

CONCEPT OF SPACE AMONG KARIMPALAN COMMUNITY IN KANNUR DISTRICT KERALA

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Abstract

This study explores the concept of space among the Karimpalan Community in Kerala. The study delves into their spatial practices and perceptions about space in their daily life. Karimpalans were one of the acephalous communities in Kerala; their spatial utilization is closely linked with their daily subsistence. This paper is trying to uncover the ways in which space is conceptualized by them and classifying different spaces according to its usage. This research also examines how their spatial dynamics and everyday practices are challenged by external factors. This study highlights the border discourse of indigenous architecture and their spatial theory.

Keywords: spatial dynamics, everyday practices, Land use, Cultural Identity, vernacular Architecture.

Introduction

Anthropology of Space is a burgeoning field in anthropology, which explores the social, cultural, psychological dynamics of human interactions within certain space. The endeavor of this research is to examine the spatial dynamics of the Karimpalan community, through an ethnographic approach grounded in anthropology of space. Understanding the concept of space among the Karimpalan is essential for elucidating the identity of them. The study focused on how space is conceptualized, cultural meaning of certain spaces among them and how their social interactions animate their space and everyday practices.

Karimpalan are the early inhabitants of Northern Kerala. They were mainly located in Kozhikode and Kannur districts of Kerala.. Karimpalan are an acephalous society in which they don't have any supreme head. During the time of shifting cultivation they don't have the concept of boundaries among them. They shift from one location to another in order to do shifting cultivation known as "*kara nel krishi*". *Karimpalan* was a nomadic community. They shifted from one place to another every year. Karimpalan settled down in the sloped areas of forest and on the banks of rivers or streams.

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Karimpalan were known as the “children of the Land “and they practised shifting cultivation and shifted the place every two years. They shared boundaries with other communities. During the Feudal period all the forest land was under the authority of Payavur temple as Temple land. Then they became slaves to Payavur temple. These days they practised “*punam krishi*”(Shifting cultivation) and they worked as bonded labourers to Nayanars. Before the time of the landlord they cultivated throughout the forest. But after that the Nayanars granted lands to them by bordering it and it is known as “*kallum tholum vekkai*”. After the arrival of Christians from Travancore, they purchased the lands that were once used by the Karimpalan and after that Karimpalan restricted to some places. Rest of the land was owned by the Christians and it compelled them to segregate into one place.

Vernacular architecture

Karipalan’s traditional houses were made in circular shape and there is a folk song in relation to the construction of house, it is

*“Mattakana kond cheppumayitt
Muttolam mannuvech veedu vech”*

(Time and Date: 11am, 07-03-2024)

It means that they constructed a house in a circular shape. Wooden beam was placed in the middle of the house and bamboo rafters or wooden rafters were connected to this beam. The roof was made with bamboo leaves. Bamboo strips were used to tie the bamboo (*illi*) leaves. The house had no separation walls. The house has an attic and it was made with wood. In these attics they kept grains and utilities. Roof is not projected outside because it can cause harm to the mud walls due to rain and adverse weather. The plinth height is 2 ft. above the ground.

Materials used for the construction of houses were naturally available resources. The dried mud brick is made with the mix of clay and straw (or grass), mixed with water and baked in the sun. The traditional houses have cow dung cladded floors. The door of the house was made with bamboo. The house had only one room and with a small ventilation hole in the room.

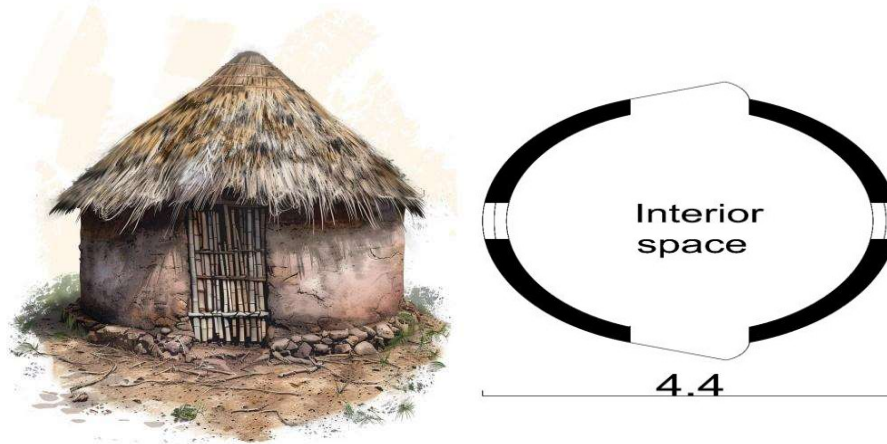
The house has multifunctional rooms with separation walls. In their traditional house they created kitchen space inside the house and it is a very small space. Most of the cooking was done outside the house. In these houses they don't have separate rooms and male and female members have different corners to sleep in. They change this house every two years.

The traditional houses do not have verandas. Later with the migration of Christians from Travancore they changed their house type and started adopting the house patterns of Christians. The shape of the house changed to a rectangle form. Now most of the houses were concreted and constructed under different government

policies. The concept of space changed among the community. Now they have started building more than one room and they have separate dining spaces.

Still now most of the houses don't have toilets inside their homes. They believed that constructing the toilets inside the houses were not good for them. But the new houses have toilets inside the house but the older generation still prefers to use the one outside.

Figure 1 Reconstructed drawing of Traditional Karimpalans House



Source: Field data

Most of the Traditional houses had approximately more than 20 members and the elder members' space is marked inside the house. Nobody else is allowed to use the coat unless any guest visits. Women's boundaries were also marked inside the house. It is important to note the way they accommodate and share space inside the houses.

Outer space is used for cooking, cleaning water storage; women were mostly using the outer spaces. The houses have large courtyards larger than the house. These courtyards were the place where social activities took place such as get together and also they dry grain here. The yards were plastered with cow dung, and still they practise the same. To understand the change in the structures of the house, a 79 year old informant reconstructed his childhood house from memory.

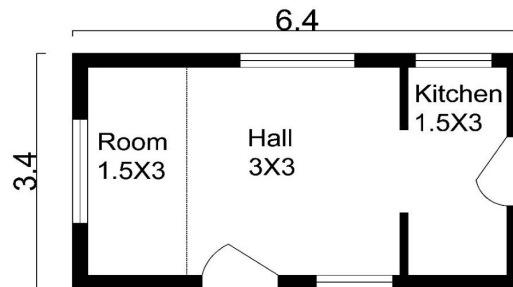
Figure 2 shows the reconstructed model of his childhood house and inside spaces from his memory. The house was in a rectangular shape. There was no veranda in his childhood house and it was provided with only two rooms. One is the kitchen and another one is a hall. His mother and father slept in the kitchen and there were 8 children. His sisters used to sleep in one corner of the house; he and his brothers were on the other side of the room.

"I still have the memory of making mud sticks for the house, my mother and father when they came back from

work they carried enough muds for making bricks, me and my brothers made them together by mixing it with water and baked these bricks in the daytime”.

(Time and Date: 5:00 pm, 05-03-2024)

Figure 2 Ground plan of informant's childhood house and reconstructed model of his childhood house.



Source: Field Data

From this it is evident that in the early days they made their houses by themselves and the process includes the help of the whole family. There is a movable separation wall they have for periods of time. From her description it is evident that after a certain period of time they changed the house patterns and contact with Christians was one of the reasons for this change. Those days her mother used to wake up early in the morning and finish all the house chores before sunrise and she went to the agricultural field. Those days' men helped women during the menstruation period. He said that he was trained to cook and manage a house from childhood onwards.

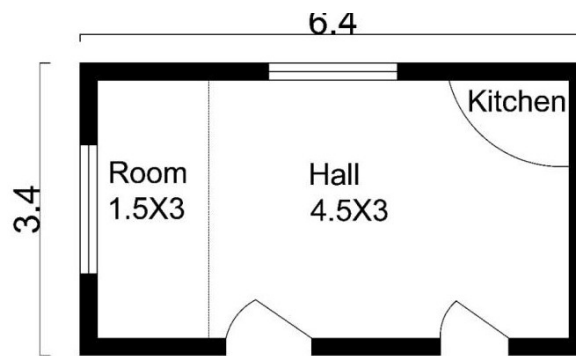
The housing patterns have also changed and the 72 year old informant explained her childhood days. She lived in Thatched house. She said that:

“These days the house has only one room. Everyone used to live in one room. There is no separate space for anyone. Kitchen was separated with a separation wall. My mom used to cook food outside the house. In the monsoon season we cook our meals inside. We used to change the house every two years.”

(Time and Date: 9:21 am, 19-02-2024)

She is memorizing how her childhood house focusing on how rooms were separated and arranged (Figure 3). There is no separate private space for anybody but it is equally shared among the members.

Figure 3. Reconstructed plan of a traditional house and its model



Source: Field Data

Karimpalan practiced menstrual pollution. One of the informants recollected the memories of her menstruation period as:

“From 14 years onwards my father made a separate space outside the house for sleeping. I have to stay in this house for 7 days. Food and water were provided in that space. In my childhood days my father used to cook during mothers menstrual days. Most of the households have similar practices like that. Still now we practice menstruation taboo, women are not allowed to enter the kitchen on these days”.

(Time and Date: 11.00 am, 28-02-2024)

From her description it is evident that women had separate spaces to sleep during menstruation time and they had restrictions to enter the kitchen. During these days men take over the kitchen duty. While asking about the restrictions inside the house she mentioned that,

“We don’t have restrictions to any specific area of the house but we women and children were not allowed to enter the ancestral worshipping space after sunset. If we visit the place, we may catch a fever. Also women are not allowed to sit on the front veranda of the house; we have to stay inside the house”.

(Time and Date: 4:50 pm, 8-03-2024)

Women were comparatively free to use the spaces. But they mostly spend inside the house rather than outside. Their space restrictions are developed around religious practices and during those days they were living in forest areas. So it is not safe for women to go outside after sunset. That might be the reason for restricting them or marking their space in the house.

While coming to the early 70s the house pattern has totally changed. They started having big verandas in the front part and more rooms were included in the house (photo 3.1). This indicates the way the housing pattern has changed. The houses were small but allocations of different spaces were there. The house has separate kitchen space and common hall for everyone to sit together and for sharing the food. The house also has a loft and now they keep rubber in the loft. They used to polish the floor with cow dung.

There was a slight change in the housing pattern and inner spaces of the houses in the late 70s. This house belongs to a 39 year old man who is staying alone. It was constructed 7 years before his birth. The plinth area of the house is 450 sq feet. The house has two small bedrooms, one Hall and a kitchen. The toilet is on one corner of the house and the house is constructed with bricks. The house has more common spaces and when it compares to the rooms, the rooms are small. While asking about the architecture one of the informants mentioned that:

“During my childhood days we only used rooms for sleeping, at that time we had only one room and another one was created after my elder brother’s marriage. We spend most of the time in the kitchen and veranda and rather than in rooms”.

(Time and date : 5pm, 02-03-2024)

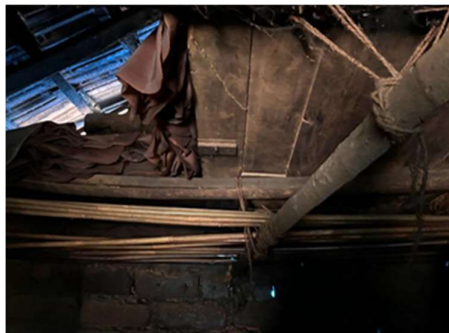
Figure 4 . Image of the house, Veranda, Attic and Hearth in the 70s.



House



Veranda



Attic



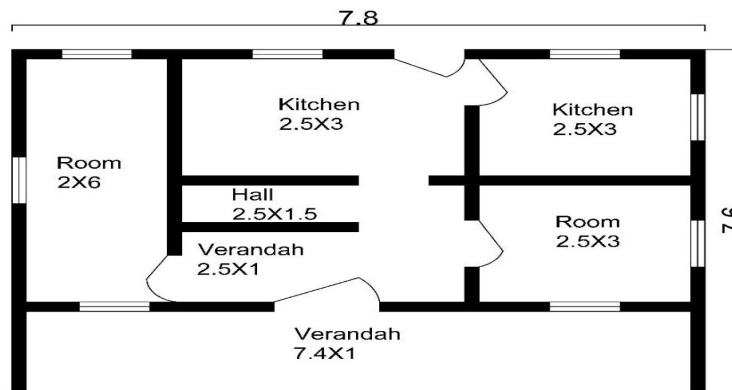
Hearth

Source: Field site

From this description it is understood that the construction of the house is also based on the utilization of space. Bedrooms were considered as the only place to rest and other spaces have equal access to everyone. All the spaces were constructed as open space with enough ventilation.

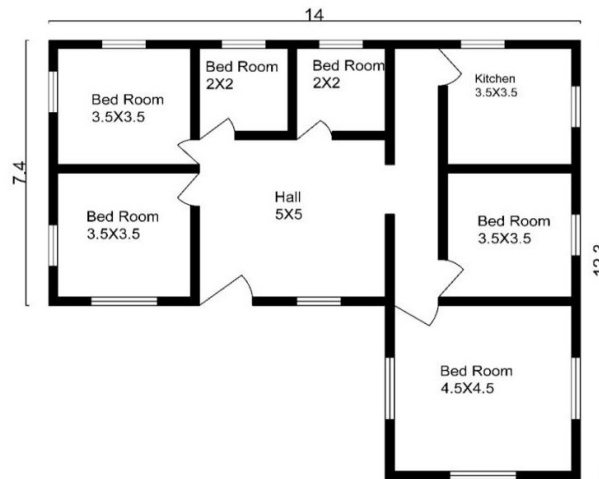
This house (Fig.5) was constructed 40 years ago. This was a tiled house and the house had a larger yard. The house had four small bedrooms and one bigger one. Right now only two people are living here, the owner of the house said that it was their *Tharavadu*. The owner of the house said that the construction of the house is similar to the traditional *Thiyya Tharavadu*. They constructed toilets outside the house because according to them constructing it inside the house is not good for the house.

Figure 5. The inner space of a house in late 1970s



Source : field data

Figure 6 indicates the ground plan of a house constructed 40 years back.



Source: Field Data

While asking about the utilization of space in this house, his wife responded that “most of the rooms are locked and I use only the kitchen, hall and our bedroom”.

(Time and Date: 6:00 pm, 21-02-2024)

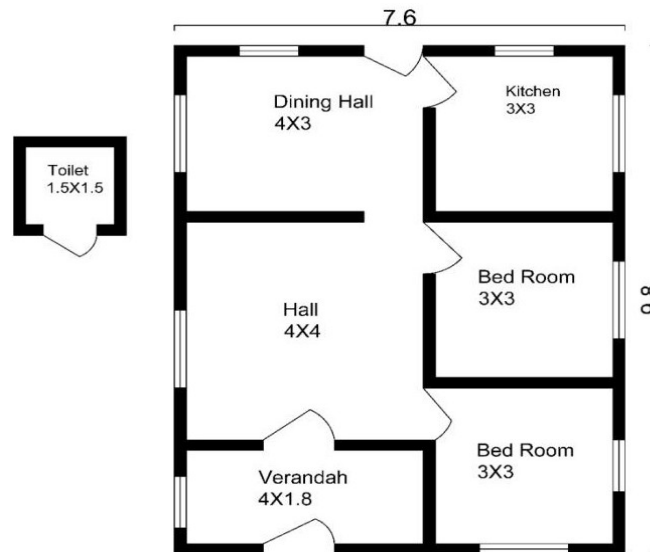
Even Though they have spacious rooms they restrict themselves to certain areas of the house. Cleaning and maintaining the whole room might be a tough task for them. In the house they don't have any religious space, because they said that:

"We worship our ancestors, and it is not good for the house to keep them inside the house".

(Time and Date : 6:30 pm, 21-02-2024)

According to their belief, women and children are allowed to enter the area where their ancestors are worshipped. It is a restricted space for the women in the community. If it is kept inside the house it is impossible to manage in that way, may be because they constructed the religious space outside the house.

Figure 7 The inner space of a house built in 2011.



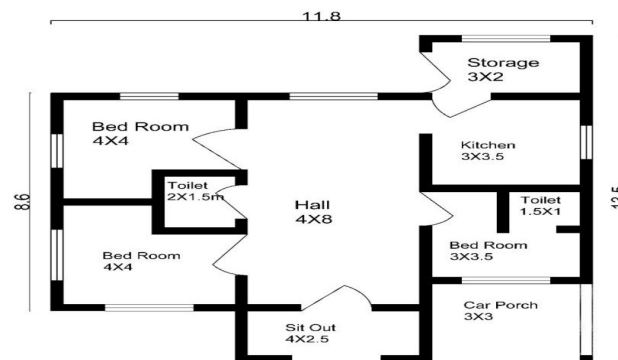
Source : Field Data

This house was constructed using the Indira Awas Yojana. The plan was launched in 1990 and the house was constructed in 2011. There are five members staying in this house, in the first stage they don't have dining space, later they added that area. The house is 700 sq.feet. They have a religious space five feet away and women in the house usually spend most of the time in the dining space and kitchen.

This (Fig.8) was one of the new houses constructed in the settlement. It is a modern house, the house has washrooms inside and the house is more spacious than other houses. There are four members living in the house. The house belongs to a retired bank clerk. In his house his wife usually spends time in yard farming and kitchen. She mentioned that sometimes she watches serials and TV which is placed

in the Hall. She considered her space in the house as Kitchen, work area and her room. After coming back from *thozhilurappu* she spends time in the kitchen and yard. Like all other houses they also have a large yard.

Figure 8 .The inner space of a house built in 2019



Source : Field Data

Political space

Karimpalan were an acephalous community where there is no supreme authority in the community to do social control. It is a group without any official leaders or head. In a community like this power is not concentrated in any leader but rather decentralized. Elders or people with experience provide guidelines and valuable advice, but they don't have any power to enforce their judgments on them. Their power is persuasive power, which is based on their ability to convince others on certain things without enforcing power but through building group consciousness.

Karimpalan neither fix land boundaries nor have the concept of *uru or muppan*. Recently they started having a muppan (chieftain) for each settlement. As mentioned in the features of an acephalous community, in the early times families' eldest members have all the authority and the elders make major decisions. But now they have specific territory and each settlement has a *Muppan*. Even now the *Muppan* doesn't have any influential powers; they convince others by enforcing group consciousness. Each *Muppan* has boundaries and their main duty is to communicate the needs of the members to ward members. When interacting with the *Muppan* of Allavikkunnu he mentioned that,

"I took the position of muppan three years back, and then most of the households did not have proper roads to their

homes. If something happened to anyone it is hard to take them to hospital by carrying them up to the road, so he convinced the community members about the importance of roads, now most of the households have roads. These roads were constructed by taking lands from the community members”.

(Time and Date: 5:43 Pm, 2-03-2024)

Here he is describing how they constructed the road by using his power as a *muppan*. Earlier they didn't have marked boundaries. They walk through the lands of other people. Even now it is visible in the community that the idea of roads is a new element. Most households have only walkways through some other people's land. Now they are realizing the importance of roads once they started buying vehicles.

Contested spaces

The public spaces are the space where the people interact and communicate with other members. In the early days they didn't have any proper public spaces.

A thirty nine year old man recollected his memories:

“Back then only very few houses were there and we had a lot more places to play, there was no concept of a playground. Only we were living here, so we played everywhere. Now the Christians started settled down with us and the public places were restricted”

(Time and Date : 8:00am, 04-03-2024)

Another man (fifty five years old) mentioned that:

“Two years back our children used to play in the ground that belonged to a Christian person and they had quarrels regarding that and we created a small separate ground for our children near the community hall”.

(Time and Date : 10:30 am, 17-02-2024)

Another common place the settlement has is community hall. In this community hall every Sunday they conduct *Kudumbashree* meetings. There are three *Kudumbasree* units in Alavikkunnu. On Sundays this was the meeting place of women in the settlement. They conduct free tuition for students in this tuition hall.

Community hall is a very small building and it can accommodate only 20 members. It is a common meeting place. Near the community hall they created a

ground for the children. In this community hall they conduct *ooru kuttam*. *Ooru kuttam* is the meeting organized by them to discuss their needs.

Religious space

Komaram are the religious practitioners of the Karimpalan community. *Komaram* is not hereditary, anyone can become *komaram*. Each location has a specific *komaram*, according to the description provided by a 70 year old informant. He says:

“My father was a komaram of Nuchiyad Village, each geographical area has a specific komaram and he was doing the religious activities, now it changed to each settlement having one komaram”

So, it means that early time the boundaries of *komaram* were marked as each village having one and now that has changed to a specific location.

Karimpalan practice ancestor worship and they make “*kottam*” as part of worship. In early times they were nomadic so when they shift from one place to another they take the dead person’s belongings with them and build “*kottam*” for them. *Kottam* was constructed in the northern part of the house. Women and children were restricted from entering this area. According to their belief, even after the deceased person possesses the land. They still bury the dead person because of this concept.

Nowadays they don’t have space in their yards to bury so they made a cemetery for that. They put three stones on top of the buried person. The place should be marked and the place cannot be used for any other purposes.

Figure 9 Burial mount



Source: Field site

The people who have enough land bury the body in the yards and construct a tomb as a memory of the deceased person. The importance of the space after death was described by a lady informant is like this:

“Getting six feet of land is the right of a karimpalan, if we do cremation they take us to another place and I may lose my connection with my family, then only I can again rebirth as a member of the family”.

(Time and Date: 5:00pm, 23-02-2024)

Analysis of her description shows the importance of space after death. They believed that if they burned the body of the deceased person they would lose their connection with the family. They think that it's their right to have six feet of land.

In some households the buried spaces were protected and daily they lit the lamp. They concrete the place and every day they clean the surroundings. Also in every house around five feet far there is a space constructed using tile for ancestor worship. It is considered as the replica of *kottom*.

Utilization of space in the yards

Utilization of space in the yards is very high among the community. Their front yards were created by using *adichil* and then they cleansed the yard with cow dung. They mainly plaster the land with cow dung for agricultural purposes. As an agricultural community they use front yards for drying various crops.

In the early days they performed and practiced *kolkali* in the front yards. On the side of the front yard there is a store that can be visible from most of the houses. There they keep the weapons. Men usually spend more time in the front yard than women. Sometimes in the summer season men of the house sleep outside. They use the front yard for various religious practices like *“painkutty”*. “Painkutty” is providing avail and toddy to Muthappa in order to fulfil certain wishes. Backyards were used for various purposes. In most of the houses they have backyard farming. Average residents grow food and some household domesticated animals. Homesteading is one of the main leisure time activities for most of the women in the settlement. A 55 year old *thozhilurappu* worker mentioned that:

“ I was running to reach home before 5 pm because that is when we are getting water from Jalanithi, after filling the motor nobody in the house remembers about watering the vegetables, i almost lost some vegetables because of the summer weather”.

(Time and Date :6:00 pm , 08-03-2024)

Other women also shared similar story as;

“We don’t buy anything from outside, we only buy onion or garlic etc. We are not able to cultivate at home. We have brinjal, ladies finger, spinach, chillies and tomatoes in our yard farm. I spend my evenings in the backyard watering the plants. We are depending on Jalanidhi, so now in the summer season the availability of water is very less and so I usually reuse the water for dish washing and also for watering the plant”.

(Time and Date : 9:30 am, 23-02-2024)

From both explanations of women how much they are communicated to that particular space is evident. They spend more time in the backyards than in front. They sometimes use the backyard for cooking food. During special occasions, when they want to cook for a lot of people they use the backyard. Most of the backyards have dishwashing spots. When they want to wash in ash they use the backyard.

Conclusion

James Fernandez defines the relationship between people and their environment as reciprocal and mutually constituting, one in which identity is negotiated through their interactions with surroundings and especially in the ritual enactment of metaphor (low & lawrence zuniga,2003). People are always influenced by their environment and always they take qualities of their environment into themselves. These qualities were reflected upon in their space, constructing buildings, and settlement plans etc(low & lawrence zuniga,2003).

Karimpalans started adopting different types of houses, especially after the influence of Christian settlement. Karimpalan didn't have boundaries. While constructing the houses they usually don't build any gates or walls. But now due to the influence of gated communities they started making fences around the houses. The Christian houses have gates and compound walls which influence them to construct gates.

Karimpalan spatial utilization changed due to the influence of external influences such as modernization and government policies. Their traditional house had only one room and inside the house they arranged spaces for everyone. There were no other rooms and a kitchen was constructed on the corner of the house. Most of the cooking was done outside. They consider their homes as shelter places, most of the time they spend outside for different activities. As mentioned earlier, the migrated Christians from Travancore brought new ideas about how a house should be constructed. Now they are constructing houses based on various projects and these houses have 2 rooms, a hall and a kitchen. Those houses constructed by the

government were not based on the house pattern of the Settlement. The government policies bring uniformity in their housing pattern.

According to Robert David Sack, “the land he works and the village in which he lives may still seem to him as a natural entity, as the place to which he belongs emotionally and spiritually. He may not be terribly conscious of the fact that his socially defined territory is also an imposed territory- forming a territorial definition of social relations” (sack, 1986, p74). Karimpalan after Shifted to settlement life their boundaries were marked by the government in different manners. The concept of *Uru muppan* was comparatively new among them, which did not exist in the early period. Traditionally they didn't have *uru* but they adopted all these as a government policy. The settlements in the closed manners of 5 to 10 cents of lands, without having enough agricultural land were also a reflection of new boundaries.

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