

# BEYOND SACRED- UNDERSTANDING THE HISTORICAL, SOCIO-POLITICAL AND CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF THEYYAM

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## Abstract

The name ‘Theyyam’ originates from the word ‘Theivam’ which means God. Theyyam which is also known as ‘Kaliyattom’, is an ancient socio-religious ceremony performed in the Northern parts of Kerala. The performance of Theyyam is in close association with the agrarian practices of ancient Kerala. It is regarded mainly as a sacred dance performance of ‘Kali’, as the name ‘Kaliyattom’ suggests. It is also known as ‘Theyyattom’ as every ‘thera’ or village was duly bound to perform it. The rich socio-cultural history of Theyyam acts as a speculum of cultural ethos as well as the social realities from the 12th century A.D. This paper is a humble, unbiased attempt to analyze how Brahminical hegemony imposed its interests over the attempts of Theyyam to provide insights to the community over the prevailed caste hierarchy and related inequalities of the time, as a Dravidian form of resistance against the aspects of Aryaniization, thereby distorting the ‘Thottam’ songs or myths that were sung during the performance. So many historical events were, in turn, instrumental in affecting a change in the performance of Theyyam.

**Keywords:** theyyam, kaliyattom, theyyattom, brahminical hegemony, thottams, untouchability, chatur varna.

## Introduction

The folk ritual pageantry of Theyyam traditionally belongs to the North Malabar of Kerala, the ancient Kolattunadu comprising the present-day Kannur and Kasargod districts. The cult of folk art Theyyam was developed in Kolattunadu during the reign of Raja Chirakkal (King of Chirakkal), of Kolathiri dynasty, during the 12th century A.D. The Kolathiris were famous for their patronage to the development of arts, architecture, and literature. The existing social hierarchy, patronage of the Rajas and Kavus contributed to the development of modern Theyyam. This patronage given by the rulers of the Kolattunadu resulted in the development of different types of Theyyam. In the 12th century A.D, the concept of Theyyam marked the reconciliation of human beings, disregarding all forms of religion as well as caste discriminations prevailing in the society. It can be regarded as historical and cultural documentation of Kerala as its significant progressions can be traced back from the 12th century A.D to the Chalcolithic age.

## Reflections of Brahminical Hegemony- Tracing back the History of Folk Art of Theyyam

The tradition of Theyyam maintains a close association with the fertility cult of primitive agricultural societies. The main practice is concerning the worship of mother- goddesses, goddesses of diseases, village goddesses, spirits, ancestors, local heroes, animals, and trees. This folk art is a combination of dance, music and ancient rituals and the major developments can be traced back from 12th century A.D to the Chalcolithic Age (1950’s), thus documenting the history and culture of Kerala. The tradition of Theyyam had a remarkable power to assimilate and absorb inspirations from various other cultic practices. It used Puranic stories in highly Sanskritized verse into local myths of Theyyam called ‘Thottam’ or ‘Thottam songs’. Aryaniization had a slow pace in North Malabar where Theyyam had its roots, strongly entwined by religious faith and culture.

In North Malabar, apart from Kshetrams or temples attributed to the brahminical religious structures, there were ‘Kavus’ or shrines belonged to other social classes of the society especially of the lower castes. Kavus or shrines are different from the traditional kshetrams or temples. In the north, each caste owns its village shrine variously known as kavu, ara, tara, palliyara, stanam, mundya, kottam etc, where Kaliyattam performance of Theyyam is conducted. It is performed in the ancestral houses as well (the Theyyam performed for the upper classes are conducted at their ancestral houses especially for the Brahmin community, as they don’t own Kavu). Each kavu consists of a principle shrine having its tutelary deity and two or three sub-shrines as an abode of different Theyyam deities. This kavus are

controlled by the community elders. The priest is known as ‘antittiriyam’ and there will be one or more ‘velichapattu’ (oracle), who makes insightful counsel or prophetic precognition inspired by the deities to the devotees. The ritual of Theyyam always holds an abstract meaning. Unlike the traditional temple structures, kavu does not possess an iconic deity made of an alloy of silver, gold, iron, copper, and lead and there will not be an enshrined interior space towards which the devotees are supposed to look into. As far as Theyyam is concerned, God should be seen with the eyes of the devotee as a visible reality rather than imagining and experiencing with their inner eye. Thus kavu is the space and kaliyattom is the time for Theyyams to re-appear before their devotees. Thus Theyyam devotees never visit the ‘theyyakavu’ the whole year, except during kaliyattom. During the ritual, Theyyam deities were invoked and made to re-appear through an impersonator with all strength and vitality. The impersonator will be possessed by the deity through his previous day's invocatory performance of thottam or vellattom. The next day before the performance, he comes out of the green room with all his face and body painted. The performative space is the northern side of the kavu. His assistants dress him up with the ‘vechukettal’ (headdresses, elaborate ornaments, and other paraphernalia) and recite a piece of an invocatory song. Gradually the impersonator will be transformed into the deity possessed. He then in front of a mirror identifies himself with the other- The God. Meanwhile, the drum beats will be at a high pitch and a tension will be created among the devotees who are eagerly waiting for the deity to re-appear through the performance. Then the invocatory song comes down to trance. He, after the identification, throws the mirror in air and re-appears before the awaiting devotees with a variety of symbolic gestures. Even though the performance of the impersonator is practiced before the kaliyattom, it cannot be referred to as a performance representing God but the God itself, from the vantage point of view of the devotees. Theyyam assures the devotees that they will be get rid of all their problems and sorrows. In return, the devotees present their offerings in cash or kind.

The tradition of Theyyam was derived from various other cultic practices involving the systematized pattern of performance and worship abounding in many deities. It is closely associated with the ancient worship of mother goddess, hero deities, ancestors, animals, snakes and many more. Among these classifications, the mother goddess has an astounding predominant position through its profuse number and pervasive nature in the performance. This is related to the fertility cult associated with agriculture. As far as history is concerned, the agricultural settlements in Kerala are marked after 1800 B.C, thus the origin of Theyyam cannot be earlier than that. The myths portrayed in the thottam songs of Theyyam revolve around the ancient agrarian practices followed by the Brahmin communities of Kerala. According to ‘Kerolopathi’ that covers the ancestry of the Nambutiri Brahmins and other castes of Kerala. There were brahminical migrations from north to Kerala. These migrations had a great impact on the economic, political, cultural and social spheres of Kerala then. It ascribes that there were 32 Brahminic villages in the northern parts of Kerala and 16 Manas belonged to the ancestral house of a Brahmin family in Payyanur. One most important among these was ‘Kunjimangalam Mana’ and the area under it included ‘Panachira Kalari’, ‘Kalanthattu Kalari’ and ‘Panavayal Kalari. During the 13th century, the Kolathiri dynasty, the descendants of the Mushika dynasty of Tamil Sangam age, possessed great power and influence as a result of the spices trade. But the main dilemma they faced was that by the caste system of that time they were not recognized as ‘Kshatriyas’. So to acquire the title of Kshatriya, Udhayavarman Kolathiri, the Kolathiri then, approached a Brahmin to perform a Yaga called ‘Hiranyagarbha’ usually performed by Brahmins. But the Brahmins refused to confer him the title of Kshatriya. This resulted in so many battles ad conflicts between the Kolathiris and the Brahmin community of Kerala. As a solution to this dilemma, Udhayavarman Kolathiri brought Brahmins from ‘Tulunadu’ of Karnataka by offering them land and many other rewards. They thus performed Hiranyagarbha for the Kolathiris and conferred them with the title of Kshatriya.

As aftermath, this initiated a conflict between the Kolathiris and the Brahmins of Kerala. This later became a popular myth in Theyyam. According to history, this resulted in the formation of two Brahmin communities, the Tulu Brahmin community, and the Malayali Brahmin community. The Tulu Brahmins were provided with the ‘Kalanthattu Kalari’ whereas the ‘Panachira Kalari’ and ‘Panavayal Kalari’ were owned by the Malayali Brahmin community. The agrarian practices followed by these communities were divergent. The Malayali Brahmins followed a system of leasing out their lands to the Nair community for tilling. They either till the land themselves or employ laborers from the untouchable lower castes. This was followed in the Panavayal and Panachira kalaries owned by Malayali Brahmins. Whereas the Tulu Brahmins who owned the Kalanthattu Kalari, leased their lands to the Nair community. The tilling was done either by the Brahmins themselves or by the Nair community. Thus the Tulu Brahmins exercised untouchability to a greater extent than the Malayali Brahmins. The Tulu Brahmins segregated and isolated the untouchables. The untouchable lower caste was deprived of the paddy fields owned by the Tulu Brahmins and the Nairs who were in charge of the Panavayal and Panachira and refused to take agricultural laborers who traditionally helped in tilling the fields of Kalanthattu before the migration of the Tulu Brahmins to Kerala Nairs, who consider themselves to be elite despite holding lower strata, repudiated the lower caste and strictly exercised the practices of untouchability than the Brahmin communities. This was to please the upper caste and to get perquisites and privileges from them. Theyyam depicted the myths of martyred people of lower castes who questioned the caste-related atrocities on them, opposed the caste system, and killed as a result. Most of these myths of the bygone reality of the caste hierarchy were portrayed in Theyyam.

Another important myth related to Theyyam thottam song revolves around the story of Manakkadan Gurukkal. Manakkad Gurukkal, an ayurvedic practitioner and a magician of that time, belonging to Vannan community, a lower caste community, was once invited by Chirakkal Raja to his palace. He underwent various tests put forward by the King but surpassed them by his magic tricks and intelligence. The pleased King asked him to perform all forms of Theyyam in a single night. He performed according to the wish of the King. Thus the King honored him by conferring him the title of ‘Gurukkal’. Manakkadan Gurukkal prescribed the performance, costumes, face painting, other paraphernalia and the thottams songs of 39 different Theyyams. These various myths depicted in Theyyam act as a speculum of atrociousness practiced by the upper caste on the lower untouchables in the name of caste hierarchy. Thus the untouchables found their voice of resistance in such vengeful spirits portrayed in these myths of Theyyam thereby giving insights to the society.

During the colonial period, Theyyam received many kinds of criticism. The East India Company criticized the practice of Theyyam and considered it as a barbaric ritual filled with superstition, corrupt, evil and inhuman. So in 19<sup>th</sup> century they imposed a ban on folk art of Theyyam but were later removed in 20<sup>th</sup> century. During 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British Royal Army introduced Enfield rifle greased with the fat of pig and cow. The army consisted mostly of Indian sepoys of Hindu and Muslim religions. As far as Hindus are concerned, cow is considered to be sacred and on the other hand, for Muslims, the pig is considered to be ‘haram’ or forbidden. So the introduction of such rifles resulted in the outbreak of First war of Indian Independence which paved way for great loss on the side of British East India Company. This made them realize the exigencies of questioning the cultural aspects that unite the society as a whole.

Sree Narayana Guru, a social reformer who worked for the up-liftment of the lower castes and who worked for the exhilaration of the Ezhava community opposed the practice of Theyyam claiming that it involves animal sacrifice, worshiping of evil deities and toddy consumption. Thus he initiated a movement against Theyyam, which failed to acquire popularity in Northern Kerala, but on the other hand, had a revolutionary effect on the renaissance sphere of Kerala and the performance of Theyyam later.

The Communist party of that time had a liberal kind of approach towards the practice of Theyyam. On the basis of the Marxist ideology they hold, they could not criticize the practice of Theyyam, as it is considered as the collective voice of the unprivileged against the upper castes. Later in 1940’s and 1950’s, the Communist party tried to use Theyyam as form of resistance and more as a political weapon, which resulted in losing its historical importance and ritualistic amplitude there by making as an artistic form only.

In the present day scenario, it has been said that there is no more folk art that could be referred to as ‘folk’ as they were completely isolated from the cultural centers. In Northern parts of Malabar, comprising Kannur and Kasargod, which was considered as cultural hubs and were once enrooted to the folk ritual pageantry of Theyyam, the ‘folk life’ is non-existent today. The rapid increase in the field of education and literacy and their ensuing political consciousness together with an urban culture though modern transportation, film, radio, television, daily press which reaches every door, accelerated the process of democratization and brought about a mass culture. In the sphere of this ‘new culture’, the artistic expression of folk tradition lost its indegeneity, thus could not survive. Thus various folk songs such as ‘tutipattu’, ‘kalampattu’, ‘kentronpattu’, ‘kurintinipattu’, ‘maranpattu’, ‘mannanpattu’, ‘mangalapattu’, ‘aravupattu’, ‘vittukilipattu’ which represented an emotional and thematic content sung and functioned at various spheres of life have almost died out due to the spread and evolution of mass culture. So the active and passive bearers of indigenous art could not get chances to preserve and develop their culture and tradition. From 21<sup>st</sup> century onwards, the effect of Globalization had commercialized Theyyam. The government provided incentives for reviving Theyyam so as to make it an addition to the tourism industry of Kerala. Before colonization, Brahmanical hegemony was exercised to a greater extent. With the introduction of western education, untouchability and notions of caste diminished to a greater extent. Thus role of Brahmanical hegemony has decreased and Theyyam has now shed off its notions of caste and has transformed from a ritual into an art. The Theyyam or Kaliyattom in present day performance acquires a new meaning and function which the new cultural goods so far seem to have failed to surmount. Even now the festivity of Theyyam is conducted year after year as the celebration of culture and tradition.

### **Theyyam: A Dravidian form of Resistance and Distortion of Myths**

The history of Theyyam embraces the fact that, then, even when the society was divided into different social classes, in Kaliyattom, irrespective of the caste hierarchy, an untouchable can step into the house of a Brahmin in the form of Theyyam, otherwise will be regarded as a punishable offense. In Theyyam all the caste boundaries and strict caste rules were ruled out, by regarding it as a practice of collective identity of the society, where every section of the society indulge themselves in organizing it. Even certain Muslim families are also an integral part Kaliyattom at some places emphasizing the fact that every individual in the society is destined to perform their roles in the functioning of society.

Despite all these aspects, the caste hierarchy had its influence on the evolution of both cultic as well as performative sides of Theyyam. As far as the cultic side of Kaliyattom was concerned, the main exceptions were the ‘Pulayas’ and the ‘Velans’, who belonged to the lower castes. Even though the Pulaya caste worshipped many mother goddesses and hero deities, even larger in number than the other castes, they were not given the right to perform their Theyyam in front of the Kavu owned by other castes, thus used to perform alone. Whereas Velans, who perform their deities like ‘Kundora Chamundi’, ‘Kuratti Dhuma’, ‘Bhagavathi’, but can only perform in front of a small hut-like sub-shrine which is situated away from or off-centered from the main kavu where rituals are being performed. Thus apart from the segregation from the upper castes, there were intricacies within the lower caste untouchables who exercised a hierarchy in the performative order of Theyyam. In addition to this, the caste hierarchy influenced Theyyam deification as well. The thottam songs of Theyyam make references to much caste-related violence that resulted in the death of many innocents, from the lower castes that were later deified and worshipped in Theyyam. It can be doubted, whether these victims or heroes were absorbed into the cult either to satisfy the urge to worship or to spread the memory of those events which resulted in their death. This can be regarded as a symbolic strategy to annunciate certain messages rooted in the social and political consciousness of the lower caste people who fell prey to the dominance of caste hierarchy and related violence. The main examples illustrating the religious fervor of Hinduism in Kaliyattom are the myths of ‘Palantayi Kannan’ and ‘Pottan Theyyam’. Palantayi Kannan, a Tiyya caste boy was slain by a Nair overlord Karuvatan Kurup. The victim was later deified in Theyyam. But today, the deity came to be known as ‘Vishnu Murti’. The thottam songs of Kannan are popular and performed over the districts of Kannur and Kasargod. But the main contradiction is that, in the performance, Vishnu Murti is portrayed as ‘Narasimha’ from the Purana, not as Palantayi Kannan. The major part of the performance revolves around the act of Narasimha devouring Hiranya. In the thottam songs, there are references to the appearance of Vishnu in the form of Narasimha. Even though Narasimha Murti of Vishnu is considered as the deified version of Kannan, in the thottam songs one can see that, after slaying Kannan, later in the dream of Kurup, Vishnu appeared and asked him, as an act of atonement that the Theyyam of Kannan should be performed. Thus the spectators tend to identify Narasimha Murti of Vishnu with Karuvatan Kurup and the whole victimization of Kannan was misinterpreted. Even in the shrine Kattapuram, which is considered as the ‘mulastanam’ or the original abode of Palantayi Kannan, Vishnu Murti and Kannan are depicted through performances as two separate deities. The performance of Kannan receives fewer devotees whereas Vishnu Murti performed in the same kavu is the main attraction of the performance. Such a method of manipulating the original version of myths can be witnessed in many thottam songs to satisfy the hegemonic interests of the dominant groups.

A similar such example is that of the myth of ‘Pottan Theyyam’, one of the most popular Theyyam deities. According to the local myth, ‘Pottan’, who belonged to the lower Pulaya caste, was once walking along a narrow embankment by clasping a baby on his waist and carrying a pot filled with toddy on his head. Then a Brahmin was approaching him from the opposite direction. The furious Brahmin commanded the Pulaya to move away from his way. But the Pulaya started to raise questions against him, pointing out the untouchability and atrocities imposed by them, in the name of the caste hierarchy. He made scathing criticism on the existing reality. The Brahmin but failed to answer any of his questions that showed the significance of those questions that could not be counter questioned. This implies that the caste system and the related inequalities should be questioned. The term ‘Pottan’ literally means deaf-and-dumb. So the gestures of Pottan are considered to be nonsensical. Since the voice and gestures of a fool do not make any sense, ‘Pottan Kali’ or the performance of Pottan never follows any strict rule in his performance, therefore he is free to act or ask anything. Thus Pottan has the freedom to express himself without confirming himself to the social norms of behavior. Thus Pottan is considered to be a representation of the collective minds of the oppressed. But later this myth was interpolated by depicting in a 14th-century work called ‘Sankara Digvijaya’ which depicted the supremacy of the great Indian philosopher Sri. Sankaracharya. According to this interpolated version of the myth, Lord Shiva in the guise of Chandala (belongs to the lower castes) appeared in the way of Sri Sankaracharya. Belonging to the upper caste, Sankaracharya commanded the Chandala to move away from his way. But the Chandala questioned him back. Since he nowhere confronted such an intelligent Chandala, Sankaracharya realized that Lord Shiva tested him in the guise of a Chandala. He prostrates before the Chandala and Lord Shiva appears and blesses him. The moment when Lord Shiva appeared and Chandala disappeared, the context and the significance of the questions raised by the Chandala lost its importance and meaning. The blessing from Shiva, not Chandala reaffirms the social norm of ‘Chatur varna’ or the caste system and reminds the fact that, Chandala blessing an upper caste is against the established caste hierarchy and cannot be accepted. Thus Chandala (Siva) and Sankara are not the representations of two opposed worldviews but belong to the same order of Siva-Sankara. Since the questions of the Chandala were remained unanswered, this implies that these caste-related inequalities can neither be altered nor questioned. Pottan Theyyam, even today, represents this altered version of the myth. Thus one question the caste system and others make efforts to create an illusion to revitalize and legitimize the caste system.

Even the rituals performed in Kaliyattom reflect Brahminical supremacy. In the very first ritual, which marks the beginning of the performance, an oil lamp is lit from the lamp of Brahminical temple will be carried in a solemn possession to the kavu. Thus the holy lamp of the kavu is lit from the holier lamp of the Brahminical temple. Each

performance of Theyyam is supervised by a ‘Tantri’ (a Brahmin priest) or ‘Koima’ (dominance) belonging to the upper caste.

“Meaning loses its value but keeps its life, from which the form of the myth will draw its nourishment. The meaning will be for the form like an instantaneous reserve of history, a tamed richness, which it is possible to call the dismiss in a sort of rapid alternation: the form must constantly be able to be rooted again in the meaning and to get there what nature it needs for its nutriment; above all, it must be able to hide there. It is this constant game of hide-and-seek between the meaning and the form which defines myth” – (Barthes 118)

According to Sri Rajan Panicker, who began to perform Theyyam from the age of 12 and son of Sri Kannan Panicker who was honored by Kerala Folklore Academy, in a personal interview stated that Theyyam can never be considered as an escape from the caste system, even when the upper caste people can be seen praying to the God that is represented through Theyyam, performed by a low caste. According to him, at the final part of the performance, during the time of blessings, Theyyam first calls out the family name of high caste people present at the ceremony and would give them special blessings and experiencing this would make the other devotees feel like Theyyam is a representation of God who remains helpless in front of the caste system. Thus he concludes that even though Theyyam possesses myths against the caste system, the practical side of the performance does not allow to question it. Through Theyyam, one can provide insights to the community through performance, but would never be able to compromise or suspend strict caste rules and discrimination.

## CONCLUSION

The paper analyzed various magnitudes of Theyyam including the historical, socio-political and cultural aspects of folk art of Theyyam. Theyyam was destined to be performed by people who belonged to the lower caste of the society, in which the victims of the upper caste were deified and performed. The paper analyzed the political reality underlying Theyyam where Brahminical hegemony is executed in all its possible ways. Even though Theyyam is regarded as the cultural identity of a community, it is a rationalistic interpretation of the Varna system. The thottam songs of Theyyam depict tales of caste oppression. Despite Theyyam is regarded as the collective guilt consciousness of the society, it is doubtful whether those innocent victims or heroes were absorbed into cult either to satisfy the urge for worship or to perpetuate the memory or the message of those events in which they lost their lives.

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