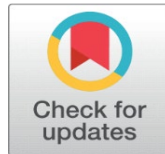
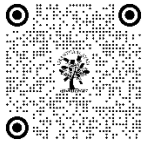


DIVINE AND DISADVANTAGED: EXPLORING THE THEYYAM PERFORMERS OF NORTH MALABAR

Dr. Teddy C. Anthappai¹

¹Associate Professor of English, St Berchmans College (Autonomous), Changanacherry, Kerala



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ABSTRACT

Caste and caste inequalities continue to be a significant reality in contemporary society, even in Kerala, where high levels of development, literacy, and secularism coexist. Despite these advancements, caste remains a critical factor in the social and cultural lives of the people. The caste system within Hinduism is characterized by a hierarchy that perpetuates disparities in power and wealth, as well as imbalances in religious practices. This study conducts an ethnographic investigation into the renowned religious ritual of Kaliyattam in Northern Kerala, revealing the harsh realities of caste dynamics, ritual authority, and exploitation present in society. Various communities involved in the ritual are required to adhere to strict customs that often result in economic exploitation and social injustice. These customs reflect the ongoing inequalities that persist within the caste system, highlighting the need for a deeper understanding of how these issues manifest in both ritual contexts and broader societal interactions.

Keywords: Religious rituals, Kaliyattam, Theyyam, Dalits, caste oppression



1. INTRODUCTION

Folklore serves as a mirror reflecting the primordial beliefs, rites, rituals, lifestyle, and cultural heritage of a nation. It encapsulates the traditions of a community, depicting the cult life and social practices that shape its identity. In the Malabar region, particularly in the districts of Kannur and Kasaragod, the myths associated with Theyyam illustrate these cultural narratives. The folk arts of Malabar highlight significant transformations in community life and religious beliefs that arose following the arrival of the Aryans. This interaction led to a reciprocal exchange between the ancient cultures of immigrants and the indigenous Malabari people. Folk arts encompass various forms such as dance, Aatam, Küthu, Thullal, Pätü (songs), and Kali (plays), which collectively illuminate human experiences, accumulated knowledge, spirituality, and devotion. As societies evolved, humans sought to secure their lives against dangers by conceptualizing Nature Gods and engaging in their worship. The Theyyam cult attempts to articulate through mythological stories or puranas elemental truths that surpass human understanding. Despite their spiritual essence, Theyyams are deeply rooted in the social structures that govern material existence. Non-Brahmanical groups established shrines for their communities and ancestral homes ('Tharavädu'), where devotional rites were often performed by Brahmins. These practices reflect a blend of cultural influences and underscore the importance of folklore in preserving societal values and traditions.

In North Malabar, there are numerous shrines known by various names such as Kaav, Kannankäd, Muchilöd, Mundya, Palliyara, and Kōttam. To present themselves before the Deities in these shrines, practitioners create imaginary forms or representations accompanied by dance, drums, and music. This ritual, known as 'Kettiyadikkal,' is conducted annually or every few years and is referred to as 'Katiättam' or 'Thewāghōsham.' Theyyam stands out as a significant ritualistic art form in North Kerala, embodying a unique method of worshipping the Deity. During this symbolic representation, participants adopt the attributes of the Gods. Theyyaghosham serves as a bridge connecting various ritualistic groups and fostering communal unity. Culturally, Malabar is distinct from other regions of Kerala. In the coastal areas encompassing the districts of Palghat, Malappuram, Kozhikode, Kasaragod, and South Canara in Karnataka, there exists a common tradition of appeasing Deities through frenzied dance while donning elaborate costumes. The art forms known as Bhūtam, Theyyam, and Tira share many similarities; for instance, Pootham and Tira are found in Palakkad, Tira in Malappuram and Kozhikode, while Theyyam is prominent in Kannur and Kasaragod, and Bhutam is practiced in Kasargod. Through these three ritual performances or 'kōlam kettiyādikkal,' it is believed that the Deity is successfully appeased.

'Kaavs' and 'Bhūta Sthānās' are institutions that govern the material aspects of society. The term Kolam is often used interchangeably with 'Theyyam.' Kettiyadikkal refers to the presentation of Deity forms as 'Kōlangal,' where appeasing the Deity through ritualistic art performances is a distinctive feature. Sthānam is a general term for devotional centers other than kaavs and temples, which may house one or more Deities with various forms and characteristics. The Theyyam tradition encompasses three major categories: Saivam, Vaishnavam, and Shāktham, alongside other forms such as Nāga prathista, Mrigaprathista, and Marthya prathista. Most Theyyams embody noble qualities associated with either Sathva or Rajoguna, while those with demonic traits are uncommon. Theyyam representations include Shakti-Siva-Vaishnava Deities, Bhūtas, Mriga Devatās, Nāga Devatas, Paretar (deceased individuals), Yakshas, Gandharvās, ancestors, and characters from Purānās and Itihasas (mythical figures), as well as communal heroes. These representations vary significantly in mythology, form, and features. The ritualistic dance performances that depict and interpret such a wide array of Deities are quite rare. Theyyam embodies a state in which both malevolent and benevolent Deities present themselves in all their glory before devotees, who regard all these figures as equally revered Gods. Different forms of the Bhadrakali avatar include Pōthi (Bhagavathi), Chāmandi (Chāmundi), Pulloorkāli, Kandan, Karikkali, and Pullikkarikkali. Other Theyyams like Pulikandan, Manikkandan, and Vettakkorumakan can be viewed as distinct manifestations of the Saiva essence. Vishnumūrthi represents a Vaishnavite Deity. There exists a wide range of significant and lesser-known Theyyams within the aforementioned categories of Saivam, Vaishnavam, and Shāktham.

A significant portion of ritualistic art performances is aimed at appeasing a favoured Deity. Theyyāttam has unique characteristics that set it apart from other ritual arts. In this tradition, the Deity is believed to manifest and dance before the devotees. Although Theyyam or Kōlam Kelttal is performed by hereditary dancers and artists, it is thought that the Deity expresses itself through these performers. Theyyams are considered speaking Gods; when they communicate, it is referred to as 'uriyāttu kalppanakkal.' This allows the supplicant to voice their sorrows, worries, and pains to the Deities, culminating in the utterance known as 'uriyāttu.' Deification and worship typically involve icons made from stone, wood, metal, or images drawn on the ground with powders of five colors. In contrast, during Theyyam and Tira performances, the individual performing 'kettiyadal' is endowed with divine attributes. This symbolic representation of veneration is crucial in the early stages of 'bhakti.' A similar form of 'pratiroopa darsana' can be observed in other ritual dances like 'kōmaram' (velichappadu). The Deity is invoked through the 'varavill' of 'Thōttam Pāttu,' leading to a frenzied dance as the Deity enters the dancer. These Deities are believed to possess both the power to bless and to destroy. If not periodically engaged in dance through 'kettiyāddikkal,' it is thought that people may face their wrath and curses. Consequently, 'Katiyattam' festivals are held annually in 'kaavs' and 'sthanās,' where people seek to have their wishes fulfilled. Katiyāttam is known by various names such as Kaatiattam, Theyyāttam, and Kōlamkettu. While there is no definitive artistic perfection in the aattam, sang, language, or sentences that can trace its origins back to the 6th Century AD, it can be inferred that 'Theyya Prasthānam' predates this period. However, considering the linguistic nuances of the Thōttams raises doubts about the age of this art form. Nevertheless, the rituals themselves are quite ancient. 'Theyya prasthānam' is said to express the genius of a great figure from 'Kolasvarupa,' who was both a benevolent ruler and a devoted bhakta (devotee).

2. DIFFERENT GROUPS INVOLVED IN THE RITUAL

The roles performed by individuals involved in Theyyam events are closely tied to their caste affiliations, with each participant having specific duties that are fixed and non-negotiable. The participants can be categorized into four

primary groups: performers, ritual specialists of the shrines, shrine owners, and the general public who are devotees of the Deity. Except for the last group of devotees, the other three groups have hereditary roles defined by their caste. While anyone from the public can participate in worshipping a Theyyam cult without religious restrictions, this group does not hold any direct ritual responsibilities; they are merely worshippers. In contrast, the performers, ritual specialists, and shrine owners have clearly defined roles and statuses within the event. The performance of Theyyam and its associated rituals is primarily carried out by various lower-caste communities in North Kerala, where these roles are considered hereditary rights and responsibilities. Each major Hindu community in this region operates its own Theyyam worship shrines, regardless of social status. Shrines may be owned by upper-caste communities such as Nair and Pothuval, with rare instances of ownership by Namboothiri Brahmins. Mid-level castes like Maniyani, Vaniya, and Thiyya also own shrines, along with lower-caste groups such as Vannan, Malayan, Velan, and Pulaya. Despite the ownership being diverse across castes, it is predominantly the Dalit communities like Vannan and Malayan who perform the Theyyam rituals, as they hold the hereditary rights to do so. In Payyanur, higher caste groups consist mainly of those classified in the general category, including Nair, Nambiar, and Pothuval. While discussing communities involved in Theyyam-related practices, it's notable that top-tier communities such as Namboothiri Brahmins and Kshatriyas also participate by owning Theyyam worship shrines in some cases. The Nair community and its sub-castes like Nambiar and Pothuval are particularly prominent in Payyanur. Historically, these communities were closely linked with higher-level rulers from Kshatriya backgrounds for political administration and with Namboothiri Brahmins for religious matters. Economically, they represent a powerful segment of society, owning a significant portion of land and acting as landlords to many tenants and bonded laborers from lower castes.

In the realm of religious rituals, higher caste individuals maintain their own Theyyam worship shrines at their ancestral homes (tharavadu) (Gough, 1958). These family-owned shrines are dedicated to specific Deities, referred to as kuladevatha, which they worship annually as part of the Theyyam cult. The administrative and governance authority over these shrines' rests solely with the respective families. In addition to managing their own shrines, these higher caste families also hold significant authority in the shrines of lower caste communities. Regardless of ownership or community affiliation, any shrine in the region—whether belonging to the Thiyya, Vaniya, Nankuvarna, or Vannan communities—is granted special status, known as koyma, by particular higher caste tharavadu. This status arises because the land on which the lower caste shrine is situated originally belonged to the higher caste family with koyma status. This dynamic reflects the imposition of landowner authority over their tenants and workers, which is expressed through religious rituals. During Kaliyattam, those with koyma status receive special consideration and space in every shrine. Following the higher castes in this hierarchy are communities like Vaniya and Thiyya, who also have community shrines dedicated to Theyyam worship that are common in the region. The roles of these communities often involve providing offerings such as oil and kalasam (toddy) for Kaliyattam rituals based on their traditional occupations. Artisan communities collectively known as nankuvarna consist of four specialized groups: those skilled in gold, bell metal and brass, iron, and woodwork. These artisan communities also worship Theyyam cults at their own shrines and are responsible for providing services at other communities' shrines according to their expertise. The most significant group in Theyyam worship consists of the performers themselves, who belong to Scheduled Caste communities. Performing Theyyam is a hereditary occupation for these castes, which include Vannan, Malayan, Munnoottan, Anjoottan, Velan, Koppalan (Nalikadaya), Chinkathan, and Pulaya. Although these castes are classified together as Scheduled Castes in governmental contexts, a distinct hierarchy exists among them.

3. BELIEF SYSTEM AND CASTES

beliefs surrounding Theyyam are deeply rooted in the myths associated with each deity, and the stories and folktales about them hold significant meaning for the devotees. The belief system related to Theyyam can be divided into two parts: the first pertains to the identity of the deity, where devotees place the Theyyams they worship within the broader Hindu pantheon. The second aspect involves folk narratives or legendary tales about the lives of individuals who became Theyyams. In the first category, some Theyyams are viewed as incarnations of Hindu Gods, particularly Shiva, with many female cults linked to the Shakti (energy) of Shiva, such as his wife Parvati or her more commonly known incarnation, Kali. These deities, often depicted as fierce demonic spirits, are believed to have descended to Earth to vanquish malevolent entities and alleviate human suffering caused by evil spirits and epidemics. The second category of Theyyams is particularly relevant to this discussion, featuring gods and goddesses who were once ordinary humans. Typically, these deities are individuals who met untimely deaths due to social injustices, including family issues, ego clashes, jealousy, chastity concerns, and the concept of purity pollution prevalent in a caste-conscious society. Among the hundreds of

Theyyams with unique backstories, a few key cults exemplify the various reasons leading to their protagonists' deaths and subsequent deification. For instance, Muchilottu Bhagavathi's story revolves around a young woman's self-sacrifice due to the pride and ego of male scholars within her Brahmin community. This male-dominated society resisted female empowerment and excommunicated her after accusing her of impropriety, leading her to take her own life. Similarly, the tale of Thottinkara Bhagavathi involves a Thiyya woman who was murdered by higher caste rulers for reading religious texts. In both narratives, three common themes emerge: the identity of the protagonist as a female, their lower-caste status, and their pursuit of knowledge through religious literature—all actions that challenged the interests of the higher caste male community.

The narrative surrounding Pulimaranja Thondachan, a significant deity of the Pulaya community, reflects a similar theme where a lower-caste individual becomes a point of contention for higher caste rulers. This individual, skilled in martial arts, magic, and knowledge—areas traditionally reserved for higher castes—faces death at the hands of cruel upper-caste individuals. The Potten Theyyam, one of the most popular forms of Theyyam in the region, shares a comparable story involving a Pulaya man who challenges the knowledge of Aadi Sankara, the renowned sage and scholar of Hinduism. In this context, the Pulaya man is depicted as a "potten" (fool) who mockingly confronts higher caste individuals. A distinctive aspect of the belief system surrounding these various Theyyams lies in the role of caste. It is primarily lower caste individuals who perform Theyyam within the religious sphere, effectively showcasing their experiences with caste-based injustices and social inequities. Through these performances, they express their struggles against inhumane acts perpetuated by society.

4. CASTE IN THEYYAM MYTHS

In the rituals of Theyyam and Kaliyattam, performers from lower castes experience a temporary elevation in status compared to their daily lives. This does not imply that their status is on par with higher castes; rather, as the central figures in these rituals, they receive heightened attention and reverence, even when performing at shrines associated with upper castes. During the ritual, a lower caste individual embodies the deity, becoming a divine figure in the eyes of devotees who approach them with deep respect and devotion to seek blessings. In this context, the performer's lower caste identity is obscured by the divine persona they assume. However, once the ritual concludes and they remove their ceremonial attire, they revert to being an ordinary individual with their specific caste identity. This means that the acceptance a Theyyam performer from a lower caste, such as Vannan, Malayan, or Pulaya, receives during the religious event is fleeting and contingent solely upon their ritual role. Before and after the performance, they are treated according to their established caste status within society. Thus, both economically and in terms of authority, a Theyyam performer experiences their status through the lens of religious rituals. To grasp the real caste issues faced by these individuals, it is essential to examine circumstances beyond the ritual context. The ritual context refers to specific religious acts performed during Theyyam, which include a series of short rituals, dance performances, and blessings for devotees. In contrast, the religious sphere encompasses the broader environment where these rituals occur, including the shrine and its surroundings, as well as the events that precede and follow the core rituals. The life of a Theyyam performer outside of ritual times also plays a critical role in this discussion. In this light, their experiences related to caste provide a more accurate reflection of societal caste dynamics.

5. TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE BELIEF SYSTEM

The trend of mainstream Hindu beliefs and practices gaining prominence within the folk religions of regional societies is evident in the context of Kaliyattam and Theyyam worship. Historically, these rituals were integral to lower caste communities, which faced social oppression from wealthier classes and castes. The beliefs and practices associated with Theyyam were closely tied to the survival and identity of these communities, characterized by unique forms and traditions. However, increased interaction with mainstream Hindu practices has significantly impacted the folk religious system of Theyyam worship. The socio-economic and political landscape of the region has played a crucial role in shaping changes in the religious culture of these marginalized groups. Payyannur, one of Kerala's first Brahmin villages, exemplifies this influence, as the social and political structure is heavily dominated by Namboothiri Brahmins and their supporting castes, such as Nair and Pothuval. These groups form a significant block in society, central to the region's economic and political dynamics. In the religious sphere, Brahmins hold considerable authority, exemplified by the central temple of Subrahmaniya Swami Kshetram. This dominance allows higher castes to intrude upon the religious practices of lower castes. Consequently, there has been a noticeable increase in Vedic rituals within Theyyam worship, which once maintained its distinct identity. The physical structures of worship places also reflect this influence, with

shrine-owning communities—primarily from middle strata castes like Thiyya and Vaniya—showing a growing interest in adopting mainstream Hindu practices. As a result, the authentic Theyyam performing communities are increasingly alienated, as they are compelled to conform to practices that feel foreign to them. This interference from higher caste groups alters not only the religious beliefs but also reinforces oppression over lower caste communities in contemporary society.

6. CONCLUSION

The Kaliyattam ritual ceremony embodies intense social dynamics that resonate throughout the cultural life of local populations. As a fundamentally religious ritual for Hindus, it is deeply rooted in the caste system, which shapes inter-community relations during the ceremony. Each caste is assigned specific duties based on traditional occupations and economic roles, reflecting remnants of feudal economic relations among various caste groups during the ritual. Lower caste Theyyam performers consistently experience marginalization from higher castes, with concepts of caste pollution still evident during rituals. While lower caste performers temporarily assume divine status as Theyyam during rituals—gaining acceptance from higher caste individuals—this shift does not lead to lasting changes in their daily lives or inter-caste relationships. The increasing influence of popular Hinduism on traditional Theyyam worship highlights enduring elements of inhumanity embedded within these practices, revealing how oppression manifests in new forms within contemporary society.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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