* in Tamil Nadu. Some put in a message in English

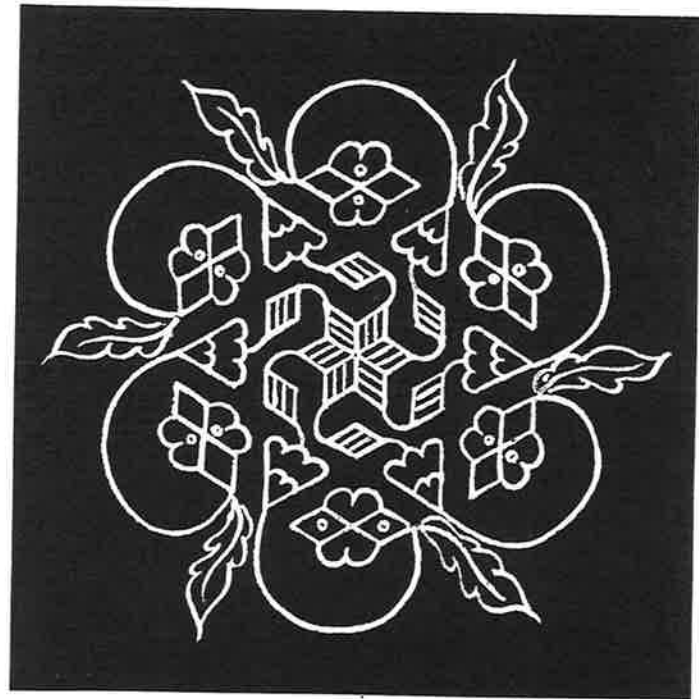
folk art in the literal sense of the word; social status, education, and wealth are therefore not the criteria by which the *kōlam* can be judged. *Kōlam* of low caste Hindus and Untouchables often appear more pristine in form than those of the socially and economically privileged Hindus of the upper classes, whose often artificial life style is reflected in their *kōlams*.

In the villages, the situation described above is still more pronounced insofar as the Brahmins, who in Randam belong to the wealthiest caste group and therefore enjoy the highest standard of education, show the greatest mastery in form and technique (Drawings 45, 50, 52; Figs. 186, 189); their designs, however, are not necessarily always of the highest artistic value. The living quarters of the Harijans are separated from the rest of the village by 500 meters of land. They contain 10.8 per cent of the whole population and are largely avoided by caste Hindus. Here, *kōlam* art and ritual are, however, as important and visually prominent as in the main village (Figs. 180, 181). Unlike the caste Hindus, the Untouchables prefer the more difficult and apparently more traditional 'fountain-pen' technique. Their *kōlams*, characterized by a daring line movement, are more picturesque and playful (Fig. 182),⁶⁴ and due to the technique last longer. The designs sometimes give a crude and unfinished impression (cf. Drawing 54), however, without losing their decorative value and magic meaning. As is the case with the Untouchables of Tiruvannamalai, artists belonging to the lowest strata of the social hierarchy have a greater affinity for the typical loop or snake *kōlam* than their caste Hindu sisters who are more receptive to innovations of technique and form.

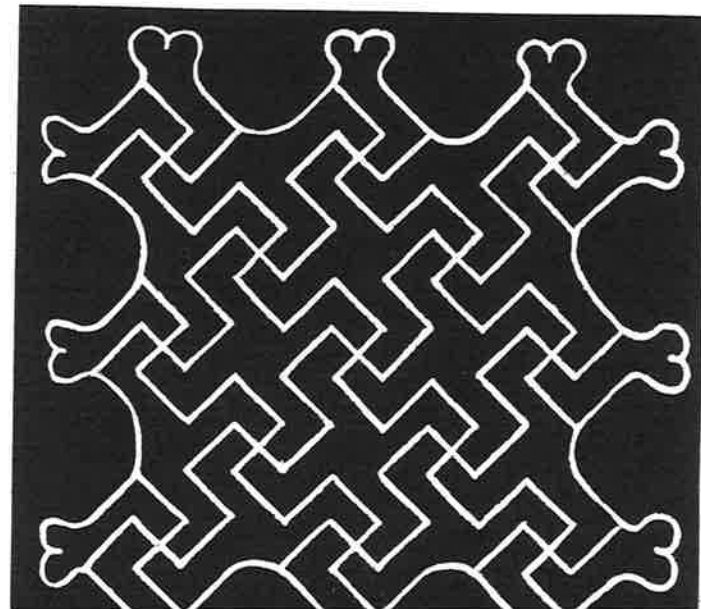
On the whole we can say that the differences which exist in all cultural areas between the various castes are also evident in *kōlam* art. The art of the Brahmins is in general more complex, shows a greater variety of forms and decorative details, and is from a technical and geometrical point of view more perfect than that of women from low castes or of Untouchables. The latter, however, approach the art with more creative freedom and spontaneity, and their *kōlams* are more picturesque. The hypothesis that the artistically best *kōlams* are those drawn by Brahmin women or by educated artists cannot be maintained or declared as proven without great reservations. We have to remember that illiteracy, especially among women, is nowhere as high as in villages where we find qualitatively the most beautiful *kōlams*. In Randam only 8.15 per cent of women can read and write as opposed to 37.5 per cent of men; in Tiruvannamalai the proportions are 43.19 per cent as opposed to 67.51 per cent (men); and in Mylapore 60 per cent or more women are literate. In *kōlam* art, as probably in all folk arts, the distinctions are not as evident as they are in the general cultural, economical, and social spheres. The fact that without exception people from all groups and strata of society adhere to this art places the art itself above all conditioning factors. Thus it is not unlikely that we can find the most cultured illiterates of the world in rural India. More decisive than education, which still bears the stamp of colonization, more decisive than economic factors, which as art criteria are negligible or even play a negative role, more incisive than the social background (where, however, the difference in upbringing may play a role) are ecological

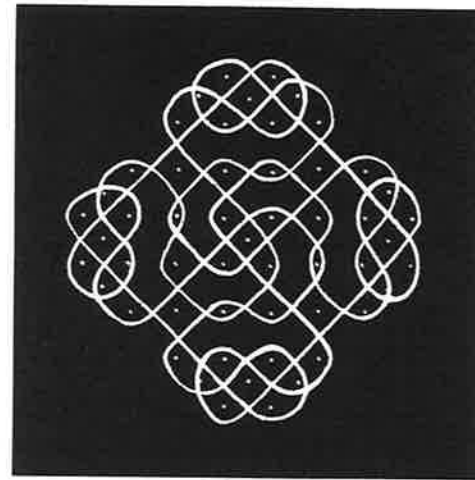
factors and factors related to modernisation and a new awareness. This we saw in the example of Mylapore and Tiruvannamalai.

Kōlam design in Tamil Nadu may continue to flourish as a folk art for a long time despite certain symptoms of decadence due to urban life. The death of *kōlam* art may well mean the death of the whole society and culture which seems unlikely for the near future considering the fact that on account of its agricultural foundation Tamil culture has shown a great resistance to change over the past millennia. The future does not look as promising for other regions of India where political and economic upheavals of the past have made a greater impact than in South India, and where arts related to the *kōlam* design are nowadays only practised by older women or where their practice is confined to festival days and particular religious functions.

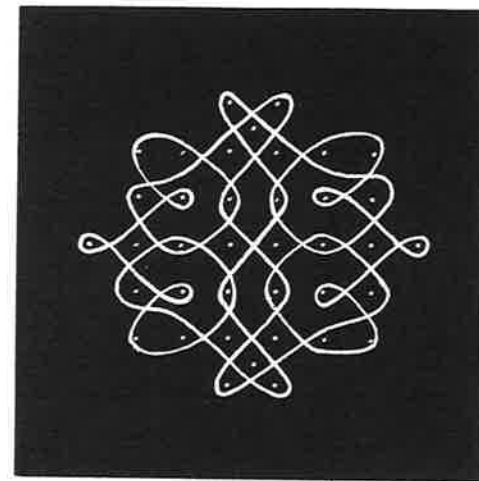


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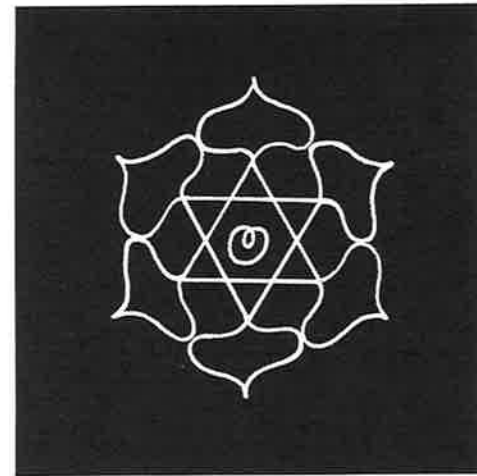




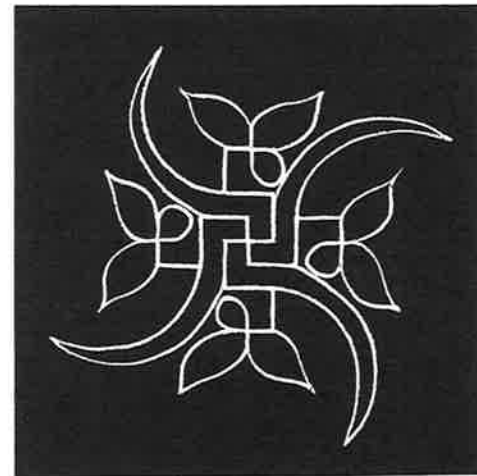
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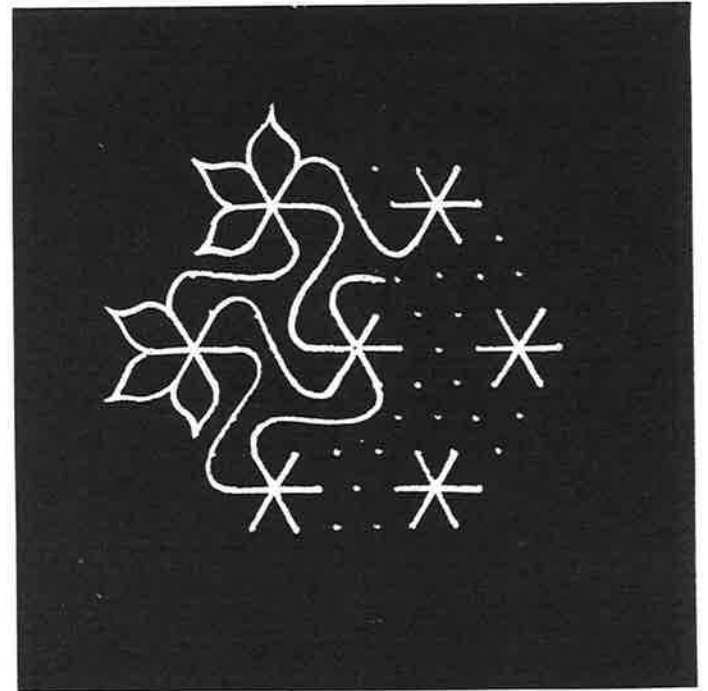
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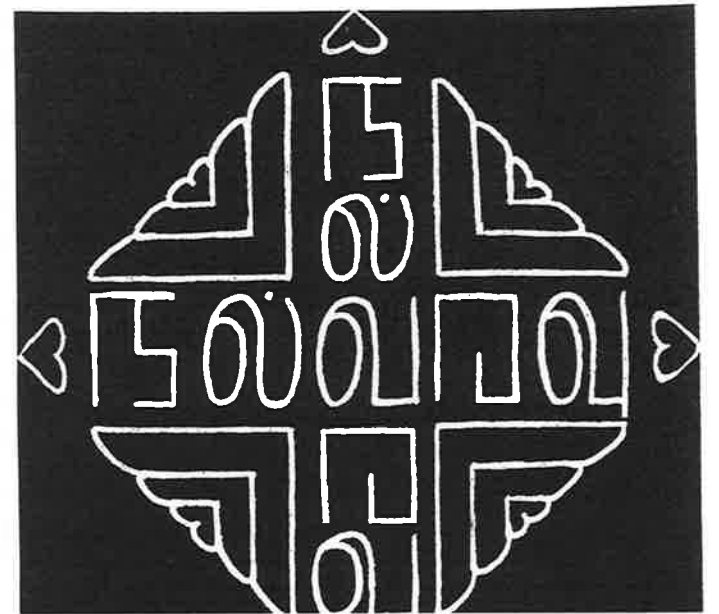
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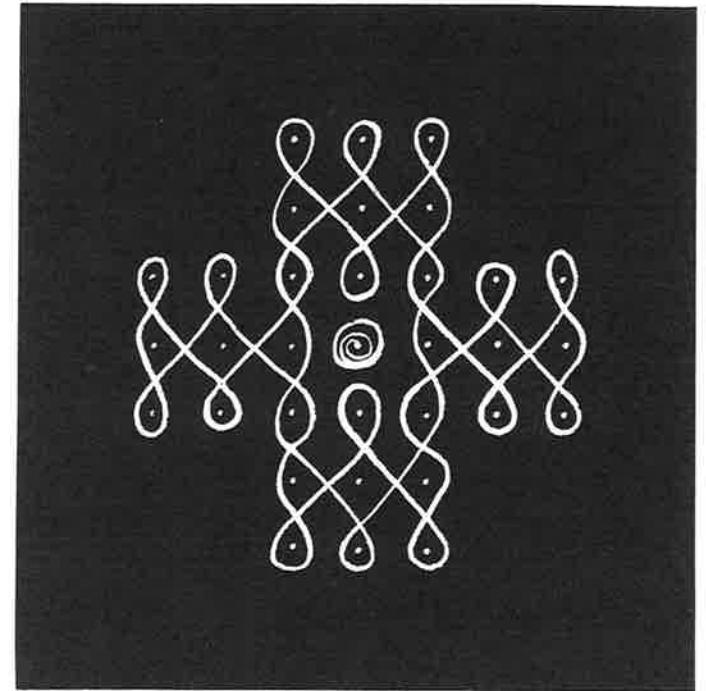


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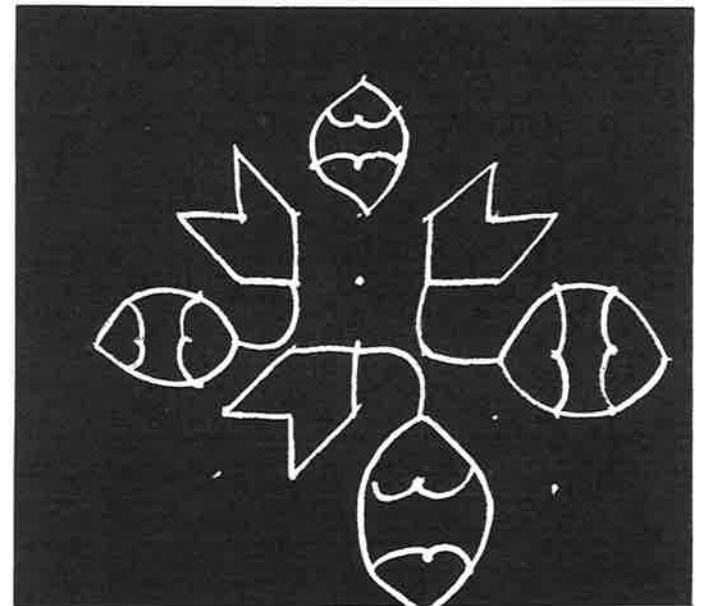


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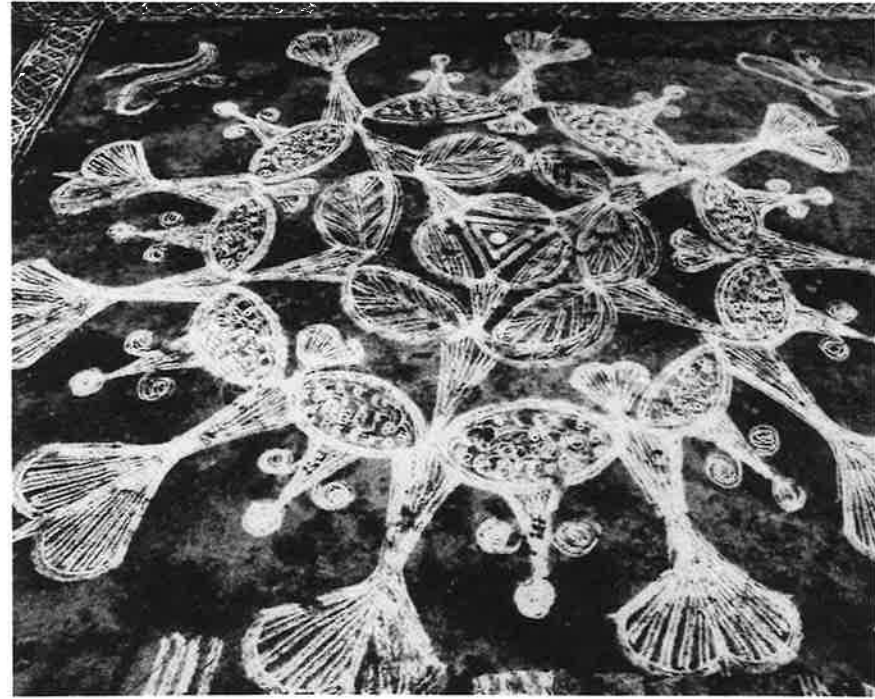


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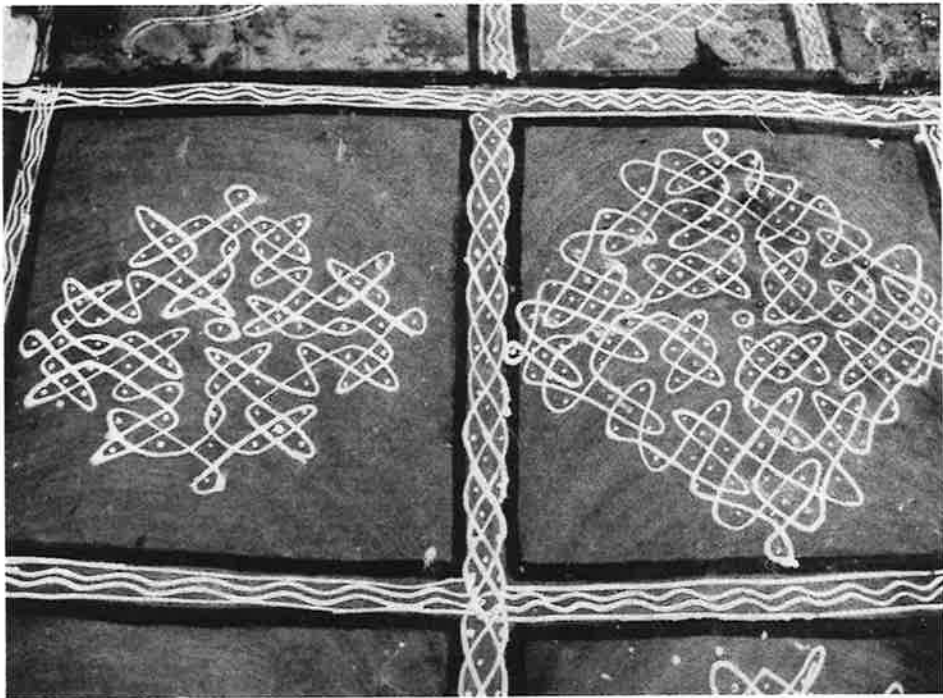
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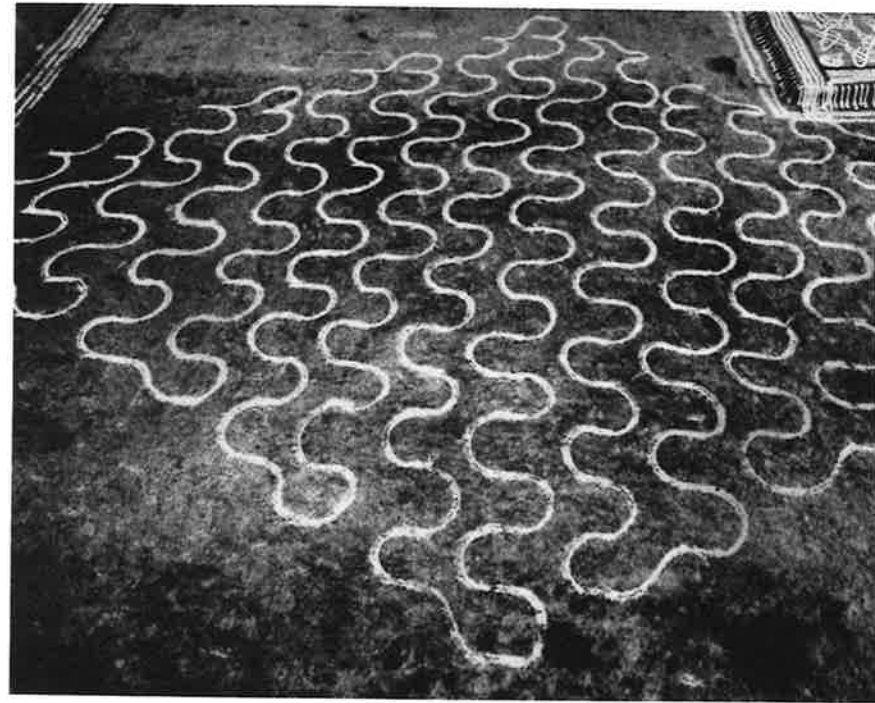


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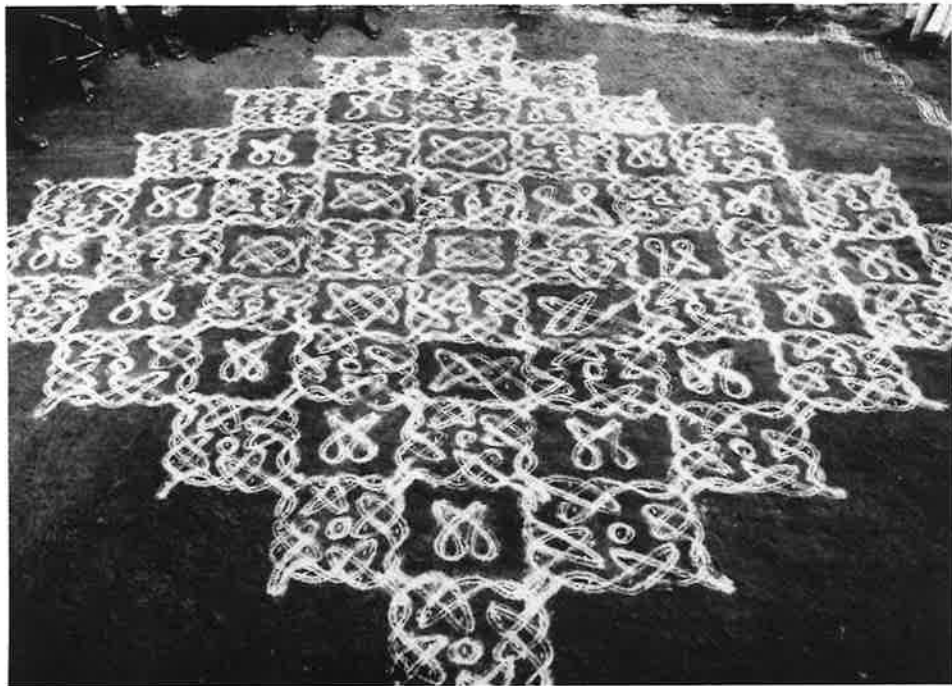


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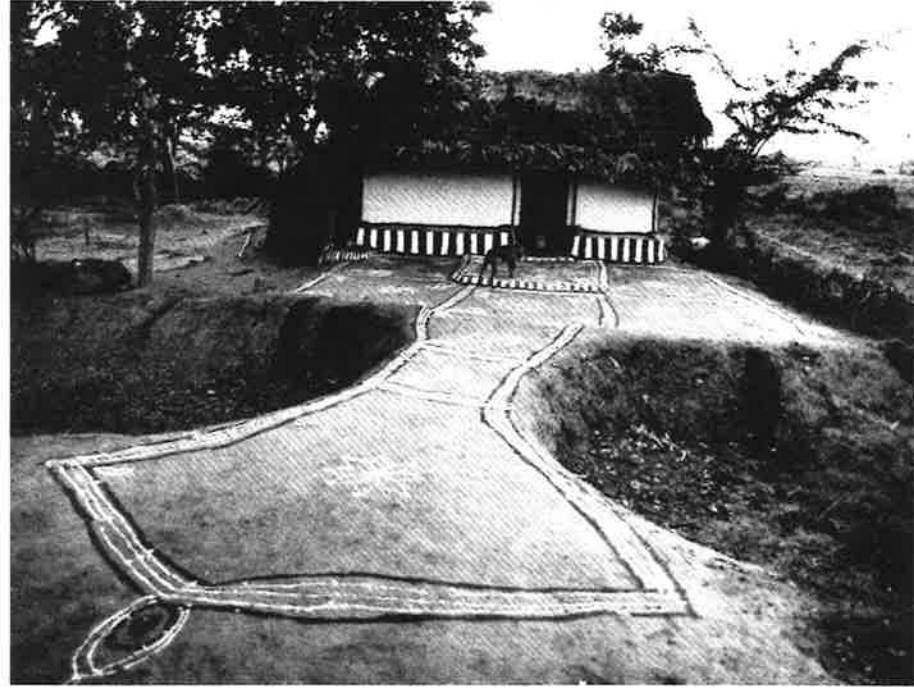
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