Experience, Meaning and Ritual: The Many Lives of *Thottam* Songs in North Malabar, Kerala

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DECLARATION

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I hereby declare that the research embodied in the present dissertation entitled, '**Experience, Meaning and Ritual: The Many Lives of *Thottam* Songs in North Malabar, Kerala'** is carried out under the supervision of **Prof. Sasheej Hegde**, Department of Sociology, School of Social Sciences, University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad, for the award of Master of Philosophy, is an original work of mine and to the best of my knowledge no part of this dissertation has been submitted for the award of any research degree or diploma at any university. I also declare that this is a bonafide research work which is free from plagiarism. I hereby agree that my dissertation can be deposited in Shodhganga / INFLIBNET.

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This is to certify that **Ms. HARITHA K.** (Reg. No. 19SSHL01) has carried out the research work in the present dissertation entitled '**Experience, Meaning and Ritual: The Many Lives of *Thottam* Songs in North Malabar, Kerala**' in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy in Sociology, under the supervision of **Prof. Sasheej Hegde,** in the Department of Sociology of University of Hyderabad. This dissertation is an independent work and has not been submitted for the award of any degree of this or any other University.

Further, the student has passed the following coursework requirement for the M.Phil.:

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Chapter 1

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Tracing the Trajectory, Forging a Problem: An Introduction

This study is an attempt to capture the meaning and significance of *Thottam Paattukal* or *Thottam* songs - a tradition of songs understood largely as a part of the *Theyyam* ritual of north Malabar, Kerala - both within their performative ritual context and outside the realm of the ritual, as it were. Broadly, as a category of song, which is largely seen as having evolved and co-existing in a symbiotic relationship with the *Theyyam* ritual of north Malabar, my interest is particularly invested in the songs themselves: singularly, their textual and narrative significance, their integration with the ritual context and outside of it as well. I must reiterate, yet, that the particular line of analysis adopted for the study has not been to totally disassociate the songs from their immediate ritual context. Rather, my effort has been to address the dimensions of the 'materiality' – at once symbolic, cultural, textual and social – attaching to the songs through its multiple loci of existence, whether it be tradition, performance and textuality. To put it in another way: I am urging for a framework that would enable us to perceive the songs as an autonomous category, having its own intrinsic potential which gets actualised in varying contexts.

The *Thottam* does, indeed, have its own significance when it is rendered in the context of the *Theyyam* ritual, being part and parcel of the overall efficacy of the latter. Sung by the hereditary practitioners, it is through the ritual activity of singing that the narrative world of the song comes to be integrated into the ritual. What are the modalities of this integration? What are the 'relationships' that get to be forged when the songs are rendered in the ritual context? How does the narrative world of the song get unravelled through the singing? Is there a systematicity to the songs themselves in terms of their internal structure which gets transposed in the context of their ritual enactment? Exploring these - and such other - questions is quite inevitable in approaching the world

of the songs in their ritual context. Importantly, too, the songs also have particular structures and literary features internal to them. Organised in a particular sequence containing multiple structuring parts, it becomes significant to explore how the songs are organised internally employing the techniques of language and literary devices. What does this internal structuring of the songs signify? How does it inform the ritual enactment of the songs? How is the narrative world of the legend organised in the songs? Such questions, formal as they might seem, are also worth exploring in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the songs in their complexity. Of course, these two levels of analysis are not mutually exclusive – and, oftentimes in the context of the song, it is quite impossible to separate them – but they enable us to get at some key aspects of the multiple 'lives' of the songs.

Overall, it is the dimensions of this dynamic existence that I aim to capture in the context of this study. In fact, a key argument underlying my investigation is that the world of *Thottam* songs should not be treated as passive and/or comprised of static entities, a vehicle of representation reflecting certain ideas and values. Rather, the *Thottam* can and must be approached as embodying forms of life that are at once experiential and meaningful, and accordingly translatable as a materiality mediating between the worlds of the human and the non-human.

Beginnings and Recapping the Problem: The Study in Its Unfolding

Let me begin by laying out the basis of my own personal and intellectual interest in the contours of this study. In fact, my interest in the world of songs and the *Thottam* in particular goes back to my childhood, where it was my grandmother who introduced me to a whole bunch of folksongs prevalent in the region, such as *Poorakkalipaattu*, *Kolkkalipaattu*, *Thiruvathirappattu*, *Koythupaattu* and so on.[1] She would recite these

[1] The '*Poorakkalipaattu*' is sung during the Pooram festival in northern Kerala, and they represent hymns dedicated to the gods. The songs are sung before the commencement of the dance performance, that is, '*Poorakkali*', which is performed by women as a ritual (although, in recent times, men too partake of the dance performance). '*Kolkkalipaattu*' is another folk song of north Malabar, which is sung during an enactment termed '*Kolkkali*' where men holding sticks move in a circle. This particular art form is said to have borrowed significantly from '*Kalarippayattu*', a martial art form practiced in Kerala. '*Thiruvathirapaattu*' represent songs which are sung during *Thiruvathirakkali*, a popular ritual dance performed by the upper caste women in Kerala. '*Koythupaattu*' consists of various regional folksongs sung by the people during the harvest. '*Koythu*' in Malayalam means harvest.

songs, clarify what they are about and unravel their content. So also, like most others who are born and brought up in north Malabar, especially in Kannur, attending the *Theyyam* ritual has been a part of one's life since early on. One or two days before the main event, my grandmother would narrate me the story behind the *Theyyam* that was to happen. This 'story-telling session' would happen every year during the *Theyyam* season. Sometimes, she would also narrate her own childhood experiences of attending *Theyyam* performances. She would take me along to listen to the *Thottam* songs, and we would all sit as a group rapt in attention. '*Watching a Theyyam without listening to its Thottam is like seeing a man without a head*', my grandmother would tell me as I kept pestering her unable to follow the song that was being sung. I still vividly remember us sitting in the front row to watch the recital, my grandmother patting her hands behind my back. I do not think she was very bothered about whether I understood the song or not; but for her the performance was 'headless' and incomplete without the *Thottam* recital, since it was believed by one and all that the extended narratives of these songs are invocations addressed to the gods and represent genealogies that recounted the origins of the god-turned local heroines and heroes. I must say that I could not understand most of what was being sung, and whenever I would ask her about 'where has the story reached?' she would reply: '*Kathivanoor Veeran is going for the battle*' or '*Maakkam is killed by her brothers*', and again '*Muthappan has left his home fighting with his parents*'. This was enough for me to sit patiently and listen to the songs.

These were my obvious points of entry into the world of *Thottam* songs, which over the years evolved from a child-like curiosity into a fledgling intellectual interest that has egged me on. I remember that, for a long period of time, I used to attend to these songs without exactly knowing what their lyrics were. During this duration, I was more interested in the way they are being sung - the tune, the sound emanating from the singers, and the use of musical instruments - and in the efficacious ritual atmosphere of the *Theyyam* of which the *Thottam* was part and parcel. Inevitably, these early interactions with the *Thottam* songs were restricted to the ritual space in which they were being sung. It was only after a point of time that I became quite interested with the linguistic and literary significance of the songs, especially with my exposure to various local books and articles that focused on the *Thottam* songs and the *Theyyam* ritual at large.

In the context of my present study, I have focused particularly on two *Thottam* songs, namely, *Maakkam* and *Kathivanoor Veeran*, which are also two popular *Theyyams* performed in the region of north Malabar. Having always known that the repository of *Thottam* songs is very large and that it can become nearly impossible to delve into the nuances of each song and their performative contexts through a single framework, as also the constraints of time and the pandemic induced restrictions, I chose to focus on two *Thottam* songs in order to understand how they exhibit different and intertwined 'lives' in their textual embodiment and in the context of their enactment in the world of the ritual. More frontally, the decision to concentrate on the *Thottam* of *Maakkam*[2] and of *Kathivanoor Veeran*[3] for the purposes of our study (which, of course, builds on wider and more general considerations about the worlds of *Thottam* and *Theyyam* herein) was based on three considerations that are somewhat interconnected. For one, the world of *Theyyams* is large, consisting of mother goddesses, local heroes, animal shaped personages and much more. The *Theyyam* ritual in north Malabar is known for worshipping the regional heroines and heroes who were born and had lived, ultimately coming to be deified, in the region. The *Theyyam* stories which I had heard since childhood were about the heroic and yet tragic life that they endured, as also about how their gallant death had facilitated their transcendence into godly status. It was but inevitable that I would want to explore these songs which narrated the 'extraordinary lives' of the regional heroines and heroes, so as to elucidate on the manner in which the songs carried these stories within them and moved into the space of ritual.

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[2] With reference to the *Thottam* of *Maakkam*, although the main character of the legend is Maakkam, the two of her children and a Mavilan (who is witness to the killing of Maakkam and her children – note, the legend will be detailed in Chapter 4) are also worshipped during the *Theyyam* performance. Since the children of Maakkam are also deified, the *Theyyam* is often named as '*Maakkavum Makkalum*' (Maakkam and Children). Likewise, another name is '*Maakkappothi*'. Balakrishnan Nair (1979) observes that Maakkam, after deification became '*Bhagavathy*', which is a common name for a goddess. It is believed that after her death, Maakkam became a goddess, and thus known as *Maakkappothi*.

[3] The *Kathivanoor Veeran Theyyam* is also known as *Mannaappan* or *Mandappan*. '*Veeran*', obviously, means hero. In the legend, Manthappan (also rendered as Mandappan) is the name of the main hero who is killed in a battle (again, this will be detailed in Chapter 4) and, following the death, he becomes a *Theyyam* known as *'Kathivanoor Veeran*'. 'Kathivanoor' is also the name of a place near Kodagu, a border region between Kerala and Karnataka. The legend has it that Manthappan travelled from his native place Mangadu in Kannur district to Kathivanoor, his uncle's home and embraced a heroic death fighting with the forces of Kodagu.

Secondly, I also took into active consideration the length and duration of the *Thottam* songs. Since my focus is exclusively on the latter, I chose to look into those *Thottam* songs which are considerably long and which are often perceived as equal in importance to the *Theyyam* dance performance itself. The third factor, which I also consider as the most decisive one and which to an extent subsumes the other two just mentioned, is my own experiences of attending *Theyyam* rituals and the many short and long conversations that I have had with people (whether they be my kin at home, friends who belonged to *Theyyam* performing families or those others who went around watching *Theyyams*, and my neighbours and other people with whom I had grown up talking about this world). All these conversations invariably touched upon and delved into *Thottam* songs, often elaborating on how these songs are capable of communicating the stories of *Theyyam* in a 'moving' manner. In these interactions, especially on the sequence of *Thottam* songs, the songs of both *Maakkam* and *Kathivanoor Veeran* occupied a significant place. I am pretty sure that even before beginning to intently watch these two *Theyyams* for the first time, I was very familiar not only with the legends behind them but also about the affective impact these songs had on the people. I had slowly and yet surely come to realise that the ritual activity of singing has a paramount place in the larger enactment of the *Theyyam*. Even though the number of times that I attended the *Thottam* singing performances of these two *Theyyam* are less as compared to the many others that I had witnessed, whenever I got a chance to attend them (the *Thottam*/*Theyyam* of *Maakkam* and *Kathivanoor Veeran*, that is) it was almost like I was witnessing something which I had already experienced.

Given these considerations, it was quite inevitable that these two *Thottam* songs would become the primary focus of my study. All the same, doing fieldwork on the songs and its rendering context obviously demanded an in-depth observation of the practice, including interactions with *Thottam* practitioners and a focused reading of the text of both these songs. My own experiences of having listened to these two *Thottam* songs, and the numerous conversations that I had with many people, clearly suggested that the significance of these songs (or, for that matter, any *Thottam* song) cannot only be understood as providing a narrative background to the ritual; importantly, that there is 'more' to be grasped and made intelligible as far as the movement of the songs into the

ritual space is concerned. The fieldwork, particularly on these two songs, was thus carried out with the intention of capturing this 'more', so to say. However, a more unsettling dilemma, which I also admit was a fruitful one, occurred during the fieldwork, as I found myself in conflict on many occasions between what the field seemed to be presenting about itself and my own preoccupations with what I had listened and observed since childhood. These 'frictions' and 'incongruencies', I would say, were inevitable in pushing the research work forward.

Recapping the ground: some readings and formulating a problem

Undoubtedly, there has been a reorientation in the way that I have myself been witness to *Thottam* singing performances over a period of time. Being a child who was fascinated by the efficacy of the songs and the ritual atmosphere, I became at a point more attentive towards the way the songs are organised, the use of language in the song and how the activity of singing itself is carried out in the ritual. This trajectory has urged me to look into the songs more seriously, not merely as an observer of the singing performances. In fact, it is precisely this 'reorientation' that has carved out the basis for our present study. Considering the fact that the songs contain various local legends prevalent in north Malabar, can *Thottam* songs have a radiant life only when it is delivered in the ritual context of the *Theyyam*? This was one of the foundational questions that pushed me to dwell on the multiple 'lives' of *Thottam* songs. The question also pushed me theoretically, which I will come to later in this chapter. The exposure to the local literature on the *Theyyam*, as well as informal conversations with some of the *Thottam* practitioners from my own village, only served to sustain this thought further – indeed, of approaching the *Thottam*, not quite as subservient to the overall ritual, but as having its own peculiar resonances and potencies.

Before coming to frame theoretically my own approach, it is important to understand how *Thottam* songs are conceived, incorporated and presented in the vast amount of the local literature on the *Theyyam* ritual. Of course, I cannot be covering all this literature here, but my intent certainly is to foreground some elements in them that have come to guide the shaping of our research problem. In many of the works, the verses of *Thottam* songs are often seen as narrating the legend behind each *Theyyam*. Interlacing the

storytelling, the lines of the *Thottam* are often positioned to maintain the continuation of the narration. Some of the works even include the documentation of the *Thottam* song in full length, invariably in the appendix as a secondary reference material. Among the works that reveal a robust engagement with the *Thottam*, the following seem to me quite important: *Thottam Paattukal: Oru Padanam* (*Thottam* Songs: A Study) by M. V. Vishnu Namboodiri (1990); *Chilambitta Ormakal; Theyyakkarante Katha Theyyathinteyum* (Ankleted Memories: The Life of a *Theyyam* Practitioner and of *Theyyam*) by Kannan Peruvannan (1997); *Theyyangalum Anushtanangalum Oru Padanam* (A Study of Rituals of *Theyyam*) by Y. V. Kannan (2011), and *Kathivanoor Veeran: Mala Kayariya Manushyan, Churamirangiya Daivam* (*Kathivanoor Veeran*: The Human Who Climbed the Hills, The God Who Climbed Down the Mountain Pass) by V. Lissy Mathew (2016). Let me elaborate on each of them.

Vishnu Namboodiri's (1990) work is solely based on the *Thottam s*ongs, and strives to understand the *Theyyam* ritual through them by engaging the linguistic and formal features of the songs. The study, as he mentions at the very outset, is based on the songs that he had collected from the practitioners, as well as the manuscripts possessed by the latter. Even though he attempts to give a structural analysis of the songs by focusing on the language, form, and content of the *Thottam* songs, he has little to say about how the songs are integrated into the ritual complex of the *Theyyam* (quite apart from containing the legends behind each of them). It is in this light that the works by Peruvannan (1997) and Kannan (2011) become salient. Considering that these two are themselves *Theyyam* practitioners, the way they approached the *Thottam* songs is significantly different from the framework adopted by Vishnu Namboodiri. While Peruvannan's is an autobiographical account of the life of a *Theyyam* practitioner, Kannan's attempt is also to forge a kind of academic engagement by viewing the *Theyyam* ritual in its entirety and situating it among a cluster of ritual practices of his caste group. Peruvannan, in his sketch, recounts his life journey from being born in a *Theyyam* performing family to becoming one of the renowned practitioners in the region. A good amount of the detailing is about his own experience of getting exposed to the world of *Theyyams*, the learning process involved, and the various *Theyyams* that he has performed. He also describes the process of learning the *Thottam* songs orally, while also making his own

observations about the musicality of the songs in terms of the elongation of line, the use of musical instruments, the proper pronunciation of words and so on. The work, in fact, elaborates not only about the ritual performance of the *Thottam* singing, but also about how practitioners learn, perceive, practice and perform the songs (see Peruvannan, 1997).

Even though the work of Kannan (2011) is not an autobiographical account, a key element of his writing is sociological in that it encapsulates an understanding of the *Theyyam* caste group to which he belongs, as well as analysing the historical and social significance of the ritual. He positions the *Theyyam* ritual among the many customs and rituals observed by the Vannan caste and explores their many continuities and contingencies. He approaches the *Thottam* songs recited by the Vannan caste practitioners as belonging to the varied repertoire of ritual songs that the caste group possesses. Kannan also attempts a comprehensive study of the *Thottam* songs by illustrating their intricate connection with the other ritual acts in the *Theyyam*, the musical capability of the Vannan caste, and so on. In fact, as part of his elucidation of the sociological and cultural significance of the Vannan caste, he goes on to describe how rituals are a crucial part of their existence - focusing here particularly on the *Theyyam* - and concludes by making some observation about the interaction of these rituals in the changing social context of our times (see Kannan, 2011).

Importantly, Vadakkiniyil (2014), who devotes a whole chapter to a critical analysis of the approach of various scholars to the *Theyyam* ritual, has some pertinent comments to offer on the foregoing works. He notes that Vishnu Namboodiri (1990) grants a superior position to the gods belonging to the Vedic tradition and limitedly perceives *Thottam* songs as fixed entities without being attentive towards its dynamic existence in different ritual contexts. Alongside this assessment, however, Vadakkiniyil considers Kannan's work as significant not only because of the comprehensive understanding of the ritual that the latter fosters, but also because of the fact that the work has been written by a *Theyyam* practitioner himself. Indeed, while commenting further the work of Kannan (2011), Vadakkiniyil makes an absorbing point:

> One of the important factors he [that is, Kannan] emphasizes here is that, in order to understand *Thottam* songs, it is not only necessary to understand the 'literature'

> in it, but should also pay attention to their rhythm, emotions, the way it is sung etc. This is a different step to understand the songs in ritual. When it is said that the meaning is not only embedded in the songs, but also in the way it is being manifested in the ritual, it indicates the entry of *Theyyam* in the field of ethnomusicology in anthropology. Definitely, this field demands more studies (Vadakkiniyil, 2014: 141).

In many ways, this comment by Vadakkiniyil is quite crucial as far as our current study is concerned. To place the matter on our terms, there is a need to understand *Thottam* songs through the multiple loci through which they are materialised.

Along these lines, there are also some works which have focused on a particular *Theyyam*. Lissy Mathew (2016), as mentioned, is one among them, which looks exclusively into the *Kathivanoor Veeran Theyyam*.[4] A large part of her work is dedicated to the narration of the legend through which she has attempted to weave a historical account of north Malabar, the region's various customs and practices and its relations with Kodagu. In fact, the study is based on the historical and cultural significance of the journey of Manthappan, with the author herself undertaking the same journey as that travelled by the hero. The work also elaborates on the various rituals observed as part of the enactment of the *Kathivanoor Veeran Theyyam*. As far as the *Thottam* dimension is concerned, she manages to describe its integration within the ritual through a sequential ordering of not only the songs, but also the ritual significance of each of the sections. All the same, what the study lacks is, taking the cue from the foregoing comment of Vadakkiniyil, an elaborate detailing of the specific ways in which the *Thottam* is unravelled in the ritual.

To be sure, some of this exposure to the existing local literature on the *Theyyam* ritual was important in formulating my research problem, although (it must be acknowledged) one of the preliminary troubles that I faced during the early stages of my work had to do with the problem of presenting the *Thottam* song as separate and 'detached' from the *Theyyam* ritual. In fact, that very word 'detachment' occasioned many questions, especially considering that *Thottam* songs are always seen as intertwined with the

[4] Of course, there are many local works which are particularly based on a single *Theyyam*. See, for instance Kannan (2013); Keezhoth (2018); and Vishnu Namboodiri (2018), among others.

Theyyam ritual. It was imperative that I develop a framework in the context of which one could be attentive to the *Thottam* song both within and outside the setting of the ritual. Some of the initial readings done as a part of my formal coursework were crucial in formulating such a framework. Thus, I was particularly alerted to the sharp emphasis given by the social anthropologist Stanley Tambiah, who had insisted that 'ritual' should be seen as an 'amalgam' (or totality) comprised of both words and deeds (see, broadly, Tambiah, 1985). The ritual totality, he had maintained, is a result of the combination of words and deeds that interlaced with the manipulation of objects and the use of different media of communication. In the same work, Tambiah also stressed on the need to be attentive towards the internal form and sequencing of the ritual words and deeds, while insisting that 'rituals' per se cannot be studied as an undifferentiated category. In fact, my own attempt to understand *Thottam* songs as an autonomous category has had to do with conceptualizing the *Theyyam* ritual as an 'assemblage' formed through the interaction between different constituent parts. When the ritual is perceived as an assemblage of different parts, it opens up the possibility of analysing these constituent parts in their own right (we will have more to say on this presently).

Even though the structure of this emphasis retraceable to Tambiah paved a base for my own study, the primary question of capturing the songs within and outside the realm of ritual still presented problems. I remember a conversation with my supervisor when we were discussing a piece by the drama theorist and cultural scholar Rustom Bharucha (1990). One of the key elements of that conversation revolved around the issue of what constitute the internal and external aspects of a cultural practice? In fact, what is 'internal' to a practice and 'external' to it are very difficult to determine. What someone may consider as 'external' to an art form will not be so for the practitioner or a person invested in that particular form. Besides, there is always a possibility of the internalisation of a deemed 'externality' as far as cultural practice is concerned. The significant take away from that protracted discussion was a creative push to perceive cultural practice reflexively, that is, practice as a way of thinking about practice itself. Such a reflexive order of thought demanded a shift in our ways of thinking about a cultural practice; that is to say, to consciously avoid the framework of its effects or 'impact' and attend to the 'process' that comes prior to and conditions the effect/impact.

Indeed, being attentive towards this mutual integration of the external and internal dimensions of a cultural practice and focusing on the processes which constitute these realms were pertinent to shaping the contours of our study.

Without doubt, engaging the materiality of the songs in a world given to itself and outside of the realm of ritual necessitated an inquiry into the internal features of the songs such as its organisation, language, form etc. The works of the anthropologist Rich Freeman (especially Freeman, 1998 and 2003a and 2003b) were crucial in exploring the historical significance of the songs in connection with the literary traditions as had prevailed in Kerala. Freeman, who has extensively worked on the *Theyyam* ritual as well as facets of the literary history of Kerala, pointed out the significant relationship between the literary and performative traditions of the region. He emphasized on how the lineaments of Hinduism in Kerala can be traced through a literary reworkings of the linguistic, poetical and semantic forms and their variable content (Freeman, 2003a). Even though this line of work certainly gave me an impetus to perceive *Thottam* songs as a literary tradition, I must also admit the fact that I have been unable to explore this dimension in detail, except making some possible historical connections (which are outlined in the latter part of Chapter 2).

Forwarding the Idea of 'Assemblage': An Initial Outline

Consistent with my overtures in the foregoing section, I prefer to open up to the idea of an 'assemblage' emerging out of the interaction between various component parts during every single manifestation of a cultural practice and/or ritual form of performance. Even more frontally, the ritual assemblage, so to say, can and must be approached as a continuously 'emerging' one – never something pre-existing or given - which each time unfolds its own significance and meanings in and through itself. Accordingly, rather than seeing the *Theyyam* and *Thottam* as an overarching, pre-established skeleton incorporating many components, the ritual event of which they are a part, as a whole, should be seen as an assemblage, emerging out of the dynamic interaction between different, yet mutually conversing, components during every single enactment. These components include the various ritual acts performed and observed within the ritual space, the material objects employed and the system of belief and worship associated

with the ritual context – in short, all the material and non-material aspects that grants the words and deeds of a ritual its coherence and completeness. These differently positioned elements and their potencies get manifested in their own ways to make the ritual take place. The elements are not just scattered in the ritual space, but they have a peculiar spatial and temporal significance, even as they also negotiate with each other. Therefore, a constant interaction between the various elements is a necessary condition for the ritual assemblage to emerge and fall in place in the course of each enactment. Needless to say, in order to understand the nature of the assemblage, it becomes significant to grasp how the peculiar components are arranged in the context of the ritual.

Having posited that a cultural form of practice, as indeed its ritual enactment, must be approached as an assemblage – the word 'ensemble' could also serve the purpose – we must sharpen the structure of our questions: how do we understand 'ritual' as an assemblage/ensemble? What are the features of a ritual ensemble? How does the assemblage emerge at all? In order to answer these questions, we need to address anew the ritual as a cultural practice and its internal dynamics. What this means is that I am more concerned here about the 'interiority' of the ritual practice (it's internal organisation, as it were) and, as such, will look at how the practice reflects backs on itself. Clearly, the idea of 'assemblage' that I propose here looks towards the internal world of the practice. This is certainly not to eliminate the significance of the socio-political and historical dimensions of the ritual; rather, to look at it through the world of practice. The anthropologist Don Handelman elaborates on this aspect:

> In general terms, I suggest thinking about ritual in its own right through two steps. The first is to separate (to an extent, arbitrarily) the phenomenon from its sociocultural surround, from its 'environment', in order to analyse it in and of itself. This analysis is not an end in itself, but is intended to be taken heuristically as far as one can. The second step is to reinsert the ritual into its surround, with the added knowledge of what has been learned about the ritual, taken in and of itself (Handelman, 2005: 3-4).

Thus, approaching a ritual in terms of its own right pays closer attention to the internal dynamics of the ritual and its self-organisation. Such an approach, before bringing in the larger socio-cultural context, concentrates on the ritual itself in order to understand how it is constituted. The ritual, in and of itself, has an autonomous existence detached from

the larger context in which it is performed. This is not to exclude the larger social matrix associated with the ritual, but rather to explore the ritual primarily and predominantly in its own right before immediately placing it in the larger context. Here, clearly, thinking *with* the ritual is more significant than thinking *beyond* the ritual.

Without doubt, the ritual assemblage is not a static entity, but is always in the process of emergence. There is a constant and dynamic movement of constituent parts within the assemblage through which the ritual as a social phenomenon moves both towards itself and outside. Of course, we are here talking about the various material and non-material elements whose interaction with each other makes the constant emergence of the ritual assemblage always possible. In the context of the *Theyyam*, as we shall detail in the chapters that follow, starting from the shrine where the ritual practice is performed to the turmeric powder which is given as an offering, including the songs that are sung to invoke the gods, even the human practitioners who sing and dance, the ritual assemblage emerges through intricate patterns of relationships actualised by these constituent elements. What inevitably makes the assemblage possible is the internal ritual dynamics at play, which involve the human and non-human participants. The anthropologist Bruce Kapferer projects, in this context, the idea of 'ritual dynamics' which goes beyond the symbolic and the representational:

> Much of the dynamics of rite, and I am concentrating here on those that are internal to it, is a property of its performance structure. This relates to the particular integral dynamics of specific events within the rite (their aesthetic properties, the orientation of participants and the dynamics of their interrelation, the form and content of acts) and to the dynamics of their relation to each other (Kapferer, 2005: 41).

Even though Kapferer is not explicitly talking about the involvement of 'non-human' beings in the ritual dynamics, he is also intending towards the multiple interrelationships that takes place within the ritual. He is more focused on how human practitioners within the realm of practice bring about different realities, and as such seeks to address the virtuality of the ritual dynamics (what he calls 'ritual space as phantasmagoric'):

> I stress the virtuality of the rite as a kind of phantasmagoric space, a dynamic that allows for all kinds of potentialities of human experience to take shape and form. It is in effect, a self-contained imaginal space - at once a construction but a construction that enables participants to break free from the constrains or

> determinations of everyday life and even from the determinations of the constructed ritual virtual space. In this sense the virtual of ritual may be described as a determinant form that is paradoxically anti-determinant, able to realise human constructive agency. The phantasmagoric space of ritual virtuality may be conceived not only as a space whose dynamic interrupts prior determining processes but also as a space in which participants can reimagine into the everyday circumstances of life (ibid.: 47).

All the same, the constituent elements which actualise the event is not restricted to human beings and the interactions they engage in and through the ritual practice. The assemblage, as it were, emerges neither through the actions of human practitioners nor by their 'timely' use of objects alone, but through the ways in which both these categories - human beings and objects - enact their agency or capacity to act by entering into a web of relations. Here I place both the human beings and the 'objects' on the same plane - they act as well as act upon each other - as autonomous agents who exercise their capacities under given conditions through a network of relationships producing their own realities. My aim, however, is not to elaborate how each constituent part engages in the dynamics of the practice; rather, to describe on the capacities in general that they possess and to comprehend the *Theyyam* / *Thottam* assemblage in its own ways of being and becoming within the world of practice (a fuller determination, along this axis, must await our Chapters 3 and 4 in course).

A Statement on the Methodology and Fieldwork

Since the research work involved detailed analysis of the songs both in their ritual context and outside of it as a kind of textualized form, the study entailed two distinct methods, namely, ethnographic fieldwork involving the active observation of the ritual activity of singing and formal interviews with practitioners (which, however, had to be truncated owing to the Covid-19 pandemic) as well as the analysis of the documented versions of the *Thottam* songs. These procedures may be more fully accounted for as follows.

A note on the fieldwork

As already implied, the fieldwork involved a pronounced ethnographic component involving the observation of the actual *Thottam* singing performance during the *Theyyam* ritual, as well as formal interactions with the *Thottam* practitioners. The fieldwork was

completed in two phases. A preliminary field exploration was carried out in the month of December 2019, so as to get a sense of the geographical distribution of the songs across the region. During this initial phase, I also met with some *Thottam* practitioners whom I was already familiar with, and the conversations with them was really helpful in getting a sense of the distribution of *Thottam* songs across the region, their importance in the ritual, as well as getting the contacts of more practitioners who are known for their singing performances.

The main fieldwork for the study was conducted in the months of February-March in 2020, across Kannur and Kasargod districts of Kerala. This included attending to the *Thottam* singing in live performance, especially of the two songs that the study is based on. Even though the fieldwork was initially planned to be carried out for two-three months by attending to more *Theyyam* performances, the unexpected lockdown due to the pandemic had put a hold on all public events. Thus, the meeting with the practitioners and attending to the actual *Theyyam* ritual performances had to be concluded in the span of a little over one month. Thus, the data gathered from the ethnography itself, as it were, is somewhat limited, although I have tried to embellish the detailing with both the secondary literature and my own personal recollections of the field.

All the same, as a part of the main fieldwork, I attended the *Theyyam* performances of both *Maakkam* and *Kathivanoor Veeran*, and some other minor *Theyyams* that were happening around. The fieldwork included the recording of the songs as well as the observation of the singing activity. The *Maakkam Theyyam* that I attended was at Chaala and the *Kathivanoor Veeran* one was at Payyan Valappu, both in Kannur district. With the help of some of my friends I got to know about the date and time of these *Theyyam* performances, and therefore I could be present at the place even before the beginning of the ritual. Since my intention was to understand the significance of the songs in the ritual, I had to attend the whole ritual performances and not the singing activity alone. Both these performances began in the evening and lasted till the next day morning (in the case of *Kathivanoor Veeran* it went on till the next day evening) and I had to stay put overnight on both the occasions.

Since the number of places where the *Maakkam Theyyam* is performed are very less, there was a huge crowd at Chaala. Before the beginning of the ritual, I could occupy a place closer to the space of the *Thottam* singing so as to observe the performance more closely. Even though the place was crowded, the use of a microphone made it easier to grasp the lyrics of the song. However, writing down my immediate observations of the ritual was not very easy, since the setting was very crowded and the singing lasted through the night; moreover, occupying a place next to the singers demanded that I stood there all through the singing performance. Of course, attending the *Kathivanoor Veeran Theyyam* was a different experience altogether, as it took place at a home in Payyan Valappu, Kannur. Since there are so many places where *Kathivanoor Veeran* is performed, and the specific location that I went to is not categorised under the 'renowned' shrines, the place was not very crowded. Perhaps the concerned family was looking out for familiar faces at the event, but I was pleasantly surprised when one of the family members approached me directly. Upon learning about the purpose of my visit, the person was most pleased to take me to Vannan Krishnan who was going to recite the *Thottam* song that day. He in fact introduced me to the latter declaring '*He is the all-in-all of Kathivanoor Veeran Thottam, and he will be of great help*'. I was also given a place next to where the singing was going to happen. After an hour or so, another kindly person got me a chair saying that the *Thottam* would last till late night and that taking notes while standing is difficult.

While observing the ritual performances, I tried to pay attention not only to the singing activity, but also to the activities and preparations done before the beginning of the singing. In fact, these initial preparations - observations of preliminary rites and making a suitable setting for the performance - were instrumental in understanding how the *Thottam* songs exist in conjunction with the other components of the ritual. While observing the singing activity, I tried to focus on the lyrics of the songs, the way in which the singers exchanged the lines, the alterations, shifting tonalities and changes in the singing activity etc. I noted down the verses during the singing, while attentive to the changes of tune and the ways in which the exchange of lines took place between the singers. Along with this, I also had to be observant towards how the larger ritual space interacted with the singing. Obviously, as it was impossible to 'go back' or 'reobserve'

the ritual, I had to be very attentive towards the ritual performance, taking down notes of even the minutest things that I observed.

Since my focus was majorly on the two songs, I wanted to draft that chapter (Chapter 4 herein) with vivid descriptions and elaborations. In fact, I have noticed that, whenever we try to describe the *Thottam* songs and the singing activity to others, one is often at a loss of words to communicate the visual dimensions of the singing. Consequently, when I was envisaging my fieldwork chapters - especially Chapter 4, but Chapter 3 as well - one of my primary concerns was to give a detailed account of the singing performance, one subsuming the human voice, the songs themselves and the network of tangled relationships that is entailed by the singing. Undeniably, in the course of this writing, it was these fieldwork chapters that 'troubled' me a lot, and one took a lot of time to order and sequence the narration (especially the interface of the singing with the ritual enactment or unfolding). Of course, I chose to meet the *Thottam* practitioners after attending the performances. This was especially true of the ones who sang the two *Thottam* songs that I was analysing, constantly striving through this interaction to gain more clarity on the notes that I had taken down during the singing. There were many instances during the ritual performance where I could not actually understand what a pause meant, why there is a tune change or why a particular rite is observed while the singing was taking place, and so on. Meeting with the practitioners after the performance was thus helpful in perceiving those observations with more precision.

During these conversations, instead of merely answering to my queries, they sang necessary portions of the songs to make me understand how they are manifested in the singing. Actually, some of my fieldwork notes were 'incomplete' as I could not write down the full lines of the songs, especially the points at which there were some alterations or pauses. Invariably, in such cases, I could only note down the initial words of those particular lines. However, when I went to meet the practitioners with those fragmented observations, they contributed significantly in making them more coherent and fuller. In fact, apart from conversing with the practitioners who sang these particular songs, I met twelve other *Thottam* practitioners from Kannur district. The formal interviews with them were primarily meant to gather information about the songs and the singing, as well

as to get a sense of their lives as practitioners, the learning process and the singing experience etc. I also queried them about the use of language and the 'musicality' of the songs, all of which were helping while analysing the documented form of the songs. Even though I had prepared some questions to be asked, most of the time the interviews were open-ended as one set of questions led to another.

Analysis and translation of the songs

The ethnographic basis of my work has been supplemented by an analysis of the documented version of the songs. The *Thottam* verses that I mention in my third chapter are taken from various sources, given that it deals with the general patterns and features of the *Thottam* songs as a whole. In my fourth chapter, which offers a detailed analysis of the *Maakkam Thottam*, the documented version of the same was taken from the second volume of *Kerala Bhasha Ganangal* (a compilation of various folksongs in Kerala, put together by Balakrishnan Nair [1979]). As indicated, the work of Lissy Mathew (2016) was referred for the *Thottam* of *Kathivanoor Veeran*. A kind of content analysis of the documented version of the songs is primarily done through repeated readings of the text, paying heed to the way the language is used and the narrative techniques are employed, while also being attentive to the structure of the songs. Considering that the *Thottam* songs are perceived as the reporting of events that had happened in the past, the employment of 'reported speech' in the song is explored in some detail. In the course of the analysis of the documented versions of the songs', I have also relied upon the fieldnotes on the ritual performance, in order to see how elements of the enactment and the 'text' (so to say) interact with each other.

My own expertise of having 'once' been a formal student of Malayalam and English literature significantly helped me to be attentive towards the linguistic properties of the songs, while also seeking out friends who are pursuing higher studies in Malayalam literature to refurbish my knowledge of phonetics and linguistics. I had to revisit my undergraduate courses on narratology and linguistics to get a basic understanding regarding the layers of the narrative, about how the narrative is organised within the framework of the songs and to grasp the nuances of the relationship between the narrator and speaker. Needless to say, this whole process of engaging with the documented

version of the songs was intriguing, in that I could revisit some of my older preoccupations such as narratology and bring them into the framework of my present research.

In this context, it is also important to mention about the process of translation of the songs from Malayalam into English. Undeniably, 'translation' is a tedious form of creative activity, and it becomes all the more challenging and difficult while encountering songs which are transmitted orally and are meant to be performed in a given milieu. Each time I read the song for the purpose of translation, I was attempting to be truthful both toward the text that I had in front of me and to the nuances of the singing performance that I had been witness. Obviously, since our study is about the *Thottam* songs, the primary material to analyse it is the song itself - the verses, their content as well as their syntactic arrangement. The study demanded to be very careful with the translation of each line, not only with their meaning but also in terms of the way the words are arranged in each line (especially since some of the observations made in the course of the work is rooted in the syntactical arrangement of the lines). Translation, I strongly believe, is an artistic activity, and the responsibility of the translator is not to give a word-by-word translation from the source language to the target language. I have always felt that the translation of poems or songs is more challenging, as it poses difficulties at the linguistic, semantic and aesthetic levels. While translating the *Thottam* songs, especially when they have an active and lively existence in the performative context, I was careful of the elements of the songs which could be 'lost in translation'. The lines of the songs clearly reflected the oral tradition that undergirded them, even as they contained many words that have peculiar regional resonances (while also some are no longer in use). In such cases, I have retained those original words in the source language and have extensively relied upon footnotes to make the translated version more comprehensible. My own experiences of translating literary pieces and the course on translation that I had attended during my post-graduate studies also made the whole process less tiresome.

An Outline of the Chapters

Having outlined the contours of our study and the shaping of the research problem underscoring it in the course of this present chapter, we move on in Ch. 2 to a historical

order of delineation subsuming both the *Theyyam* ritual and the *Thottam*. We explore broadly the history of the *Theyyam* ritual, as well as probing the ways in which the ritual has been engaging with the different social scenarios. To be sure, the evolving trajectories of the *Theyyam* need to be grasped from within the peculiar historical context of north Malabar. The geographical positioning of the region and the social dynamics between different caste groups in the pre-colonial Malabar context has contributed significantly to the popularity of this particular form of worship. Indeed, as we enunciate in the course of Ch.2, from a ritual form of worship confined into certain spaces, the *Theyyam* has over time come to constitute multiple experiences and resonate various meanings - as an art form, a cultural form of resistance and so on. I also make an effort to place the ritual within the larger context of south India, so as to place in perspective some shared lineages between the Dravidian form of worship and the *Theyyam* ritual. The nature and nuances of hero worship, both in the south Indian context and in the Kerala region, is also indicated, while mandating the same as a prerequisite for any systematic analysis of the *Thottam* songs in particular. This order of determination is further extended to the literary-cultural space, where I further strive to locate in the context of the two major literary traditions of Kerala, namely, *Manipravalam* and *Paattu*, the relationship that the *Thottam paattu* could be having with the latter *Paattu* tradition.

We move on in the course of Ch. 3 to a more detailed exploration of the world of *Thottam* songs in general, placing them both within the ritual context of the *Theyyam* and outside of it as well. The notion of the 'assemblage' as constituted of various parts is here more fully operationalised for laying bare the *Theyyam* and *Thottam* dynamics in general. In fact, for the purposes of our elucidation, the 'assemblage' idea further consolidates our framework of approaching the world of the *Thottam* songs as a reality in its own right. In thematizing the life of the *Thottam* outside of the ritual, we look at how the features of the narrative world are embedded in the song, the precise ways in which the legend is organised in the song through various sections or segments, how these different parts of the song are connected and so on. This analysis of the 'structure' of the songs further exemplifies the fact that, while there is a broad narrative connection between the segments of the song, each of them can be seen as individual components having definite endings and beginnings. Importantly, however, when the *Thottam* is actually rendered

in the ritual context, these individual components interact with each other bringing forth meanings particular to the context of enactment. In fact, a key section of the chapter elaborates on the ritual significance of the *Thottam* songs as a whole, while fostering attention on the very activity of singing, the acquisition and use of singing skills by the practitioners, as well as on how the singing activity brings about multiple social relationships within the ritual context. As we point out, when the songs are sung in a ritual context, the singing imparts meaning not only through the unravelling of the narrative world, but also through building networks with other components of the ritual.

Based on the general patterns and features of the *Thottam* as outlined in the third chapter, the next chapter (namely, Ch. 4) is given over to an analysis of the two *Thottam* songs of *Maakkam* and *Kathivanoor Veeran*. A substantial part of the chapter is a detailed study of the *Maakkam Thottam*, both in its ritual context and its textualized version. The treatment of *Kathivanoor Veeran* further augments this understanding, while also placing in perspective the specificity of how each *Thottam* song has its own ways of organising itself and getting enacted in the ritual context. All through this largely ethnographic rendering – obviously more fully documented for the song of *Maakkam* – the focus is on the different relationships that emerge between the singers and the larger ritual space during the singing activity (while also lacing together some remarks on the social position of the singers as well as the content that they are singing). We also offer a detailed analysis of the documented version of the songs, noting in particular how a large part of the *Thottam* of *Maakkam* is based on the use of 'reported speech' as part of its structuring and is premised on a clear distinction between the narrator and the speaker in the song. We note, both in the context of *Maakkam* and *Kathivanoor Veeran*, the play of voices inherent to their documented versions, which often is not quite discernible in the context of their actual enactment in the *Theyyam* ritual. The songs, as such, are not only performative in the context of enactment; they are, in themselves, performative. Ch.4, accordingly, concludes by fostering some critical considerations on how 'text, context and textualization' imparts layers of meaning to the universe of *Thottam* songs, which are further connected to the notion of 'assemblage' as outlined in our introductory chapter and operationalised in the course of Ch. 3.

Hopefully, then, the permeating presence and character of the *Thottam* in all its narrative flow and contexts of enactment clearly demonstrates the potential of the song to be a part of different modalities of existence, each exhibiting its own capacities. Our concluding chapter (Ch 5) attempts to consolidate this understanding, while also striving to articulate the dimensions of future work in this domain which I hope to put together in the near future. Particularly, the chapter lays out the dimensions of new media and technology interventions that have come to mediate the domains of the *Thottam* and the *Theyyam*, thereby adding another element into our exploration of the 'many lives' of these cultural forms of practice.

Chapter 2

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Situating *Theyyam* and *Thottam*: Historical Lineages and Sociological Postulations

The attempt in this chapter is to engage with some of the historical lineages attaching to both the *Theyyam* ritual in north Malabar and the *Thottam* songs which are a constitutive part of the same context. The effort here is to contextualize the significance of this form of worship – indeed the 'assemblage' that it represents – while also commenting on the ways in which the ritual as a whole has been interacting with varying historical and sociological circumstances. While I do not dwell on the history of north Malabar as such, I do make an effort to ground this ritual form of worship within the peculiar history of the region. Of course, the attempt is neither to trace the 'origin' of the cultural forms in question nor to explicate on the various historical contingencies that bear on north Malabar. Rather, the intention is to demonstrate how this particular form of worship (and the associated world of *Thottam*) is historically embedded within the sociocultural schemas of the region, and along this course provide a glimpse of the ways in which they have 'evolved' and 'sustained' over the period of time.

Theyyams: Categorisation and Historicization

Being one of the most popular and significant forms of ritual worship in north Malabar, the *Theyyam* has occupied an unparalleled position in the history of the region. Before attempting a mode of historicization, I will try and briefly give an outline of the distribution of *Theyyams* across the region. The word '*Theyyam*' is often seen as a synonym for '*daivam*' which means God. The 'gods' worshipped in this ritual, as indeed the organisation of worship, are often seen as significantly different from that of high Hinduism. The number of *Theyyams* worshipped in the region is above 400 according to Karippath (2019), most of which have different origin myths, associated with different caste groups and embodying various cosmic worlds of being and becoming. Our attempt

here is to quickly address this diverse world in terms of how they are being categorised and worshipped. Following this, we will move into a mode of historicization.

As already indicated in our introductory chapter, the *Theyyam* ritual is performed by different caste groups. Indeed, the right to perform the *theyyam* is given to them based on the local customs and culture. Apart from a categorisation along the lines of the various performing castes, the pantheon of *Theyyams* is also distributed along the lines of the tutelary deities of particular caste groups. For example, the *Theyyam* of *Muchilottu Bhagavathy*, as performed by the Vannan, is the tutelary deity of the Vaniya caste. Likewise, the *Theyyams* are also classified on the basis of the nature of the deity who is worshipped. In fact, Karippath (2019) has classified the *Theyyams* on the basis of their nature and intention. As he observes:

> In north Malabar, there are about four hundred *Theyyams*. From Kozhikode to Kumbala (Kasargod), we could see lots of shrines where these gods are worshipped by different communities. In it a lion share belongs to the mother goddess. According to their legends, they can be divided as heroines, village ruling goddesses, goddesses of grain fields, enemy destroying goddesses, goddess for disease etc. The other part of *Theyyam* can be classified as heroes, forefathers, animal-shaped gods, battle gods, *Manthramoorthi*[1] and gods in favour of hunting (Karippath, 2019: 82).

On the other hand, the historian Dilip Menon (1993) classifies the *Theyyams* into four types, forwarding them as follows:

> Within the constellation of gods worshipped in *Theyyattam*, we can broadly distinguish between four types. There are the aspects of *shakti - Bhagavathi, Chamundi and Kurathi* - who form the majority of the 350 or so deities worshipped. The second category includes the variation of *Siva-Pottan, Gulikan, Bhairavan* etc. Here too a considerable degree of mixture is evident, with ghosts, spirits and local heroes being performed as manifestations of Siva. The Vaishnava *theyyams* are not as important as the first two, though the Vishnumurti or Vishnu in his avatar as Narasimha has come to acquire general acceptance as *gramadevata*. The fourth category of heroes and heroines are always performed as aspects of one of the earlier divisions. Snake worship, warrior worship, dating from the centuries before Christian era, continued to form an integral part of the *theyyattam* pantheon (Menon, 1993: 198).

[1] '*Manthramoorthi*' is a category of *Theyyam* which supposedly appears before the devotees following the continuous recitation of mantras or chants (see Karippath, 2019: 85).

Thus, on the basis of the performing communities as well as the nature of the legend behind each *Theyyam*, the latter can be put into different categories. This multiplicity is also evident in the ritual acts associated with each *Theyyam*. Indeed, the spaces in which *theyyams* are being traditionally performed require some comment here. It needs to be noted that the places in which the *Theyyam* is being performed have different names associated with them, even though the appellation '*Kavu*' is generally used to refer to the actual sites in which *Theyyams* are conducted. All the same, terms such as *Palliyara, Kazhakam, Idam, Kottam, Kalari* etc. are also used to designate the specific places in which the ritual takes place. In this connection, it has been explicitly stated that:

> All *tharavadu* (group of families) worship one, or, more *Teyyam* as their family god, and perform *teyyam* in natural settings, either in specially designed sacred centres or in houses. There is community, as well as village sacred centres. Some are similar in appearance, and some others vary in size, shape and structure. *Ara, palliyara, maadam, kalari, kazhakam, kavu, kottil, tara* etc., are some examples for sacred centres. In these centres, stones or weapons are supposed to be representing the presence of deities, which is placed in such a manner under certain trees, elevated platforms or *peedams*. A sacred centre may have either one sacred spot or more than one, in which case the main-deity would be found at one spot, and the subordinate deities at other spots. Likewise, each sacred centre may have either a single deity or a group of deities with the chief-deity. A subordinate deity of a sacred centre may be the chief-deity of another centre (Damodaran, 2008: 283).

This diversity in the *Theyyams* is also manifested in the ritual enactment of them. Thus, it can be seen that on the basis of the performing groups, the ways in which it is worshipped as well as the peculiarity of the spaces of worship, this particular form of ritual worship comes across as quite distinctive. According to the nature of the deity, the performing caste and the location in which it is conducted, these *Theyyams* differ from each other to a large extent.

Elements of a historicization

As already mentioned, my effort here is not to trace a historical chronology of the *Theyyam* ritual through different periods of time, but rather to understand how this form of worship has been a significant element of the sociocultural history of the region. Any historicization of the *Theyyam* ritual needs to be placed within the socio-cultural matrix of northern Kerala, the larger framework of Dravidian culture and the social context of

the possession cults in South India. North Malabar's peculiar organisation, the geographical location and the cultural configuration should also be taken simultaneously. The social background of the *Theyyam* as well as its ritual organisation are intricately linked to each other, and are inseparable from the conceptual and historical understanding of the region. Indeed, in the *Theyyam* ritual, the cultural ideas and categories of the region are manifested through the embodiment of ritual practice, the *Thottam* songs as a whole and the overarching structuring of the ritual itself. The elements of our historicization here will involve two important strands, namely, one concerning specifically north Malabar and, two, the social organisation of worship in south India as a whole.

Obviously, the history of the *Theyyam* ritual can be traced back to the medieval times, even before the colonial encounter, so to say. The anthropologist Rich Freeman (1991) specifically understands the absence of references of colonial institutions and power structures in the *Thottam* songs as a means to trace the history of the *Theyyam* even before the colonial times. He explicitly recounts:

> The political powers which *Teyyam* worship itself describes and recognises as having indeed ideological significance are located not in the colonial or modern periods, but in that of the traditional kingdoms of medieval Malabar. These kingdoms were largely dismantled by the close of the 18th century, so it seems reasonable to conclude that *Teyyattam* was developed in its current form and flourished at some period prior to this dismantling (Freeman, 1991: 38-39).

Evidently, the presence of 'little kingdoms' and the unique socio-political environment revolving around this was a main feature of the north Malabar region. The region came under the kingdom of *Kolathunad*, which was one of the prominent kingdoms in pre-colonial Kerala.[2] As compared to the southern parts of Kerala, the region maintained its distinctive political and cultural identity. The peculiar geographical distribution of the region - the presence of hilly areas, mountains and rivers separating different places - gave rise to a decentralised political system where the 'kingdom' was fragmented into small chiefdoms. Moreover, as compared to other places, *Kolathunaadu* had a loosely knit political structure, which retained a prominent ritual facade. Religion was thus not

[2] Traditionally, *Kolathunaadu* is described as the land lying between the rivers Perumba and Valapattanam, roughly comprising the present Kannur and Kasargod districts of Kerala.

centred on a priestly class, but gave prominence to the ritual functions of kings and chiefs on the one hand and to the relatively lower status spirit possessed oracles and mediums on the other (see Freeman, 2003a: 161). In fact, while commenting on the presence of Brahmin settlements in north Malabar, the historian Mailaparambil has sharply observed:

> However, the concentration of the Nambutiri Brahmin villages in North Malabar happened to be very thin in comparison with their counterparts in South Malabar and the central Kerala. According to the tradition, the Lord Parasurama established sixty-four Brahmin settlements in *Bhargavakshetram*. Among them, thirty-two were located in modern Kerala state. Among these thirty-two original *gramams*, only two appear in North Malabar, namely Payyannur and Chellur or Perinchellur (Taliparamba). It is conspicuous that the locations of these Brahmin *gramams* were predominantly in and around the paddy-cultivable wet-lands in Kerala. Actually, this also explains their lack of numbers in North Malabar as the geographical circumstances there limited the scope of wet-land paddy cultivation. Taking this factor into account, the social and, to an extent, the ideological influences of these two *gramams* over the entire Kolathunadu realm was rather limited. Besides the Nambutiri Brahmins, Tamil Brahmins, known as Pattar Brahmins and Canara Brahmins also settled in some parts of Kerala. However, neither of these groups seems to have constituted influential sections in medieval Kolathunadu society (Mailaparambil, 2012: 18).

Clearly, the religious worship system of north Malabar had its own features which was not particularly concentrated on the Brahmins and the cosmic world of their gods.

As noted above, there were only two Brahmin villages in north Malabar, namely, Taliparamba and Payyannur, both of which belong to Kannur district. Besides, as noted, the absence of large-scale Brahmin settlements was mainly due to the geographical features which restricted the possibility of large-scale paddy fields (given that most Brahmin settlements were associated with paddy cultivation) [see also Varier and Gurukkal, 1999: 113]. Therefore, the village structure of the region was more decentralised and self-subsistent. Importantly, this peculiar feature of the villages in north Malabar region accounts for the interdependence that existed between the caste groups, even while strictly following the purity-pollution dichotomy. In fact, as has been stressed by many, the caste system of Malabar as a whole was a system of mutually interdependent relations between relatively stable groups, these being arranged in an accepted order of ranking that governed and was expressed by almost all their interaction (see Miller, 1954: 413). This configuration got reflected in all the other manifestations

of the region's socio-cultural setting, the social organisation of religious worship being the main. William Logan in the first volume of the *Malabar Manual* ([1887] 1989) observes the presence of different belief systems in the region, such as black magic, sorcery etc., which co-existed with the ritual practices of high Hinduism. This peculiar social organisation of worship as prevalent in north Malabar was closely connected to the ways in which different caste groups in this region negotiated with each other in terms of their belief systems, religious practices and so on.

All the same, the relationships shared between the various communities of the region was highly ambivalent; the ritual and religious world embedded in the region was constantly in flux with the system of caste giving rise to a unique, seasonal space of negotiation between the different groups. As compared to the other parts of Kerala, the Nair (or Nayar) community had more prominence in the north Malabar region. Ritually ranked below the Brahmins, the Nairs enjoyed significant amount of superiority. The unit of Nair settlement is known as the *Tharavadu*, which controlled most of the land and forest area. In a society which was stratified on the basis of caste, the Nairs inevitably exerted their dominance over the lower castes. As prominent social scientists have pointed out, the *tharavadus* enjoyed almost unchecked power over the castes' dependent on them; there was no external authority, so to say, which regulated relations with 'inferiors' (see Mencher, 1966: 143). Much of the folk literature, primarily the *Thottam* songs from our point of view, carry multiple references to the caste hierarchy and brutal killings of the lower caste people by the upper castes. The *Theyyam* and the mythical narrative associated with it often mentions in detail about the matrilineal kinship system and the superiority of the *Tharavadu* as a determining factor in the social system that obtained. Undoubtedly, the upper caste people worshipped the *Theyyam* expressing their fear and devotion towards the god.

Invariably, the *Tharavadus* became the space where the *Theyyams* used to be conducted. In a caste society, obviously, the *Theyyam* was creating and reinforcing a highly fluctuating space, both materially and conceptually, oscillating between the caste divisions and the ritual context of enactment. Significantly, Miller (1952), while alluding to the village structure in north Kerala, points out that the main structural cleavages were

between territorial units, villages, chiefdoms, kingdoms and not between castes. He even goes on to opine that:

> Any sense of injustice, however, was felt only towards the individual who had exceeded his rights and was not extended to a cleavage between castes or between ruler and subject. As in all hierarchical systems of this kind, what was suffered from a superior could be inflicted on an inferior. An oppressor also had supernatural retribution to fear (Miller, 1952: 160).

Indeed, this fear on the part of the oppressor is very explicitly embedded in the myth of many *Theyyams*, especially of the local heroes. The imagery of the hero who is being killed appears in the dream of the oppressor, demanding him to deify the dead in order to quench the former's wrath, is a common part of the *Thottam* songs eulogising local heroes. Inevitably, fearing the retribution of these lower caste people, the landlords were often predisposed to worshipping them. Quite prominently, in the context of slavery in the Travancore region, the engaging historian Sanal Mohan has observed that the "practice of worshipping the murdered slave to appease his wandering soul - which would have otherwise sought revenge upon the landlord and his family - was part of the popular belief and ritual systems in most wetland regions of Travancore" (Sanal Mohan, 2015: 67).

Doubtless, this 'interdependence' of different caste groups in the north Malabar region is indicative of a certain level of co-existence among different religious beliefs and practices in the region. Additionally, the recurring natural calamities, the consequent loss of agricultural produce, the presence of contagious diseases etc. also created anxiety among the people and pushed them to resort to various forms of worship and propitiation of gods. The *Theyyam* ritual, in fact, is thus also closely associated with the fertility rites of a people, the curbing of natural hazards and the well-being of a populace. In this context, it has been pointedly noted:

> Thus, death, famine, poverty as well as the productivity of the soil were seen as part of a cosmic order which could be controlled or appeased because of the closeness of humans and nature. This closeness had two aspects. For the lower castes it offered a measure of certainty about the world, but for the upper castes this meant that Malayans and Vannans were inclined to be close to evil spirits who too were part of nature. Thus, they were to be feared at the same time as regarded as those capable of exerting a benign influence (Menon, 1993: 194).

To be sure, then, the upper caste people also attended the *Theyyam* ritual and sought blessings from the deity. This indicates the kind of social acceptance that such a form of worship received in the north Malabar context. Moreover, the statistics also shows that as compared to the south, the north Malabar region had more shrines or *kavus*, which were the places where the *Theyyams* would be performed.[3] Explaining the presence of these shrines and their use, Menon has further noted:

> Performances of the *teyyattam* were held at shrines managed by Nayars, Tiyyas or castes lower to them. The incorporation of local heroes, the ancestors of the Nayar families and the *bhagavathi*, in the sphere of worship defined a cosmology particular to every tharavadu-shrine complex. The distinctive form of worship at these shrines also emphasised the conviviality of the religious community (Menon, 1994: 54).

It cannot be denied that the social organisation at large, and the conduct of worship in particular, signal the asymmetry in the relations of power which was peculiar to the region of north Malabar. Therefore, instead of perceiving the *Theyyam* ritual as a mere reflection of the regional society, it would be appropriate to approach it (together with the sense of community produced as an offshoot of the ritual performance) as a constitutive element shaping the social relationships of the north Malabar region. The annual *Theyyam* ritual and the various social relationships that it sustained must be approached as one of the significant components in retaining the social order of the region. The *Theyyam*, quite certainly, is not just an alternative form of worship which got institutionalised gradually, but obtains as one of the integral cultural and social phenomena, which through its own categories and cosmologies incorporates a region and its socio historical contingencies.

The emergence and sustenance of the *Theyyam* ritual thus needs to be placed within the peculiar geographical and cultural backdrop of the region. In fact, commenting further on the geographical features of north Malabar, Dilip Menon pertinently states:

> Historically, there had been a tendency towards political decentralisation in north Malabar, the independence of local chieftains being guaranteed by the hilly nature of the terrain. Settlements too were more scattered and isolated in comparison to

[3] As mentioned in passing, '*Kavu*' is the traditional name given to the sacred groves. It is a protected patch of forest and taken to be largely expressive of a religious ethos. They are also, increasingly, considered as community-based repositories of biological diversity.

> the thicker settlement pattern of the rice-growing areas of south Malabar. In the north, it is difficult to speak of villages in the traditional sense (Menon, 1993: 191).

Indeed, as we have been maintaining, this unique geographical and political positioning of the region has influenced its cultural matrix and the patterns of social stratification to a great extent. The anthropologist, Rich Freeman in his work even identifies the presence of three distinct value systems as having co-existed in the north Malabar region: first, there was the Brahminical world which is based on the dichotomy of purity and impurity; second, the political or royal strand which is premised on a martial status; and, third, a strand which drew its strength from the magical powers (see Freeman, 1991: 38-39). The amalgamation or confluence of these three strands go to constitute a peculiar regional cultural matrix for north Malabar.

The Theyyam in 'south India': extending the terms

Even though the *Theyyam* has an inseparable bond with the region of north Malabar, as a ritual form having a tradition of its own, it becomes equally important to situate it within a larger framework of ritual dynamics as prevalent in the south Indian region as a whole. Indeed, as framed for the presence of Dravidian culture (albeit geographically distributed mainly in the South and Southeast Asia) and characterized by various social specificities and tensions, the south Indian region has always possessed its own unique cultural and historical significance. The *Theyyam* ritual, therefore, should be attended as having a specific trajectory and position as far as the intricacies of the social organisation of worship in south India is concerned.

Of course, as Freeman has also reminded, the term 'Dravidian', while used as a 'linguistic-cum-ethnic label' for the people of south India, is also an accepted designation for the unique and distinctive language family represented by the four literary languages of south India, and a host of unwritten languages (see Freeman, 1991: 20). Historically, south India has been known for its elements of Dravidian culture and social organisation which (as is held) varied significantly from that of the 'Aryans'. I have no intentions of providing an essential understanding of the term 'Dravidian' though, preferring instead to use the word to capture the cultural continuities between different geographical regions

of south India, particularly the present Kerala and Tamil Nadu. In such a scenario, the word 'Dravidian' suggests an amalgam of internally connected regional cultures, which certainly had its own micro-variations and heterogenous features but still could be brought together under one label. The system of religious beliefs and ritual worship, as they obtained in north Malabar, should be approached therefore as a part of the cultural continuum that was pervasive throughout south India.

Ancient Kerala, being culturally and linguistically a part of the early Tamil landscape, shared a lot in common with the Dravidian modes of worship in south India, especially in terms of their organisation and structuring of ritual practices. The Dravidian modes of worship varied significantly from those that prevailed among the Brahmins. The presence of animal sacrifice, the offering of blood, nature worship and deification of local/regional heroes were some of the key features of the Dravidian modes of worship. Commenting specifically on the features of Dravidian worship, the missionary scholar Wilber T. Elmore has observed:

> The Dravidian gods, however, are usually local in their origin. Their history commonly begins on earth, often as the ghost of someone who has died. In the thought of the people also, the Dravidian gods are local. Each village has its own deity, a fact which has given rise to the common term of 'village deities' for these Dravidian gods. Even when one God is found in many places, the people never think of it as a general god with world relations, but only as their local deity (Elmore [1915] 1925: 10).

Clearly, the organic connection of the worship system with a particular locality or region was a typical feature of the Dravidian arrangement. The deities were a part of the living system, closely connected to the land and nature, and the people identified them as intertwined with their lives. This attribute, which made the god or the divine available to the devotees in their vicinity, was not quite a feature of the system of worship that existed among the Brahmins. Broadly, the ritual organisation of the T*heyyam* exemplifies the features of the social organisation of worship in the Dravidian culture and its engagement with the peculiar socio-political and geographical features of north Malabar.

The *Theyyam* (or the god-dance, in particular) is often identified as a possession ritual where the human performer becomes the god herself or himself during the course of the ritual performance. The common belief behind the ritual is that the humans are not dancing gods, but that it is the god in person who is dancing. In fact, making a distinction between the idea of shamanism and possession in the context of religious practices, the ethnomusicologist Gilbert Rouget pertinently reminds us that "in possession the communication between visible and invisible worlds operates in quite the opposite direction; it is no longer the man who visits the inhabitants of the invisible world, but, on the contrary the latter who visits him" (Rouget, 1985: 22). Accordingly, this idea of possession, as represented by Rouget, suggests that as far as religious practices are concerned, cultures reveal two major means for achieving the communication with the other (or invisible) world, namely, they either have to go to the spirits or the spirits have to come to them. The *Theyyam*, however, demonstrates a further nuance, in that the one possessed (or the performer) does not imitate the god that he embodies, rather, he *is* that very god. More specifically, he is not conversing or communicating with some entity in the other world; rather, the persona of the divinity is substituted for that of the performer and does not co-exist with it. In fact, the body of the performer is not a 'medium' which facilitates the divine to enter the earth, but instead the performer is the god (or deity), and thus the very idea of the body becoming a facilitating medium collapses in the case of the *Theyyam* ritual.

Now, as the scholarship has averred, this practice of possession worship was a common ritual practice in south India. The ancient Tamils supposedly worshipped apotheosised ancestors and fallen martial heroes whose spirits they had installed into stones (Freeman, 2003b: 308). In the *Theyyam* ritual too, the people who had embraced a heroic death fighting the social evils would be deified and periodically invoked by the performer belonging to certain caste groups as per the traditions and customs prevailing. The cult of possession, as prevalent in south India, was thus confined largely to lower castes of the region. In fact, Freeman highlights an interesting difference between the possession cult that existed in south India and north India: "There are often greater institutional investment, social organizational stability, and caste-based hereditary lines of possession-priesthoods across south India, whereas such cults tend to be more

idiosyncratically personalistic, popularly contingent, and institutionally marginal across much of north India" (ibid.: 309).

All the same, it cannot be said that the possession cults in south India was exclusively practiced by the lower castes. The *Sangam* literature as a whole provide sufficient evidence to suggest that the possession cults in ancient south India received royal patronage.[4] Even though it is true that the Brahmins had their own worship system that revolved around the temple, the other dominant castes often resorted to the possession worship system. As far as the case of *Theyyam* is concerned, we have already seen that the peculiar social organisation of the north Malabar region created an interdependency between different castes, which got reflected in various modes of the worship system that existed in each community. The *kuladevata* (or tutelary deity) system present in many parts of south India is an example of this.[5] It is documented that many dominant castes had their own caste or clan deity known as *kuladevata*. Thus, calling attention to the dimensions of ancestor worship in the Nair *tharavadu*, Menon has explicitly observed:

> In every Nayar tharavadu, some form of ancestor worship was practised, the most common being the setting apart of a room in the house as the abode of the ancestors. The symbol of the ancestor - a sword if the person had been of a martial temperament, and beads and slippers if they had been spiritually oriented - was worshipped in an outhouse and one of the male members of the family acted as a priest (Menon, 1994: 45).

Evidently, there are *Theyyams* which are known as the *kuladevatas* of the upper caste community, even as they are performed by the lower caste people. For example, *Muchilottu Bhagavathy*, one of the most prominent female *Theyyams*, is the tutelary deity of the Vaniya Nair community, one of the dominant castes in north Malabar. Muchilottu Bhagavathy was a Brahmin woman who had to face humiliation from her own community and in extreme pain and anger she decided to immolate herself.[6] A local Vaniyan assisted in her self-immolation by providing enough oil to light the fire. Later, she appeared in the dream of Muchilotan, a Vaniyan attached to the household, and urged

[4] As is well recognised, the *Sangam* corpus is the ancient Tamil literature and the earliest known literature of South India. The preserved part of the corpus consists largely of bardic poems and elements of Tamil grammar.

[5] The word '*Kula*' means clan and '*devata*' means deity. Invariably, '*devata*' refers to the female goddess/deity, which is suggestive of the prevalent practice of goddess worship in the Dravidian culture.

[6] A version of the story states that the human name of Muchilottu Bhagavathy was Devi.

him to deify and worship her. The Brahmins who had humiliated her succumbed to misfortune and disease, and the right to perform the *Muchilottu Bhagavathy Theyyam* was given to the Vannan community.[7]

The system of possession worship, therefore, was not exclusive to the lower castes in south India, having received royal patronage in the ancient times and continuing to be patronised by various castes in the recent times as well. The ritual of worshipping local heroes through possession rituals had clearly emerged as a culture of worship throughout south India. Even though a section of dominant castes embraced the temple culture and Sanskrit mode of worship, the village-based, land-owning dominant castes resorted more to the local ritual practices of ancestor worship, thereby popularising the shrine culture (basically '*kavus*') where the ritual possession often took place. The periodical festivals in these shrines marked the confluence of family gods and local *Theyyams*, thus establishing a flexible network between different communities based on the social organisation of ritual practice.

Now, it must be emphasized that the cultural tradition of worshipping 'heroes' through their spirits was extensively prevalent in the south Indian region. The possession, as a significant form of worship, was ritually formalised and exhibited its own internal structure and organisation. For instance, the *Bhuta* tradition of the south Canara region is another example of popular possession worship in south India.[8] Indeed, the very distribution and popularity of these rituals suggests that the activity of possession was fundamental to the social organisation of religious worship in these places. According to K. K. N. Kurup, the *Theyyam* originated from rituals like *Velan Veriyatal* and hero-worship (see Kurup, 1973). The *Velan Veriyatal* was a possession dance to propitiate Murugan, the god of the uplands, and performed mainly by the people who were hunters and gatherers in the ancient Tamil country. Making a comparison between the *Theyyam*

[7] This is one of the significant *Theyyam* performing communities, known for enacting the roles of deified heroes and heroines. Apart from this cultural function, they also represent the Washermen community.
[8] Broadly, south Canara under British rule consisted of the present southern part of Karnataka, namely, Mangalore, Udupi, Kasargod and the Aminidivi island (north of Lakshadweep). *Bhutharadhane*, as practiced in the region, includes various ritual practices, particularly the possession ritual though spirit propitiation.

and *Velan* cult, Kurup (1973) concludes that the former (*Theyyam*) in its rituals and performances is much indebted to the *Sangam* tradition, and as such many characteristics of the *Velan* cult, such as the recitation of songs, the usage of native instruments like drums, the act of possession etc. are also found in the *Theyyam*.[9]

At any rate, considering the socio-cultural context and the larger scenario of religious worship that existed throughout south India, the *Theyyam* as a part of institutionalised possession worship was always organically connected with the lives of the people of north Malabar region. Defined locally as existing in the god-human spectrum, the *Theyyam* discloses the flexible and fluid boundary between the divine and the human. The ritual, in fact, becomes the confluence of the living and the dead. The performers, using their immanent powers, become the centre of worship, at once accepted and acknowledged by the people at large, and accordingly proclaiming its social nature as a 'popular' worship system in the region. The configuration and constitution of the *Theyyam* performance thus should be captured as a ritual assemblage of practices – a point we had made in our introductory chapter, and will go on to detail in the next chapter - one consistently interacting with different social communities and settings, even as its dimensions and relations have shifted through time.

The Changing Contexts of Theyyam: Keying In

Principally, from about the medieval times to the present, the *Theyyam* has been exposed to multiple socio-political changes, even as it has retained its significance over this long period of time. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to assert that the tradition of *Theyyam* has maintained its vitality across time by interacting with the changing social dimensions of the region. From being a ritual confined into specifically conditioned spaces, the *Theyyam* has made its presence in varying contexts, whether colonial, post-colonial and even the contemporary times. From its strictly outlined spaces of ritual worship, it has traversed the boundaries and occupied multiple spaces which grants it some unique configurations.

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[9] Kurup (1973) concedes that the determination of the Sangam period - roughly held to be between the 3rd century BC and 3rd century AD.- does present a chronological difficulty. But he nevertheless insists that the *Theyyattam* in *Kolathunaadu* is considerably indebted to the cult of *Velan*.

The *Theyyam* ritual has always received different kinds of attention from the people and authorities at large. During the colonial period, specifically with reference to the literature produced about the significance of religion and ritual practices observed in the north Malabar region, the descriptions about the *Theyyam* has occupied a significant position. Among these works produced, the volume *Nayars of Malabar* by F. Fawcett ([1901] 2004) describes in detail the *Theyyam* dance performance that the author had witnessed. He, in fact, addresses the *Theyyam* performers as 'devil dancers', and characterizes the performance as 'the weirdness of human tumult'. I reproduce below an excerpt from his detailing of the *Theyyam* performance:

> As the procession issues from the northern gate of the temple, where it is joined by the elephants, Gulikan stands in the northern entrance of the enclosure (which he cannot enter), facing it, and a halt is made for three minutes, while Gulikan dances. The poor old man who represented this fearful being, grotesquely terrible in his wonderful metamorphosis, must have been extremely glad when his three minutes' dance, preparation for which occupied all the afternoon, was concluded, for the mere weight and uncomfortable arrangement of his paraphernalia must have been extremely exhausting. It was with this difficulty that he moved at all, let alone dance (Fawcett [1901] 2004: 261).

Vadakkiniyil (2014) also notes a similar trend in the descriptions of foreign traders and the Basel mission authorities who all perceived the *Theyyam* as 'devil'. Importantly, he observes that the *Theyyam* had played a significant role in hampering the spread of Christianity in the north Malabar region, and that therefore it was necessary for the authorities of the Basel mission to convince the people about the *Theyyam* worship as a form of deep-seated ignorance and superstition (see Vadakkiniyil, 2014: 22). The latter further notes that the reformist Sri Narayana Guru addressed *Theyyam* as a devil worship which needed to be eradicated.

In this light, until a certain point of time, the *Theyyam* was approached and documented as a form of superstition and a mode of evil or devil worship associated with a 'primitive' state of culture and being. However, instead of gradually disappearing like many other ritual forms of other parts of Kerala, the *Theyyam* has in fact flourished, especially during the post-independence scenario, finding more acceptance and reception not only in the ritual context, but also outside the realms of its conventional existence. Taking cues from

the observations of the South Asian performance scholar Wayne Ashley and anthropologist Regina Holloman, the professor of performance practice Philip Zarrilli (2000) makes a significant comment about the pan-Kerala appeal that the *Theyyam* received over a period of time:

> In several articles, South Asian performance scholar Wayne Ashley and anthropologist Regina Holloman have documented how during the early 1980s Northern Kerala's most widespread form of traditional Hindu ritual/religious practice, *teyyam* (the generic name for the deities propitiated in calendrically determined ritual festivals, *kaliyattam*), began to be performed not only in its traditional ritual context, but also for 'Kerala Tourist week, as an entertainment for a biology symposium, as part of the Folk Dance Festival during the Republic Day celebrations, at the opening ceremonies of the 1982 Asian Olympics in New Delhi, and at the Village Art Festival in Kerala sponsored by the Ford Foundation' (Zarrilli, 2000:148).

Thus, the *Theyyam* has constantly been finding new spaces for articulating its presence in different contexts. Tarabout (2005) has even observed that the rooting of the Communist party in Kerala and the consequent flourishing of Malayalam literature depicting the lives of downtrodden people has also contributed to the 'reinvention' of the ritual. As he pointedly notes:

> As a consequence, in the 1940s, *Teyyam* and certain other rituals involving spectacular elements came to be seen by some as a 'culture of the people', though in an ambivalent manner. On the one hand, entrenched as it was in the ritual structures of power, *Teyyam* was condemned for legitimising the existing land tenancy relationships, and therefore for perpetuating a local 'feudal' order. On the other hand, it was possible to see the stories of past heroes which were at the centre of many *Teyyams*, as epics of resistance against such an exploitative order, and *teyyam* costumes, music, song and dance as the expression of the creativity of the masses. World War II gave local Marxists the occasion to test some practical consequences of these views (Tarabout, 2005: 194).

It seems to me to be particularly pertinent to concede that the establishment of the Communist party in the region of north Malabar has had a significant impact on reconfiguring of the *Theyyam*. In fact, popular *Theyyams* such as *Kathivanoor Veeran, Pottan Theyyam, Baali* etc. were presented as the gods of justice, resistance and so on. Up until this post-independence context, such a narrative based on these *Theyyams* was quite unfamiliar to the region. Such a reconfiguration did indeed lend a new dimension to the significance of the ritual in the region (see also Vadakkiniyil, 2014: 25). We may even push this point further to state that, around this post-independence context, the

internal conflict inherent in the *Theyyam* ritual became even more visible. On the one hand, many of the rituals observed during the *Theyyam* performance represented the caste hierarchies, even though many of the rites considered as 'irrational' such as hunting, sacrifice of cock etc. continued to be a part of the ritual organisation. On the other hand, the *Theyyam* also came to be seen as the 'icon' or 'symbol' of resistance against the oppressive and discriminatory system. Moreover, in more recent times, apart from being a form of resistance, the *Theyyam* has been seen as representing the 'Kerala culture' in national and international platforms. The *Theyyam* has come to be gradually recognised as an art form of Kerala, holding its own alongside other 'classical art forms' such as Kathakali. Tarabout (2005), in the essay referred to above, has traced the journey of the *Theyyam* ritual from its encounter with the colonial authorities to its meeting with the international public, as it were. Examining the presence of *Theyyam* as a ritual, a political tool and a form of resistance, he also alludes to the intervention of an international forum like the Ford Foundation in taking the 'local' ritual worship to an international realm. As he poignantly concludes:

> Discussions of *Teyyam* involve widely differing points of view expressed at different levels of society. Although *Teyyam* is still mainly a village cult, most of these discussions relate to notions of globalizing: 'primitivity', irrationality, the imagination, popular culture, cultural heritage, worldwide social and cultural cohesion, etc. Social influences are diverse. Colonial administrators, Christian evangelists, reformist Hindu saints, local caste elites, Marxists, nationalists, folklorists, anthropologists, dramatists – all have something to say about *Teyyam*. What should be stressed is that these various discourses have all implied interpretations of 'the locality', and conceptions about the relationship of the locality with what are perceived as 'universals' (Tarabout, 2012: 205).

Quite decisively, the widening canvas of the *Theyyam* has granted many lives to the practice, even as it has been adapting to the varying socio-political and cultural contexts.

Being a ritual form of worship confined to a particular region, the *Theyyam* has over the period of time traversed many boundaries, often confounding the shackles of its ritual form. In the contemporary times, the *Theyyam* is no longer confined to its previous spaces of performance, and therefore must be approached as a form of ritual practice deeply entangled and conversing with varying contexts. As already specified, the *Theyyam* has now come to occupy a space in larger institutional schemas, such as cultural

festivals, as an art form representing Kerala and so on. Vadakkiniyil (2014) has even critically looked into the entry of the *Theyyam* in the internet through an analysis of particular websites, blogs and internet communities. He points out that in this virtual landscape too, the *Theyyam* is being presented and approached in different ways. Indeed, in this particular context, far from representing given social relationships, the *Theyyam* functions as a catalyst to forge new social bonds and solidarities within the virtual world. Quite resolutely, alongside the formation of virtual communities, the recent trends are also witness to the entry of technology into the ritual performing spaces per se, recording and capturing the ritual events and presenting the same before a larger audience.

Transformations in the ritual organisation of worship

Thus far, in this section, we have broadly looked at how the *Theyyam* as a sociocultural form has been adjusting itself to the changing social context; we have hardly keyed in on the ways in which the specific ritual organisation of worship – indeed, the rites and rituals observed as part of *Theyyam* - have also been transformed over the period of time. The *Theyyam* is not only adapting to the new contexts externally, the internal organisation of the ritual form of worship is also responding to these changes (often in almost invisible ways). The subtle changes happening within the ritual performances therefore also require some comment. Indeed, while acknowledging that rituals cannot be 'static' through time, the eminent social anthropologist Jack Goody astutely notes that that the exact repetition of elaborate rituals, despite all intentions, is most difficult to preserve over time, especially if they are performed only at long intervals. As he says, variations are bound creep in partly because memory is imperfect and people do the best they can in the circumstances (see Goody, 2010: 65).

As far as the *Theyyam* rituals which involve practices such as animal sacrifice are concerned, people have argued for the necessity to reform such ritual practices according to the ethos of mainstream society. For instance, Binoy Viswam, the former forest minister in the 2006-2011 Kerala government, severely attacked the practice of '*Bappidal*' in the *Vayanaattukulavan Theyyam*.[10] He had firmly stated that any ritual

[10] '*Bappidal*' is a ritual practice in the enactment of *Vayanaattukulavan*, where the *theyyam* goes into the forest, hunts the wild animals, and brings their body to the performance space.

that disregards the human ethics and cultural progress cannot survive in a society, and that it is mandatory to make the necessary changes in the ritual practice so that it would fit into the mainstream society. He urged that such ritual acts should be substituted with symbolic acts which could represent them (Viswam, 2016: 104). Alternatively, Kannan (2011) has engaged with how the changing social patterns of north Malabar has affected the *Theyyam* ritual worship and its form. While conceding that it was once intricately connected with the Dravidian form of worship, he notes that over the period of time the influence of Aryan myths has created significant changes within the ritual organisation of *Theyyam* worship as indeed in the nature of its authority. Noting particularly the infiltration of the Aryan epics in the *Theyyams*, especially of the Vannan and Malayan narrative component – as well as acknowledging the presence of *Thottam* songs that proudly narrate the story of the Mahabharata and Dakshayaga – Kannan also alludes to the changing positions of ritual authority from the performing castes to that of the Namboodiris in particular (see Kannan, 2011: 159).

Furthermore, with particular reference to the responses from within the ritual contexts of the *Theyyam* – and in keeping with the trends noted above – a prominent aspect is the transformation of the traditional *Theyyam* worshipping spaces into the fold of high Hinduism. The noted journalist Sakthidharan (2019) has keenly noted this trend, taking the famous *Muthappan Madappura* as an example. As he sharply observes:

> Inevitably perhaps, the cultural complexion of the shrine has undergone a transformation as Muthappa is being gentrified and co-opted into the fold of Aryan deities. A foreword by a known pro-Hindutva scholar, Priyadarshan Lal, to a book on the Muthappa cult (*Sree Muthappan-Aithihyavum Charithravum* by Latheesh Keezhallur) describes the deity as a confluence of Saivism and Vaishnavism. He claims that Muthappa is a Dalit incarnation of Lord Siva. The Madappura now displays the board '*kshetram*' which word is normally used to describe a Hindu place of worship and relies on Namboodiris for the performance of some rituals. Ganapati *homams* mark the beginning of the festival in November. The priest chants newly coined Sanskritistic mantras like '*Sree Muthappaya Namah*' (Sakthidharan, 2019: 123).

In this light, we can definitely say that the exclusive ritual enactment space of *Theyyam* is also being 'affected' by the external factors which are often political as well as polemical. Importantly, however, such trends are noticeable not only in the changing dimensions of the ritual space, but also the ritual acts observed as well as the alternations

made at the level of the language, as used (say) in the *Thottam* songs and the infusion of Aryan mythical elements into the legends that constitute the *Theyyams*.

To be sure, the *Theyyam* is no longer confined into the ritual spaces, but has marked its entry into more wider and complex contexts. In such a scenario, it becomes difficult to cling on to the simplistic polarities of 'ritual space' and 'rational space' in order to make sense of the ritual activities as a whole (see Parameswaran, 2017: esp. 59-79). The nuanced ways of re-fusing the various elements of the *Theyyam* assemblage – as indeed their reconfiguration in different spaces - allows for a perpetuation of the ritual through different layers of meaning and experience. Indeed, the customarily transmitted materials from the past are not merely getting amalgamated into the discursive practices of the contemporary; more importantly, there always exists a tension between the two, in the context of which it becomes difficult of draw a single line between the 'old' and the 'new'. In a word: the transfiguration of elements associated with a ritual space like *Theyyam* challenges any watertight compartmentalization of the traditional and the modern.

In sum, then, the manifold trajectory of the *Theyyam* ritual, its interaction with and adaptation into varying contexts, is significant so as to get a sense of the ways in which this particular ritual form continues to shape social meanings and experience. In our introductory chapter, we had sought to establish a framework from within which the *Theyyam* ritual can be approached as an 'assemblage'. The present chapter was meant to augment that understanding, by focusing on some of the historical lineages that bear on the assemblage as well as to throw light on aspects of its dynamic form. In the rest of this chapter, we continue this historical order of delineation, moving into the associated world of the *Thottam* in particular. The analysis forged herein will be further sustained in the further two chapters that follow.

Into the World of 'Thottam' Songs: Historical Postulations

Evidently, as I had noted in my introductory chapter, my initial interaction with the *Thottam* songs was restricted to the ritual space (namely, the *Theyyam*) in which it was sung. While I will explore aspects of this intertwining in the subsequent chapters, I want

to continue the historical order of delineation of this present chapter by formulating some thoughts on the tradition of *Thottam* songs in particular. Can *Thottam* songs have a radiant life only when it is delivered in the ritual context of the *Theyyam*? This was one of the primary questions that pushed me to dwell into the multiple lives of *Thottam* songs.

The word '*Thottam*' has multiple inter-related meanings, all of them intimately connected with the system of ritual worship in Kerala. The word is in fact used as a noun which refers generally to a collection of songs (with diverse themes) sung in ritual contexts as a eulogy in order to invoke and make the god/deity appear in the particular ritual space. The word '*thottuka*' means to produce, to imagine, to generate thoughts etc. However, in the ritual context, '*thottuka*' is suggestive of the activity of singing which is instrumental in ushering divinity into the ritual space. The German missionary and linguist Hermann Gundert identified that the word '*thottam*' had evolved from an old and archaic verb '*thottuka*' which (as Gundert put it) means to revive, rejuvenate or restore to life. He also identifies its meanings as 'to show or appreciate festivity' and 'to play a song' (Gundert, 1872: 494). The Malayalam dictionary *Sabdatharavali* also connects the verb '*thottuka*' with the idea of rejuvenation, whereas '*thottam paattu*' is identified as a group of folksongs, mostly sung in different ritual contexts (Padmanabha Pillai, 1980: 977).[11] All these meanings associated with *thottam* and *thottuka* is therefore suggestive of the inherent creative and artistic potential of the people, especially of the lower castes, which specifically gets manifested in a ritual space in the form of songs.

The *Thottam* is in fact used to refer to a bulk of songs rendered in the context of ritual worship praising the god/deity and oriented to induce divinity into the human body or the ritual space at large. This implies that, as an integral part of the social organisation of worship, the *Thottam* was directly attached with a myriad of ritual places all throughout Kerala, especially among the lower caste people of the region. However, as we have delineated, in the popular understanding, the *Thottam* song is generally seen as intertwined with the *Theyyam* ritual of north Malabar. Vishnu Namboodiri makes a distinction between the *Thottam* sung in the northern and southern part of Kerala on the

[11] The *Sabdatharavali* (A Star Cluster of Words) is taken to be the most authentic Malayalam dictionary of the 20th century.

basis of the difference in the narrative world these songs deal with. He says that in the southern Kerala '*Thottam paattu*' is mostly sung praising *Kaali* or *Kannaki*, whereas towards the northern part the transmutation of humans into gods and demon-spirits formed the central theme of these songs (Vishnu Namboodiri, 1990: 29). This somewhat unique feature of the narrative world makes the *Thottam paattu* of north Malabar distinctive from other *Thottam* songs.

Importantly, however, even within the context of the *Theyyam* ritual, the word '*thottam*' has different meanings and significance. In the ritual context, the *Thottam* both refers to a figure and the song. Karippath, who is a well-known researcher in the field of folklore especially with reference to the *Theyyam*, elaborates on this:

> The *Elamkolam* (the primal form of *Theyyam*) who vigorously dances and sings about the bizarre strength, calibre and story of incarnation of the *Theyyam* (which is to appear in its complete costumes and ornaments later) is known as '*thottam*'. *Thottam* appears in the red costume and with ornaments on the hands and neck and also with slight head adornments. *Thottam* runs to the holy yard from the *Aniyara* (holy green room) to receive *Kodiyila* from *Anthithiriyan* and after bowing to the keepers of eight sides (*Ashtadikpalakas* - keeping west, east, south, north, north-west, north-east, south-west and south-east under their control) starts singing hymns (*thottam paattu*) rhyming on the drum placed on the pedestal (Karippath, 2019: 89).

As such, he admits that '*thottam*' is an ambiguous word. Furthermore, Vishnu Namboodiri (1990) discloses that the word '*thottam*' means the dress worn to sing the song. Consequently, even in the context of the *Theyyam* ritual, the word '*Thottam*' has different meanings signifying distinct categories. Kannan (2011) points out that, before becoming the *Theyyam* in its entirety, every performance should observe either '*thottam*', '*vellattam*' or '*elamkolam*'. Let us quickly look at what these three ritualised practices are in context of the *Theyyam* assemblage. Broadly, these three words designate practices relating to the initial phase of the *Theyyam*; they call attention to figures that come before the arrival of the main *Theyyam*. However, not every *Theyyam* has all of these initial phases. '*Elamkolam*' literally means the primal form of *Theyyam*. However, Karippath (2019) considers both '*thottam*' and '*vellattam*' as part of the '*elamkolam*', although he makes a distinction between them in terms of the costume and ornaments. Pointedly, he differentiates between *thottam* and *vellattam* as follows:

> Just like *thottam*, the *elamkolam* designed on behalf of the heroic ancestors and gods having the 'Saivism' element incorporate the *elamkolam* termed '*vellattam*'. Compared to *thottam*, the *vellattam* has more ornaments and special facial make-up called '*vellattukuri*'. *Vellattam* can be considered as a small *theyyam*. They wear a kind of head adornment called '*Vellattu thoppi*', besides several types of necklaces, shoulder bangles, bracelets and '*thandappoo*'. *Vellattam* does not have much *thottam* songs. Inside the holy green room when the ornaments are put on, the *Aniyara thottam* will be recited, and when the assistants prop up the hands '*Kaithangi thottam*' will be recited. The origin and history of the *Theyyam* are briefly mentioned in these recitations. *Vellattam* performs many physical acrobatics and dancing steps in the exciting and intoxicating rhythm of drum beats. They perform even somersaults. In the dusk, amidst the red light of country torches, the dancing performances of *vellattam* is a hilarious and thrilling sight for the viewers (Karippath, 2019: 90-91).

Moreover, commenting on the connection between *thottam* and *vellattam* with the nature of the deity, Karippath sharply observes that:

> Only the male gods have *vellattam* in the *elamkolam*. Goddesses will have only *thottams* in their lighter version and costumes. But all male gods (male *theyyams*) do not have *vellattam*; they have *thottam* instead. The male gods, namely, *Kathivanoor Veeran*, *Vishnu moorthi*, *Bhairavan*, *Madiyan daivam* and *Manikandan* have *elamkolam* as *thottam* (ibid.: 91).

In sum, then, it can be seen that the word '*thottam*' in the context of the ritual refers both to the song and the figure. However, I will be focusing on the *Thottam* songs rendered in the main *Theyyam* ritual. Indeed, even while being a distinctive category, the tradition of *Thottam* songs and its ritual significance in the region of north Malabar needs to be placed within the larger social and cultural matrix of south India where a multitude of song traditions obtain and have thrived. Therefore, before going to the internal nuances of *Thottam* songs and their dynamic rendering contexts - which will be fully explored in the chapters to follow - this particular form of practice should be seen as a part of a larger universe constituted by many song traditions. Songs and singing have always been a part of the south Indian culture since long ago. The vast repository of folksongs sung in every nook and corner of the region on different occasions and with different intentions unravels the prevalence of singing in the social life of the people. Needless to say, the *Thottam* songs which are sung during the *Theyyam* ritual need to be placed within the vast repository of songs produced and rendered by the lower caste groups.

The focus here is certainly not to explore the relationship between music and the Hindu religion, but rather to capture singing as a social activity defined and informed by the system of caste and deeply embedded in the daily lives of common people. Historically, with the exception of Brahmin musical lineages, most hereditary performing castes throughout the Indian subcontinent were considered low caste (Mason, 2006: 13). The singing as such was a collective activity, where certain caste groups were exclusively associated with producing and delivering songs on special occasions. The act of singing was highly ritualized in the various regions, often considered as an auspicious activity not only in terms of the particularities of the religious worship, but also in the everyday lives of the people. There was singing in the paddy fields, marriage ceremonies, ritual spaces and the like.

The life of Thottam in the social world of songs: intimations

My attempt here is not to trace back the origin of '*Thottam paattu*' to any particular ancient form, to discover as it were an 'authentic' forebear for this particular tradition; rather, the effort is to orchestrate the differently constituted and socially positioned contexts, their interactions and intertwined trajectories so as to make some constructive and historically informed comments on the genealogy of the *Thottam paattu* tradition. Such a framework of elucidation demands a certain degree of 'decontextualization' or 'dissociation' of the songs from its immediate ritual context, positing it within the larger matrix of the social, linguistic and religious history of the south Indian region, while quickly followed by a 'recontextualization' of the songs in the respective ritual contexts. Therefore, the following analysis gives some credence to approaching the *Thottam* as an immanent activity and a ritual practice that constitutes, and is constituted by, the sociocultural milieu of the region.

Undeniably, the prevalence of singing and the social acceptance of it in the south Indian region has been intricately connected with the specificities of caste. In fact, the origin myth of certain lower caste people in south India is suggestive of the immanent connection that they have with singing and music. Singing, being the hereditary duty of such groups, was also a means of livelihood for them. The lower caste people who were supposedly ritually impure stayed close with the nature, and kept separate from the upper

caste lifeworld by a sustained sense of ritual purity. The former would often travel from one place to another, often visiting the upper caste households as well to rid the latter of any evil spirits that lurked.

The ancient Tamil records contain innumerable references to the different communities who would go from one place to another, reciting songs hailing the king, local chieftains, warriors etc. These local bards used to earn their livelihood through singing praises of those in positions of power. The scholar George Hart talks about the Panan, one of the bard communities in the ancient Tamil region as follows:

> The music making activities of the *Panans* are various. Most commonly *Panans* are described as they travel from one court to another court of one king to another to make music and receive gift from the monarch to sustain the wretched existence they and their families led. They would be accompanied by their wives, called *Viralis* (from viral, victory), who would dance as they performed (Hart, 1975: 139).

The Panans were one of the significant communities in the Tamil region associated with singing and music. In fact, the very term '*Panan*' derives from the word '*pan* / *pani*' meaning beat, music, time, melody and so on. The Panans in the Tamil region were classified into three groups: as vocalists, singers with lute, and singers with a begging bowl (Kailasapathy, 1968: 95). They were known for going to the war field, composing songs about the heroic deeds of the warriors and singing those in front of the common people to earn their livelihood. The Panans, being singers by caste, did not fit into the social world of agriculturalists and increasingly felt the pinch of poverty (Narayanan, 1988: 112). The Panans are also present in Kerala, residing predominantly in Palakkad, Travancore region of Kerala, having their own tradition of singing songs. The songs sung by them are known as '*Panan Paattu*' or '*Thuyilunarth Paattu*' (the latter meaning, broadly, 'waking up' songs), which are mostly recited in the houses of upper caste landlords in the small hours of the morning in the Malayalam months of *Karkkidakam* (July-August) and *Chingam* (August-September) by the Panan couple.[12] It is believed that their singing would drive away the evil powers from the household and invite

[12] '*Karkkidakam*' is the last month of the Malayalam calendar, which marks the peak month of monsoon. It is also known as the month of poverty due to heavy rains. '*Chingam*', the first month of the Malayalam calendar, is known as the auspicious month.

prosperity and wealth. Panan / Panara are also present in the state of Karnataka, who are classified as Schedule Caste there. They are known for singing *Paddannas*, a ritual song, and also serve as a caste of impersonators of the local deities (Nandavarma, 2017: 45).

There were many other lower caste communities in the Tamil region, whose lives were inseparably linked to producing music and delivering songs. One among them, the Tuniyar community, is said to stand as guard over heroes wounded in battle and to play the drum when the memorial stone is worshipped. Another, the Akavunan community is known for telling the future through singing. They also used to hold a stick in hand and praise the field of fighting after a battle was over, ostensibly to bring matters back to the normal condition. Likewise, the Pulluvan caste, one of the Scheduled Caste communities in Kerala, is known for singing *Pulluvan Paattu* as a part of the snake worshipping tradition in Kerala. They used to go to different households and sing these songs in order to ward off inauspiciousness from the vicinity of the house, particularly the curse of *nagas* (or snakes) on the family.[13] The name '*Pulluvan*', incidentally, is derived from *Pullu*, a hawk, because the Pulluvan are quite adept at handling the disorders which pregnant women and babies suffer from through the evil influence of the birds. It is believed that their music and the associated ballads are peculiarly pleasing to the serpent gods, who shower their blessings to one and all.

The singing, as indeed the production of music, by the lower caste people was an integral part of the cultural practices of the region of south India. It was socially recognized and culturally accepted. The sonic atmosphere created by the lower caste people in a ritually organized environment during particular time periods was a vital part of the lifeworld of the upper caste people. It is particularly interesting that, in a society stratified on the basis of the caste system and where the upper castes are believed to get polluted even by mere sight of the 'untouchables', the lower caste people are seen as a group capable of driving off the evil spirits and inviting prosperity. Very often, the cosmic world of the lower caste groups included a pantheon of living and non-living beings, all thought to be

[13] The ritual is also known as *Sarppam Thullal* (serpent dance) where, towards the end of the ritual, the virgin girls (*kanyas*) get into a trance. In this latter state, it is believed that the sacred snake which is drawn on the floor has come alive.

possessive of extraordinary powers. The singing, accompanied by the loud sound of musical instruments such as the drum, was seen as having the vigour of controlling the dangerous powers which used to disturb the upper caste households and the region at large. The singing thus became an activity through which certain values were created, maintained and distributed. Possessing the capacity to drive off the evil spirits and invite wealth and prosperity, the lower caste people accordingly occupy a highly ambivalent position by means of their singing performance. These people also received remuneration in kind (such as paddy, cooked rice etc.) for their musical activity, and this enabled them to eke out a living through songs and singing.

Explicitly, the ritual context of hero worship is another context where the singing activity gained considerable meaning. There are numerous songs sung by the common people narrating the story of the dead and the deified local heroes, and these are transmitted orally to a large extent. The repository of folk songs that deal with the stories and heroic deeds of local gods is certainly vast, and they acquire a peculiar status in the ritual contexts of hero worship. Indeed, the hero worship tradition prevalent in the south Indian region and the rituals related to it, such as possession and oracular forecasts, have songs and singing as quite paramount and central. To be sure, the nature and nuances of hero worship in the south Indian region is a very vast topic which requires a full-length substantive study altogether. It may, nevertheless, be worthwhile to contextualize this dynamic of hero worship in the cultural milieu of Kerala as a prerequisite for a more informed analysis of the tradition of *Thottam* songs, especially since these songs are often invocations of the deified local gods and goddesses.

The widespread and powerful trend of worshipping local heroes, people who were born in a particular locality and embraced heroic death, is an important form of reverence and remembering among the people, especially the lower caste throughout south India. Several ancient documents, particularly the ancient Tamil poetry, have innumerable references that elucidate on the prevalence of hero worship across locales. What is particularly noteworthy here is the popularity and significance given to the local gods and goddesses rather than the gods belonging to the dominating ‘Aryan culture’. Of course, this emphasis is indebted to the historically strong and culturally deep-rooted

Dravidian culture. But, importantly, the worship of local heroes as gods was not exclusive to the Dravidian tradition, being widespread across regions and communities. Even the sparse literature on folk religion in South Asia indicates that the worship of the deified dead is widespread in this cultural area (see Blackburn, 1988: 214). All the same, the belief system associated with the hero worship, its modalities and configurative forces do vary to a great extent depending upon the historical setting and the cultural schemes of the region in which it is embedded.

The local myths often euphorically talk about the males and females who lived an extraordinary life leading to a tragic and yet gallant death. The earliest historical evidences of hero worship in south India are the references found in Sangam literature. Thus, comparing the gods of ancient Tamil with that of Aryans, George Hart pointedly observes that

> The gods of the ancient Tamil were not transcended beings, but rather immanent powers, present in the objects encountered every day and involved in every aspect of ordinary life. They are to be distinguished from the gods of the early Aryans in that their potential danger was stressed more than their benevolent aspect, and their transcendent character is far less important (Hart, 1975: 26).

Alongside, on the basis of his analysis of the repository of ancient Tamil poems, Kailasapathy makes the following comment on hero worship: "Many poems speak of the hero-stones which were erected on the spots where warriors fell in battle and were presumably buried. These heroes often became tutelary divinities or demons and were worshipped with offerings of food and flowers" (Kailasapathy, 1968: 76). Thus, the region in its entirety presented a long tradition of hero worship given over to venerating the local heroes who once lived among them, often times through organising rituals that incorporated vocal and instrumental music, dance, painting etc. As already stressed, this tradition of hero worship was extensively prevalent in south India, and not exclusive to the Tamil region. The tradition of hero worship among the Tulu community in the southern Karnataka region is another significant example. Through the narrative songs called *Paddannas*, the native heroes of the Tuluva community such as *Koti* and *Chennayya* are depicted.[14] This notion of calling upon the spirits of the heroes and

[14] *Koti* and *Chennayya* are the two main characters in the Tulu epic known for their martial skills and heroic deeds. See also Nandavarma (2017).

worshipping them through organising ritual is rooted in the cultural psyche of north Malabar region as well.

As such, the songs are often invocations to the local heroes and deities, narrating their life, and often sung in order to invite the spirit to take hold of a given ritual space. The sonic atmosphere created through the singing and the use of musical instruments gradually creates an atmosphere of divinity and order. The social organisation of the ritual in this context is deeply embedded in the social setting of the region, especially in the belief system of the common people. It is also worth mentioning that the hero worship, often in the form of acts of possession, is carried out with an intention of warding off the disorder created in the larger society or individual life due to natural hazards, deadly diseases etc. The chaotic and threatening life-situations of the people and their notion of 'heroic death', which often demonstrates uncontrollable and irremediable energy, are coupled with the larger framework of hero worship where it is believed that the power of the local heroes and ancestors as called upon through singing re-establishes order in the society. Pointedly the songs narrating their life history, as combined with the sound of percussions, is considered as instrumental in making the dead appear in the concerned ritual space. In fact, the ritual here is centred on the idea of death; and, what is more, rather than the fear of death the songs establish a ritual context in which contact with the dead is created and celebrated. The dead is invoked, requested to appear and resolve the issues of the people. Thus, making a connection between death and deification, Blackburn has urged: "A violent death transfers its power to all death deities. Driven inside at the moment of death, that power then becomes a source that can be summoned to counteract other elemental forces of disease, disaster, or even death" (Blackburn, 1988: 218).

Evidently, then, the tradition of singing songs in a ritual context narrating the life of the deified hero was prevalent across the region of south India, and '*Thottam paattu*' should be seen as an inevitable part of this tradition. K. K. N. Kurup, who has traced the origin of *Theyyam* in the ancient Tamil possession ritual known as '*Velan veriyatal*', identifies the practice of calling different gods in a prayer-like song which was called *Thottam* (see Kurup, 1973: 27). The *Thottam* songs are sung with the intention of making the deity

appear on the body of the performer. The process of 'becoming god' through the recital is known as '*Thotti edukkal*' – from '*thottuka*', meaning 'to create' (as already seen) - which literally suggests that one has to invoke the *Theyyam* through a continuous and elaborate ritual process of singing these songs, which gains full momentum as it progresses; and, therefore, the very invocation of the gods by the performer is never sudden and impromptu.

Without doubt, the *Thottam* songs sung in the spaces of *Theyyam* worship is closely connected with the customs and traditions deep-rooted in the caste divisions of society and culture. The *Theyyam* performing rights, as already seen, were divided along the caste lines, where certain *Theyyams* were only performed by specific communities. Commenting on the relationship between ritual songs and caste system in Kerala, Pambirikkunnu (2011) has astutely pointed out that the production of *Thottam* songs by the lower caste communities are largely dependent upon their labour-time and leisure time. He specifically mentions that the caste occupations of *Theyyam* performing communities such as Malayan, Vannan etc. were less laborious and hardly required a day-long work unlike the agricultural work which demanded strenuous labour and time.[15] Therefore, according to Pambirikkunnu, these communities had got enough leisure time as compared to those who were involved in the agricultural labour and thus the former would sit in groups and create the songs that narrated the myth of their own gods (Pambirikkunnu, 2011: 83).

Likewise, Y. V. Kannan has observed that the Vannan community, as one of the *Theyyam* performing castes, has many *Thottam* songs such as *Kenthron Paattu*, *Kalam Paattu*, *Manthravaadi Paattu* etc., which are all not related to the *Theyyam* ritual, but are known explicitly as *Thottam* songs (see Kannan, 2011: 121). They are sung mostly on special occasions; for example, *Kalam Paattu* was sung for the healthy delivery of females and *Kurunthini paattu* was meant for the well-being of girls. This clearly suggests that the *Theyyam* performing communities possessed a repository of songs which were not

[15] In fact, the colonial official Thurston (1909a: 436-439) explicitly opines that the principal occupation of Malayans is exorcism, even as singing is also considered their occupation. Vannan is the washermen community, with tailoring also as one of their occupations (see Thurston, 1909b: 315-321).

exclusively associated with the *Theyyam* ritual, but were part of various other ritualised contexts. The production and singing of songs thus become a community affair, directly associated with the social position of these people. Of course, the ritual space of the *Theyyam* – which is largely the ritual space that our study is concerned with here - becomes one of the many spaces in which the song and the activity of singing gets manifested.

More intimations of Thottam paattu

Needless to say, these communities possessed vast repertoires of knowledge in the form of literary and creative productions, with the larger tradition of *Thottam paattu* providing an entry point into the very world of *Thottam* songs. Importantly, the Malayalam language of the north Malabar region varied significantly as compared to the supposedly more refined version present in the central and southern part of Kerala. Indeed, the history of Malayalam language and its literary output is intrinsically connected with the religious life and worship system of the region. In fact, it would not be wrong to state that the convoluted renegotiation and reconfiguration of the literary, religious and cultural identity through time bestowed Kerala a distinctive position in the Dravidian family. Of course, as already hinted at, the reciprocal relationship and consistent contact between linguistically different and yet geographically adjacent regions gave rise to the merging of language forms and literary traditions. Therefore, the existence of the *Thottam paattu* tradition should be seen as rooted in an intriguing network of Kerala's cultural history as informed by the dynamics of language, religion, performance etc.

The term '*paattu*', as associated with *Thottam paattu*, should be explored in some detail here. The word '*paattu*' generally means 'song'; in fact, in order to indicate the category of songs, the word *paattu* is used. *Thottam paattu*, accordingly, means *Thottam* song. To be sure, the folklore of Kerala has many '*paattukal*' (songs). In a more general sense, anything that is sung is often termed as 'song'. However, as we go back to history of literary traditions in Kerala, *Paattu* is a separate literary genre, considered as a mixture of Tamil and Malayalam and often placed as opposite to *Manipravalam* (which consists of Sanskrit and Malayalam). The *Leelathilakam*, a classical literary treatise on Malayalam language, makes some incidental remarks about the tradition of *Paattu* in the

text. One of the significant features, as acknowledged, is its Dravidian framework as opposed to the Sanskrit one. The classical scholar K. N. Pisharadi (1917), in his introduction to the Malayalam translation of *Leelathilakam*, mentions that one of the mandatory features of *Paattu* was the absence of Sanskrit phonology. *Leelathilakam*, in fact, identifies *Paattu* as having Dravidian patterns of orthography, metrical pattern and named patterns of consonance and assonance. The first chapter of the text ends by stating that all the literary usages that do not belong to the *Paattu* are *Manipravalam*.

Incidentally, in ancient Tamil poetry too, *Paattu* was a literary genre. The *Paattu* genre of Kerala shares striking similarities with that of the Tamil tradition. All the same, this latter tradition of Tamil, as collected in anthologies, is suggestive of a courtly culture centred on the king and the kingdom, indicating thereby an elite domain of literary production. Assuming that the *Paattu* could refer to the remnants of the Tamil courtly culture in Kerala, Freeman has noted (and we shall quote at some length):

> On the one hand the fact that those Dravidian features of phonology, vocabulary and prosody that our text (*Leelathilakam*) subsumes in the elite genre of *Paattu* continually resurface historically from folk and popularising genres, as well, points to another level of contribution in the sociolinguistic matrix. We have seen that the *Leelathilakam* registers a dialect split of Bhasa between a variety that is 'crude' (*apakrsta*), spoken by the 'ignorant', versus one that is 'refined' (*utkrsta*), current among the 'educated', with only the latter variety admitted to Manipravalam. Socially, however, it also associates the refined language with the upper three caste-divisions (*traivarnnika*), and the unrefined with the inferior or degraded castes (*hina jathi*). Significant as this is in recognizing the caste-mapping of dialect strata within Kerala, the text goes on to note that the phonology of the lower stratum is largely like the Tamil of the Cholas and Pandyas. In sociopolitical terms, however, the text is quick to stress that despite their language, these lower classes still belong to the Keralas. So the same features of Dravidian phonology that are rejected in the high genre of *Pattu* as being diagnostic of foreign Tamil are simultaneously consigned to the lower rungs of society, where they are resignified as belonging properly to Kerala (Freeman, 1998: 55)

Indeed, given this determination, Chandera (2004) has opined that *Malayala Bhasha* (Malayalam language) evolved from *Kondunthamizh*, one of the two divisions of Tamil language, associated with the lower groups. The other part of the division is *Senthamizh*, which is claimed to be used by the privileged and the educated. Likewise, the *Leelathilakam* also, as claimed, points out that the usage of Tamil words in Kerala was

peculiar to the lower caste groups. Accordingly, it is clear that even though there was considerable similarity between *Paattu* of both the regions, the social position of these two traditions varied significantly. Thus, the *Leelathilakam* further suggests that two types of *Bhasha* existed in Kerala, one known as *Apakrishtam* (ugly or crude) used by the people belonging to the extreme lower strata of the society and *Ulkrishtam* (refined/excellent) used by the educated, privileged people (see Pisharadi, 1917: 21).

The caste system as prevalent in Kerala, consequently, pervaded the various dialects, with most productions and literary usages within the dialects clearly marked by such social differentiation. All the same, it is important to emphasise that the features of Dravidian phonology were consigned to the lower rungs of the society (Freeman, 1998: 55). An analysis of the verses in the *Thottam paattu* tradition, for instance, shows the Dravidian influence in its formation and literary usage. The *Leelathilakam* even identifies *Paattu* genre in terms of three features: (i) that the *paattu* be written using exclusively the letters of the Tamil alphabet; (ii) it must contain grammatical connotations such as assonance and consonance; (iii) the *paattu* should adhere to the Dravidian metrical pattern and not the Sanskrit one. When we analyse the *Thottam paattu*, in particular, it can be said that they also possess similar features, and consequently has its genealogy linked with the literary traditions of the *Paattu* genre.

However - and this is important - in the ordinary usage the term '*paattu*' as associated with *Thottam* explicitly signifies song, and does not come to be recognised in relation with the overall literary genre of '*Paattu*' (even though they reveal shared features). Importantly, this ignorance about the *Paattu* tradition plausibly informing the *Thottam* could be rooted in the inherent tensions of caste society. The orchestration of the history of Malayalam literature and the identification of the various genres of literary production was executed by the privileged, upper caste people who had considerable access to the production and preservation of knowledge. The performers of the *Thottam paattu*, on the other hand, belonged to the lower caste community, whose terms of 'access' to these literary genres was largely through the performative contexts moulded in and around dominant religious beliefs and ritual practices. Therefore, more than to literary genre per se, the concerned communities were more accustomed with the performative features of

paattu as signified by their activity of singing. The presence of assonance and consonance, as the singers themselves opine, makes it easy for them to memorise the songs. In fact, in the famous *Malabar Manual*, originally published in 1887, the colonial official William Logan makes the following comments about the prevalence of folk songs and its relationship with the life of common people in Malabar:

> Even though works that can compete with Thiruvalluvar's *Thirukkural* or Sivamakkiyar's well-crafted poems are not present in Malayalam, they have a wide variety of folksongs which gained immense popularity among the common people. Majority of the songs that are composed by the common people in their own rhythm on the themes they are interested in are not documented. The people of Malabar, even now composes songs that deal with the incidents they come across (Logan, [1887] 1989: 80).

All the same, it cannot be denied that the works categorised under the genre of *Paattu*, in the process of their transmission, assimilated many Sanskrit features. Doubtless, this Sanskrit sway is an effect of the influence of the Brahmin dialect. The gradual detachment from the Tamil, and the subsequent incorporation of Sanskrit, upper caste literary activities, made the Kerala *bhasha* more Sankritised. In fact, the Puranas and Sanskrit epics also became a central theme of the literary work that was covered under the genre of *Paattu*. Inevitably, the Sanskrit themes and contents were composed in Dravidian meters. At any rate, both the Sanskrit and the Tamil literary traditions influenced the Kerala context, and this confluence is very evident in the language and literature of the latter. In fact, Freeman has fervently observed that "early Kerala co-authored this Tamil tradition, but then began diverging from it around the twelfth century, to embrace both Sanskrit literary registers, and to develop its own Dravidian poetic and linguistic heritage in different directions" (Freeman, 2003a: 160).

As already urged, the linguistic features and literary traditions, across south India, and specifically in Kerala, were entangled with the system of caste and religious worship prevalent in the region. The incorporation and adaptation of literary productions, such as written texts, songs etc. into the framework of religion established a performative context to the social organisation of worship and ritual. The *Thottam paattu* tradition, as well as its internal dynamics within the performative context, was thus informed by the intricacies inherent to the composition of language and culture in the classical Kerala

milieu. In fact, the overall tradition, which had an immanent connection with the caste system both in terms of its internal organisation and performative context, simultaneously constituted a semiotic system which could affirm various social positions and relationships.

Chapter 3

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In and Beyond *Theyyam*: Orchestrating the Multiverse of *Thottam* Songs

The Past in the Present: From Ritual 'Complex' to Assemblage

Ritual has been studied by many scholars, exploring the diverse ways in which it gets manifested, and accordingly translating into many definitions and meanings. It becomes all the more difficult, therefore, to adhere to a single definition (or theory) as part of any effort to understand ritual and the various dimensions attached to it. Since rituals are part and parcel of every single society and the cultural matrix associated with it, a universal overarching definition or theoretical framework seems inadequate to comprehend the multitude of modalities attached to them. Indeed, rather than trying to fit a particular ritual into the framework of a definition or theoretical framework, any analysis should stem from the ritual itself, exploring the characters and capacities exclusive to that domain. Each ritual unfolds itself by exhibiting a dynamic peculiar to it. Any comprehensive analysis of a ritual, I believe, is vested in the ritual itself, and without grasping how the ritual organises and demonstrates its own intrinsic potential we fail to understand the larger social significance it bears.

Consequently, my entry into this world will invariably begin with the ritual practice that I am concerned about. The primary focus of this study, as mentioned in our introductory and subsequent chapter, is the *Thottam paattu* ('*paattu*' in Malayalam, to recall, means songs) which is generally considered as a 'part' of the larger *Theyyam* ritual. *Thottam paattu*, as reiterated, is an integral part of the *Theyyam* ritual. These songs are sung before the commencement of the main *Theyyam* dance, narrating the life story and divinity of the *Theyyam* being propitiated. The song and the activity of singing are seen as significant factors without which the ritual event of *Theyyam* will be incomplete. As the *Theyyam* practitioners themselves say, '*There is no Theyyam without Thottam*'. The *Thottam* songs rendered before the commencement of the possession dance provide a

basis for the ritual to take place. According to one of the famous *Theyyam* practitioners in Kannur district, Dineshan Peruvannan, the soul of the ritual lies in these songs. They contain the legend, which is the narrative base and the formative pull for the ritual itself to proceed. The songs, and the very activity of singing, have their own peculiar features and capacities that get manifested in the ritual context.

However, before going to explore the multiple 'worlds' associated with *Thottam* songs, it becomes pertinent to understand the nature of the larger *Theyyam* ritual of which *Thottam* is a part. This will give us a clear idea about the way in which *Thottam* singing is incorporated in the ritual complex. In fact, in order to explore the relationship that *Thottam* songs share with the ritual, it is important to capture the dynamics of not only the song but also the larger ritual. The ritual event as a whole includes the singing of *Thottam* songs and the possession dance known as *Theyyam* or *Theyyattam* (*Theyyam+attam*, *attam* means dance or play). In the regional vocabulary, the term '*Theyyam*' is often used as an overarching term for the entire ritual event, encapsulating many material and non-material elements. Thus, when people say '*Theyyakkalam thudangi*' (The *Theyyam* season has begun) or when they ask '*Theyyam eppozhaanu?*' (When is the *Theyyam* scheduled on?), they are not necessarily intending the main dance alone, but referring to the ritual event as such. However, the *Theyyam* is often used interchangeably to refer to the possession dance as well as the larger event. The word *Theyyam* thus encompasses everything that the ritual event enacts and signifies and also tries to bring about.

Many scholars who have studied the *Theyyam* ritual approach it as a complex amalgamation of the religious and cultural ethos of the region of north Malabar in Kerala. The American anthropologist Rich Freeman in his thesis approached the *Theyyam* as a (religious) complex (Freeman, 1991: 31)**.** He explored in particular the socio-cultural significance of worship in the *Theyyam* ritual:

> For what one actually encounters in moving between the various groups practicing the *Teyyam* worship, are rituals, myths and principles of organisation that form relatively discrete and coherent systems of value partially joined form, yet partially overlapping with those of castes above and below them (ibid.: 36).

Freeman here is obviously suggesting us to perceive the *Theyyam* as an amalgamation constituted of various segments which are 'relatively discrete' but 'coherent'. What he attempted to do further in his thesis was to place the ritual of *Theyyam* in the larger socio-religious context of south India in order to trace continuities through time. He was more focused on exploring the nature of social relationships associated with this particular ritual organisation of worship. Another scholar Wane Ashley has observed that "*Theyyam kettu* is not an isolated phenomenon but a complex which has continued to incorporate different deities, rituals and symbols over the past several years" (Ashley, 1979: 100). Clearly, both Ashley and Freeman understand the *Theyyam* as a complex more in terms of the accumulation of the social, religious and cultural schemas of the region where the ritual is practiced. The famous Kerala historian K. K. N. Kurup also shares a similar understanding about the *Theyyam* worship:

> The peculiarities found in the pattern of hero worship in Kolathunadu are interesting. This is made colourful and impressive by the aesthetic spirit and religious outlook of the common people. The village folk in their worship of the heroes who once lived among them organised festivals incorporating ritualism, vocal and instrumental music, dance and painting. This blending of artistic forms in a historical pageant is a good example of the aesthetic imagination of the people (Kurup, 1973: 3).[1]

Now, even though these understandings propose to see *Theyyam* as a complex constituted of multiple elements, they signal more towards the incorporation of the social and historical values in the ritual as a way of representing the socio-cultural and historical realities of the region. *Theyyam* is seen as a manifestation of an entire complex of religious and cultural values of the region (see Freeman, 1991). The notion of a 'complex' invoked in these writings views the *Theyyam* ritual as assimilating peculiar features of the region within the matrix of ritual worship. It is perceived as a 'complex' which is historically formed at a particular juncture in the distant past. As such, having evolved from a peculiar socio-historical juncture, the *Theyyam* is mostly seen as 'representing' or 'reminding' of the past. The ritual complex which had already formed integrating the features of a particular historical time brings the 'past' to the present through every single ritual event and its enactment. Therefore, even though the people

[1] Note, *Kolathunaadu* was one of the four older kingdoms in Kerala (the rest being Zamorin, Cochin and Quilon). It roughly comprised of the north Malabar region of the present Kerala state.

generally say that in *Theyyam* various religious, cultural and artistic elements are incorporated, all these immediately bear a reference to the past; the elements which constitute the ritual are not quite of the present, but are informed by the past. Thus, the moral intention of the *Theyyam* ritual, as the practitioners themselves point out, is to bring the past into the present. The *Theyyam* ritual, according to such an understanding, is a diachronically structured complex, with each *Theyyam* performance seen as the seasonal enactment or repetition of an already formed ritual complex.

However, even with reference to the past, the precise way in which the *Theyyam* encompassed the social within its realm of practice opens up new terrains of meaning and significance. In a society where the caste system was taken to be very stringent and dominating, the *Theyyam*, as practiced by the lower caste people, is often seen as challenging the existing caste hierarchy. Not surprisingly, the myths behind many a *Theyyam* talk about the intensity of caste and gender discrimination that existed in the society. Deifying those heroines and heroes who revolted against the discriminatory system and making them a part of the belief system of the region was seen as a strategy through which the hierarchies, even if temporarily, were subverted:

> The *Theyyattam* sought to create a moral community through the establishment of a sense of limits - thus far and no farther. By necessitating the deification of victims, it created a collective imagination of what was just and unjust. Society was not free of relations of power; paradoxically, it was the existence of dominance and subordination which was the condition for the imagining of community. It was a 'symbolic strategy' whereby limits were placed on the actions, arbitrary or immoral, of those in power. The moral community was the space within which conflicting discourses were arbitrated (Menon, 1993: 190).

Thus, while being encompassed in the larger social matrix of the society, the practice of the ritual demonstrated a symbolic potency which potentially subverted the social hierarchy of caste. The ritual practice, nevertheless, was not capable of permanently uprooting the socio-religious values system that governed the society, even as it was generating spaces within the boundaries of the larger socio-political context in which the social hierarchy is temporally subverted:

> *Theyyam* can be dislodged from their shrine affiliations by acts of human devotion and ally their power with other matrilineages. They can shift allegiance not by upsetting the hierarchical scheme of things, or the relation of value that organise it in reference to a sacred totality that they can also express, but by

> effecting or manifesting different accents upon reality or unfolding possibilities of relations and shifting socio-political positioning continually emergent within the socio-political contexts in which a hierarchical scheme of value is in operation **(**Kapferer, 2010: 200).

It must be reiterated though that, in the contemporary context of north Malabar, the 'past' which is evoked in the ritual does not have anything to do with the pragmatic concerns of the everyday lives of the people in the region. In that sense, it no longer 'represents' the lived reality of the population of the region (see Vadakkiniyil, 2016: 98). The socio-political context of north Malabar has undergone tremendous changes in the recent past, but the ritual complex of *Theyyam* has its own space and significance even while the region was getting exposed to and adapting to new socio-cultural values. The tradition of *Theyyam* ritual practice is very much alive in the region as it retains its own significance through every single performance. Broadly, in its contemporary seasonal manifestations, *Theyyam* ceases to be a practice that 'represents' the elements peculiar to the current socio-political context of the region.

Opening Up to the Assemblage: The Theyyam In and Of Itself

Even when the ritual practice of *Theyyam* manifests a reality which is entirely different from the existing everyday realities of the region, it has retained its significance and vitality at every historical juncture, by emerging as an 'assemblage' in each and every ritual context where it is performed. Indeed, rather than perceiving the *Theyyam* as a complex which is already formed in the past, I prefer on the terms indicated in our first chapter to open up to it as an 'assemblage' emerging out of the interaction between various component parts during every single manifestation of the practice. In what follows, we shall be formulating further an approach to the ritual assemblage in its own right.

The ritual assemblage of *Theyyam* emerges in each of its seasonal manifestations by unravelling its own meanings and significances within and through its own world. As such, the precise aspects of how the ritual is 'arranged' within the world of its practice – its constitutive and self-organising features - will be the primary concern here. Each year, by the end of October and the beginning of November, all the '*Kavus*' in the north

Malabar region of Kerala will get completely astir to welcome the *Theyyam* season.[2] The region has hundreds of *Theyyam*, each having its own myths associated with it. They are each performed by different castes. All the *Theyyams* cannot be performed by every *Theyyam*-performing caste. Separate castes have the privileges to perform particular *Theyyams* according to the tradition and customs (Karippath, 2019: 29). Each *Theyyam* occasion is performed in a shrine or '*kavu*' in order to worship the deity associated with that shrine/grove. In some occasions, certain people conduct the *Theyyam* at their own houses as an offering for the family's well-being.

The world of *Theyyam* is very vast and dense, not only in terms of the numbers but also in terms of the varying internal dynamics that each *Theyyam* reveals. It is very difficult, therefore, to understand the internal organisation of the *Theyyam* in terms of a single general pattern. Based on the performing caste, place and the myth, each *Theyyam* ritual has its own peculiar features. Even the same *Theyyam* performed in different places sometimes show slight variations. Krishnan Peruvannan, who is known for performing the '*Vishakandan Theyyam*'[3], talks about the regional differences as manifested in the '*Vayanattu Kulavan Theyyam*'[4]:

> *Vayanattu Kulavan* follows two traditions: the northern one and the southern one. The northern tradition of *Vayanattu Kulavan* has more '*nayipp*' (physical movements) as compared to the southern tradition. This is based on the history behind the *theyyam*. So, for this same *theyyam*, you can see differences in rites. The region, its relation to the myth etc. plays significant role in the *theyyam* ritual (Interview conducted on 16 March 2020, at Kolachery, Kannur).

Also, some of the *Theyyam* ritual event involves the performance of multiple *Theyyams* - either performed one after another or performed simultaneously in the same space - each having an autonomous existence, even while performed in a common space. It will have rites, songs, dance, facial make-up etc. which are exclusive to that particular *Theyyam*, and the coming together of all these elements makes the ritual enactment complete. Often, the viewers identify a *Theyyam* through the features which are

[2] 'Kavus' are the sacred groves present mostly in the Malabar region where the Theyyam ritual takes place.
[3] This *Theyyam* is performed at Chaathanpalli Kaavu, Kolachery in Kannur District on the first day of Malayalam month Thulam (October-November). The *Theyyam* season in Malabar begins with the performance of this particular *Theyyam*.
[4] In some places, this *Theyyam* is also known as '*Thondachan*'. It is believed that he is the incarnation of Lord Shiva.

exclusive to it, especially the make-up and costume. The practitioners themselves say that if they are to perform different *Theyyams*, it is important for them to prepare themselves mentally for the particular *theyyam* which they are supposed to perform the next day. Krishnan Peruvannan further explained about the importance that even the small rites have in a ritual performance:

> Every *theyyam* has different rites and customs associated with it. Sometimes, I will have to perform entirely different *theyyams* in consecutive days. Even though there are some similarities in the initial rites and all, the *thottam* songs, the dance movements, even the way in which we say '*munpasthanam*'[5] is delivered are very different for each *theyyam*. Since we dedicate our complete self in each performance, we get fully immersed in every *theyyam* we perform. Therefore, as a practitioner before the performance itself I should be mentally prepared to perform that particular *theyyam*. The *theyyam* will lose its divinity even if a small mistake in performing the rites has occurred (Interview conducted on 16 March 2020 at Kolachery, Kannur).

Now, even as the *Theyyam* as a whole is an assemblage constituted of multiple constitutive elements, each *theyyam* ritual is also an assemblage in its own right that gets enacted in particular space and time. Every *Theyyam* ritual thus becomes possible only when different elements come together and negotiate with each other in a particular context – as a kind of dynamics in motion.

On to the dynamics of the assemblage

The *Theyyam* practitioners have their own distinct lives and realities outside the world of practice. For them, performing the *Theyyam* is a duty and right passed down from their ancestors. They consider it as their birth right and moral obligation which should be carried out with complete dedication and precision. Some of them also see practicing *Theyyam* as their '*kula / jaathi thozhil*' (caste occupation) which is seasonal. Performing the *Theyyam*, for them, is a 'seasonal labour' which fetches them livelihood. But the performers also assert that they are not 'doing *Theyyam*' to get money; rather, being born in the *Theyyam* performing caste, it is their duty to perform the ritual. However, once

[5] *Munpasthanam*, a part of the *Thottam* song, is understood as a prose section of the song which however is rendered in a poetic form. Vishnu Namboodiri (1990) describes *Munpasthanam* as a prose form sung in poetic form that contains the origin myths and the travel histories of the deity. Not all *Thottam* songs have *munpasthanam* though.

the individual becomes a part of the ritual space, their realities are changed. Rupesh Peruvannan, a *Theyyam* performer from my village, commented:

> The world of *Theyyam* is very different from our ordinary world. There I am not Rupesh, who runs a tailoring shop, but the god himself. There people do not identify me as a normal person; for them I am *Muthappan* or *Kathivanoor Veeran* or *Puthiya Bhagavathi*, depending upon which *theyyam* I am performing. Even though we are having this conversation right now, when you come in front of me once I become the god, I will not even recognise you. I don't think you will come in front me and call me '*Roopeshettan*' (*Laughing aloud as he utters this*). Because after wearing the make-up and costume, I see myself in the mirror and from then on, I am not a human being, but God (Interview conducted on 04 March 2020 at Munderi, Kannur).

Rupesh further explains in this interview about how his 'ordinary' life, where he is tailor and father of two kids, changes once he has adorned the costume of the *Theyyam*. In that world he experiences and produces another reality which does not reflect his everyday life. When he assumed that I will not call him '*Roopeshettan*' (Brother Roopesh) as the *Theyyam*, he is clearly urging that the ritual world throws meanings produced within its own realm to the outer world also. The realities are reimagined in the process, and the practitioners, by entering the world of ritual (which is also part of their 'life'), take on 'realities' which are otherwise impossible to attain in their ordinary lives. Performing the *Theyyam* is very much a part of their life and lineage. As such, the entry into the world of ritual practice brings about realities that are distinctively related to the everyday lives of the people. But by their engagement in the ritual practice, the participants are both reoriented to their ordinary realities and embodied with potencies to restore or reconstruct their lived worlds (see also Kapferer, 2005: 51).

I remember as a child I used to stand in a long queue in front of the *kavu* to receive blessings from the *Theyyam*. After the god-dance is done, the *Theyyam* would sit on a stool in the middle of the courtyard to hear her/his devotees. The devotees would be standing in a line, and each one would have a conversation with the 'god' talking about their life difficulties and anxieties. The *Theyyam* would pacify them by giving solutions to their problems. Before leaving, the *Theyyam* gives a pinch of turmeric powder and tulsi leaves to the devotees. Soon after I received it from the *Theyyam*, I would apply it on my forehead and take the rest of it back home. I still remember walking back home

tightly holding that pinch of turmeric powder in hand without letting it fall down from my hand. It was clear to us that it is 'not the turmeric powder' that our mother would use to cook at home, but something divine and sacred. In fact, in the local idiom, it is not called as 'turmeric powder', but as '*kuri*' or '*prasadam*'. My mother also would apply it on her forehead and keep the rest of it for the other family members. Overall, this particular event in the ritual practice is known as '*Nercha kodukkal*', for which people gather in crowds and patiently wait. This is the one occasion when they can have a direct conversation with the 'god'. The *Theyyam* often holds the hand of the devotee while listening to their life dilemmas. This act of holding hands is a way of assuring that the god and her/his blessings will always be there with them through any crisis. While holding the hand of the devotee, the *Theyyam* would have a pinch of turmeric powder in his hands and, in the process of the conversation, offer it to the devotee.

For the devotee, the turmeric powder is a promise from the god, and a bond created directly with the divine entity. The powder is thus the power and divinity of the god, and also carries a 'life' story and social history within it. In the *Theyyam* ritual, the people would have a one-to-one interaction with the god; she/he hears your worries and consoles you. In a society where stringent caste rules obtained, for the lower caste people the god did not reside in an inaccessible realm. Their god was one among them, who descended to their world and communicated with them, unlike the Brahmin gods. Freeman correctly observes:

> Despite royal patronage of a number of local gods represented in *Teyyam* form, some of whom are apotheosised chiefly warriors, one of the centrally organising social facts of *teyyattam* is that all of the actual performers are from castes traditionally considered polluting, the avarnar, or Kerala's former 'Untouchables'. This means that much in the *teyyam* deities' liturgies, costuming and ritual forms was authored by and is in the custody of communities that Indian researchers today might label subaltern, or Dalit, in other contexts. Indeed, since the substantial numbers of avarna castes in Kerala (perhaps a numeric majority in some locales) were all excluded from entry into Brahminically regulated temples, *teyyam* shrines and temples were the principal institutional form of religion for all those people. *Teyyams* were their only manifest gods, and *teyyam* was their form of 'Hindu' worship (Freeman, 2003b: 310).

It is important to point out that the network created between the *Theyyam*, turmeric powder and the devotee is inseparable from world of practice in which they are

embedded. They come to form an interactive field in which the turmeric powder is not occupying a passive state, but actively enters into a relationship which brings about meaning to the ritual practice. Moreover, in the *Theyyam* ritual, turmeric powder is also used as a make-up material. The performers apply turmeric powder or paste on their body as a part of the costume and make-up. In this context, the turmeric powder produces different meanings depending upon the interactions it enters into in the world of practice. Thus, while to a devotee turmeric powder is an 'offering' or 'blessing' received from the *Theyyam*, for the performer, in his preparation to become the 'god', the turmeric becomes one among the colours that enables the transition. Clearly, in these different orders of relations, this particular object engages with each other to render parts of ritual assemblage meaningful and dynamically resonant.

This is the case not only with the turmeric powder, but also different objects such as the clothes worn, the leaves of plants strewn around, the weapons carried and so on, each of which exercise their agency and impart multi-layered meanings in the ritual assemblage. Of course, my intention here is not to delve into how each object engaged in the ritual practice enters into multiple relationships and makes the emergence of the assemblage possible. Rather, the effort is to demonstrate that the assemblage is not consisting of human beings alone, where they act upon the 'passive' objects, but emerges out of a web of relationships in which human and non-humans actively participate. In such a scenario, the various 'objects' are neither static nor non-living, but dynamical things which inform and mould the assemblage with their interactions. These objects exert their force in the making of the assemblage, and are also operated within the encompassing ritual dynamics. Indeed, the 'social' presence of these objects entails that they each transform themselves into agents capable of imparting feelings, invoking memories, and producing new realities. They signify something when they stand alone, and bring about different dimensions once they are collaborating with others. Thus, as has been emphasised, the object in itself is not an idea or symbol, but an operator or agent (Morgan, 2018: 58). In fact, Morgan even uses the word 'enchantment' to talk about how images and other objects exert their agency of their own in multiple contexts. As he effectively states:

> Whether one is a Neolithic islander or modern technologist, enchantment is a way of accounting for agency beyond one's means. Talking wood chips, talking spirit

> boards, or the divination of providence are all ways of learning secrets that make life safer by rendering it more purposeful and less random (ibid.: 8).

The underlying suggestion here is about the formation of assemblages through the networks constituted by the active interaction between human and non-human parts.

Evidently, the ritual assemblage of *Theyyam* too has emerged with the interaction of multiple components, both human and non-human, which is spread across time and space. As Dineshan Peruvannan elaborated in the course of a conversation:

> People, especially these days, have this tendency to consider *Theyyam* as the 'dance' alone. Most of them only come to watch the dance. But, for us, the moment when the human performer becomes the god is the result of many other processes which happen before that. Without all those, the performer cannot become the god. Without receiving the *kotiyila*, how will the energy/spirit of God come from the *palliyara* to the *aniyara*? The presence of God should first reside in *aniyara*, then only the performer who is adorning the costume and make-up can transfer that energy into his body. For that matter, without narrating the life story of the *theyyam* through songs, how can the *kolakkaran* become the god? So, all these have to be done in the way it is to be done for the ritual to be complete (Interview done on 14 March 2020 at Azhikode, Kannur).[6]

This practitioner, one of the most renowned in Kannur district, was elaborating on how different elements involved in the *Theyyam* ritual have their own place and significance in the practice. Each constituent part, in that sense, has an autonomous existence within the world of practice, even when they interact with each other. On the one hand, the overall means-end schema of the ritual assemblage directs these different parts; and, on the other hand, these parts and the networks they enter into actualise the assemblage. Therefore, the assemblage emerges when the constituent parts engage in 'meaningful' transactions; and, in the process of this emergence, the assemblage also determines these transactions happening between the multiple parts which constitute it. The scholar called attention to earlier formulates this very well: "The network is not, in fact, a single shape with a directing centre, but is a shifting form of relationality, resulting as human and non-human actors interact in the transient shape of an assemblage" (Morgan, 2018: 100).

[6] Some of the technical terms in this citation will be clarified in course.

Surely, then, the dynamics of ritual practice and its attendant cosmos is constituted not only by the human agents but also the 'objects' themselves. Not surprisingly, scholars have gone on to reiterate the following as part of the 'material study' of religion:

> Religion is not a pure realm of ideas or beliefs that are translated into material signs. The material study of religion avoids reifications that identify ideas or dogmas or individual people as the irreducible core of the religion. Instead, a religion is inseparable from a matrix or network of components that consist of people, divine beings or forces, institutions, things, places and communities. One might say that the operation of this network is the production of a life-world and that religions are powerful ways in which worlds act and maintain themselves (Meyer *et al*., 2011: 209).

The constitutive elements are neither randomly deployed nor occupying static positions, but are engaged in 'meaningful conversations'; they merge into, act upon, and stay away from each other and at times get enacted simultaneously, producing multitude of meanings by expressing their own capacities and potencies. Therefore, in ritual assemblages generally, the constituent elements are not just cobbled together into a 'complex'; rather, they are dynamical gatherings, allowing the gradual synthesis and actualisation of the overall project of the ritual assemblage. These components are not external to the ritual, but intricately internal to it, whose validation and legitimacy stem not externally, but from within the ritual that they themselves constitute.

Rejuvenating the assemblage

Every event of the *Theyyam* ritual takes place in its own time and space by actualising the potential of the web of multiple relationships. It is true that the beliefs of the people and the memory of the past are certainly crucial, but the ritual practice and the activities involved in it have their own capacities and potencies. Therefore, each *Theyyam* event is new, involving the interaction and exchanges between different components. Broadly, the *Theyyam* ritual, from the perspective of the practitioners, begins with the rite known as '*atayaalam kodukkal*'. '*Atyaalam*' in Malayalam means sign or signal and '*kotukkal*' denotes the action of giving. Therefore '*atayaalam kodukkal*' means giving or presenting the sign. The individual authority of household or *kaavu* or temple – as specific locations where the *Theyyam* is going to take place - nominates a person who is going to be the

chief *kolakkaran* (the one who performs *Theyyam*) [7] in the upcoming ritual event at their place and hands over the 'sign' as a confirmation. The '*atayaalam*' comprises of betel leaves, areca nut, rice and tamarind powder which is wrapped in banana leaves. From the moment the *kolakkaran* accepts this gesture, he will begin preparing for the *Theyyam*, the *atayaalam* of which he has received. It is a promise made between the *kolakkaran* and the '*janmaari*' (the one who does puja in that particular place) ensuring that from then onwards the former who has received the 'sign' is bound to commit himself completely to the upcoming ritual that he has agreed upon. The *atayaalam* also establishes a bond between the *kolakkaran* and the initiating authority, stating that from the time of '*atayaalam kodukkal*' to '*kolu kittal*' (*Kolu* in north Malabar means wealth or money and '*Kittal*' means the act of receiving, and thus their combination indicates the remuneration which the *Theyyam* practitioner receives after the performance is over) they are committed to each other and to the ritual event as well.

Every *Theyyam* 'begins' with this act of '*atayaalam kodukkal*' and it takes place weeks or months before the actual performance or enactment. Thus, as Vannan Krishnan detailed in the course of a conversation:

> *Atayaalam kodukkal* is the most important part in the *Theyyam* ritual. In that sense, the *theyyam* begins not at the day of performance, but from the day a *kolakkaaran* receives *atayaalam*. From that moment to the day of *theyyam*, it is a preparatory phase, especially for the *kolakkaran*. He might be performing the *theyyam* after months or years. So, he needs to be mentally prepared to be the god. He becomes more punctual, he should get more sleep, concentrate on his diet and avoid going to large public gatherings. All these are done in order to prepare himself to perform perfectly. *Atayaalam kodukkal* also means that every *theyyam* performance is new and one needs to start it fresh, irrespective of whether you are an experienced performer or not (Interview conducted on 16 March 2020, at Thrikkaripur, Kasargod).

The act of '*atayaalam kodukkal*' is clearly indicative of the 'newness' implicit to every iteration of the *Theyyam* ritual event. Importantly too, even within the realm of the practice itself, the *Theyyam* performance is strives to reveal its potencies so as to maintain

[7] '*Kolakkaran*' derives from the word '*Kolam*' (roughly translated as appearance, shape etc.) which, in the context of the ritual, refers to the *Theyyam* itself. The one who performs '*kolam*' is accordingly referred to as *kolakkaran*. The *kolakkaran* is also referred to as '*Kanalati*' (that is, the one who plays or dances with fire).

the vitality of every ritual event. The overall ritual assemblage, as it emerges through its own internal dynamics, is geared to be regenerative, vital and creative in its own terms. It is not a mere hollow repetition of a past; rather, every seasonal *Theyyam* performance has its own vitality and potencies actualised through that given event. Every time the *Theyyam* ritual takes place, it is a new performance, where multiple participants enter into and form a web of relations. Moreover, the ritual, while producing its own realities in a present time and space is contingent on another invocation of time-space dimensions. As the critical literature has reminded us, all ritual, in order to actualise the potencies of the human, strives to control time, in terms of slowing, speeding, curving, reversing, or obviating it (see Handelman, 2013: 36). Therefore, what is seen and palpably obtains as repetition, with the apparent obsession with detail, precision and so forth, is really an expression of the constitutive and regenerative aspects of the practice itself.

The Life of Thottam Songs Within and Outside the Ritual Context

Having elaborated on the life of *Thottam* songs in the larger social and cultural scenario of south India, and especially of Kerala, in the previous chapter, I will now move on to considering their layers of significance both within and outside the ritual scheme of things. Specifically, our attempt here is to approach *Thottam* songs from two distinct analytical vantage points: one implicating the life of the songs in its own world and the other taking them on board in the context of the ritual. In these two 'lives', as it were, the songs give expression to different modalities, unravelling their intrinsic potentials, while also contributing to a multiplicity of meanings and experiences that inform the larger social matrix in which the songs are implicated. The meanings unravelled by the songs, therefore, cannot be understood simply in terms of the ritual renderings they participate in; they should also be perceived in terms of their circulation and local adaptations, as well as accounting for what people do with it as a whole. In fact, to consider the songs as a 'passive medium' through which the belief system associated with a ritual assemblage is 'conveyed' or 'transferred' undermines the very material existence of the songs, their historicity and the force they are capable of exerting in different contexts.

To reiterate, the songs are not static entities which carry a human imprint; rather, there is an active movement of the songs from its textualized form to its performative contexts, each of which entails actualising the capacities inherent to them. Indeed, the textualized form of the *Thottam* songs clearly indicates the dimensions of their existence outside the performative context. To be sure, I use the word 'textualization' to denote the presence of songs in their documented form, especially print, in order to explore the organisation of the song and its manifestation in the documented form. As such, this will largely be based on an exploration of the language and linguistic techniques employed in these songs. Indeed, in the realm of ritual, the songs are considered as sacred, and singing these songs becomes a ritual activity which is carried out in a specialised environment. The following analysis outlines some of these internal facets, while of course avoiding the more complicated question of the relationship between orality and textuality in the case of *Thottam* songs. In what follows, we will be commenting on the general ways in which the song is organised and presented focusing in particular on the potential of language inherent to them.

A life of its own? Glimpses into the narrative world of the Thottam

What does it mean to state that an art form which is 'meant-to be-performed' has a life of its own outside its performative realm? Perhaps to rephrase the question: what does it mean to perceive a work outside of its explicit performative context of manifestation? There is something perplexing about this question, especially in the case of *Thottam*, which is invariably seen only in terms of its ritual enactment. Strictly, in terms of poetics and performance, the anthropologists' Briggs and Bauman (1990) have proposed an idea of 'entextualisation' as the process through which a 'discourse-text' comes to decentring itself. As they frame it:

> [Entextualisation] in simple terms, though it is far from simple, [-] is the process of rendering discourse extractable, of making a stretch of linguistic production into a unit - a text - that can be lifted out of its interactional setting. A text, then, from this vantage point, is discourse rendered decontextualizable. Entexualisation may well incorporate aspects of contexts, such that the resultant text carries elements of its history of use within it (Bauman and Briggs 1990: 73).

In other words, what makes 'entextualisation' possible is the capacity of the 'text' to reflect upon and bend back upon itself (ibid.). To be sure, my primary intention here is

to see how the *Thottam*, outside its ritual context, potentiates decontextualization by exercising its self-organising capacities. The effort clearly is to get at the world of *Thottam* songs outside its ritual context and to grasp how this world is organised. For our purposes here, we do not focus on any particular *Thottam* song though, concentrating instead on some general tendencies and patterns internal to the songs independently of their ritual enactment.

Of course, the repository of *Thottam* songs is diverse and multiple, and each song has its own peculiar features that it becomes difficult to capture the life amidst this multiplicity. Even as one attends to their unique dimensions, one is also confronted by the fact that they resemble one another in incorporating a multitude of meanings and significances. Arguably, it is this depth that makes the life of the songs even more meaningful and contextual. As the *Thottam* practitioners themselves admit, the songs are a repository of the life stories and heroic deeds of each *Theyyam*. The songs not only embody the popular regional legends of north Malabar; they also comment on the prevailing social structure and cultural values of the region. As already affirmed, they contain innumerable references to the past events, the everyday life of the common man, the details of the chieftains who ruled the region, an account of the agricultural practices and agrarian relations, and the like. These songs also are a eulogy directed at the gods and sing to their power. They however cannot be grasped only in terms of the themes and motives embedded in these references. The songs, both in its textualized form and their ritualized rendering, are more than the stories which are contained in them. Indeed, while the local stories do form the crux of the songs, their narrative world and internal structuring need to be approached separately and even more attentively in terms of their different levels and their intertwining.

The narrative world of the *Thottam* revolves around the stories that are considered as an integral part of the collective memory of the region and its population. These stories are all pervasive in the region of north Malabar and are, at once, contained, preserved and transmitted through the *Thottam* songs, which arrange the narrative of the story within its framework. Here, in the context of this chapter, I will try to give a general sense of

the ways in which these stories are enclosed within the songs, elaborating on some common tendencies and features of their narrative world.

It is widely known that the *Thottam* songs contain the myth behind each *Theyyam* and it is through the rendering of the songs that these mythical components are invoked. Most of the *Theyyam* legends prevalent in north Malabar region are about the local heroes and heroines who, after encountering many difficulties in their life, embrace a violent death and eventually become the godly *Theyyam*. The narrative world of the *Thottam*, therefore, largely revolves around the life of the main protagonist, even as it further builds on the lives of associated characters. Within the framework of the songs itself, the narrative world is contained in a section which the practitioners often identify as '*Valiya* / *Pradhaana thottam*'[8], which can be roughly understood as the 'main *thottam*'. They become 'main' or 'long' not only in terms of their sheer abundance, but also in terms of the qualitative significance they have within the *Thottam* repertoire. These are the portions of the *Thottam* songs which contain the myth/story behind the *Theyyam*.

The main *Thottam*, especially of the local heroines and heroes, begins with the birth story of the godly *Theyyam* as a human. In most of the stories, as represented in the song, there is a conflict at the birth of the *Theyyam*. They are born to a couple who are desperately waiting for long to have a child. The parents, especially the barren mother, go for pilgrimage to many temples and perform various offerings to have a child. The profound grief and longing of the 'childless' parents and their agony is one of the opening themes of most of the *Thottam* songs. The *Thottam* of the '*Maakkam Theyyam*', for example, begins with the lamenting of Unicheriya who is eagerly longing to have a girl child.[9] There are some stories where the childless couple, who cannot have a child, find an orphan infant and raise him (or her) as their own child. Thus, the birth story of the '*Muthappan Theyyam*' goes like this: a Brahmin couple Paatikutty and her husband were worried about not having a son who could take care of them in their old age and would light their funeral pyres when they are dead. While living in the grief of not having a

[8] '*Valiya*' derives from the Malayalam '*valiyath*', which means long; '*pradhaana*' means important or main.

[9] The '*Maakkam theyyam*' propitiates one of the most popular *Theyyam* goddesses in north Malabar. We will present more details about this *Theyyam* in the next chapter. Unicheriya is the mother of Maakkam.

son, Paatikutty has a dream in which a beautiful baby boy is lying in her lap and smiling. The very next day, having gone to the river nearby for her morning ablutions, she finds a baby boy lying on a rock in the river shore. With great joy, she takes the child home and raises him as her own son.

Of course, there are other stories in which the birth of the *Theyyam* occurs as a 'solution' to a crisis. For instance, the birth story of *Vayanattu Kulavan*, the ancestral god of the Thiyya community, presents this conflict during birth in a different way. He is known as the son of Lord Siva, born out of the latter's left thigh so as to get toddy from the coconut trees. It is stated that one day, when Siva went to have toddy from the coconut tree, his wife Parvati became fed up with this obsession and ventured to put all the toddy at the top of the tree so that her husband cannot take it and drink. Confronted thus, Siva gets angry and immediately conjures up a son by hitting at his left thighs so as to tap the toddy from the tree. Thus, it is claimed, was born the clan god of the Thiyya community, *Vayanattu Kulavan*, and toddy tapping became their caste occupation. Without doubt, the attendant strangeness or uniqueness revolving around the birth of the *Theyyam* is a common theme underlying them. This supposedly 'unnatural' or 'awaited' birth makes their life different from that of the other humans. In fact, when we look closely at the stories, the tendency to transform the '*Theyyam*' born as a human being to an 'extraordinary human' is always there. The narrative invariably opens up by presenting uneasy situations, all of which get resolved by the very event of birth. Starting from the birth, what makes the narrative flow is the sequential occurring of multiple actions and events, all of which are not necessarily initiated or controlled by the main character of the story. Even though the *Thottam* songs are the stories of the heroine (or hero), the exemplary nature of the main character is not pre-given; rather the continuous and often uninterrupted flow of narrative, as weaved through multiple events, gradually transforms an ordinary individual to a hero/heroine and eventually to a god. This transmutation of the human to a godly presence is carried out through the building up of a dynamic and moving narrative world.

Even though my primary focus is more on the songs of the local heroines and heroes, the *Theyyam* stories of north Malabar, it must be noted, are not confined to them. The *Baali*

Theyyam is an example of this. Baali, as we know, is one of the characters in the epic *Ramayana*, but in the *Thottam* of *Baali Theyyam*, the *Ramayana* is retold from the perspective of Baali. The mythical character Baali meets a person called Manummal Viswakarman in Hampi, who had gone there to collect some wood for his carpentry works. Baali, supposedly, accompanies the carpenter to north Malabar and becomes a significant part of the life and culture of the region. For the people of north Malabar, broadly, the *Baali Theyyam* is for their own god with whom they shared their miseries. The Baali of *Ramayana*, who is killed by Rama, becomes the hero of the people of north Malabar. The mythical character of Ramayana and the uncrowned king of Kishkindha becomes a *Theyyam* in north Malabar.[10] Baali is here the hero, who is not born as a human but becomes a part and parcel of the everyday lives of the people of north Malabar. Indeed, commenting on the great variety of *Theyyam* stories, Freeman pertinently observes:

> Many *teyyams*, those who represent the original prototype, I would argue, derive from the apotheosis of formerly living human beings. In apparent contrast, others are represented from their birth, as gods, usually as localised incarnations of Puranic Hindu deities, created for some special purpose in local circumstances. The 'human' *teyyams* themselves, however, seems to undergo apotheosis often after miraculous deeds and violent death, only because of the divine power inherent within them. Relatedly, many of the originally godly *teyyams*, likewise, are reported to have wandered about in human form, interacting with other human characters as members of their social communities. The essential point suggested here is that, there is no ontological break between the human and the divine in this cultural context, but rather a continuum of expressions of powers, always divine to the extent they manifest an awesomely heightened effectiveness, and always human, to the extent that they emerge from social relations in a narratively historical context. This narrative continuum of the human-divine power spectrum is fully consonant with, and perhaps even necessary, as the discursive support for a performative mode of worship whose whole rationale is the demonstrated transformation of low-caste human beings into the tangible embodiments of living gods (Freeman, 2003b: 318).

Importantly, the 'human-divine' continuum that Freeman alludes to is not only carried out in the performative context of the ritual, but also through the ways in which the narrative of each story is framed and built up. The characters in the *Thottam* songs, irrespective of their birth and origin, lead an ordinary life and engage in mundane

[10] Anil Kumar's (2021) recently published '*Munnootti Onnamathe Ramayanam*' (The Three Hundred and First Ramayana) is an extensive study on the social and historical significance of the *Baali Theyyam*.

activities depending on their social background. However, even while embracing the ordinary life like the people around them, there are situations carefully distributed in the narrative which place them one step above the common people they live with. In fact, throughout the story, beginning with the birth itself, there are elements strongly rooted in the narrative to express not the human, but the 'extra-human' nature of these characters. The challenge of the narrative, clearly, is to confine them into the world of humans, even while granting them capacities and qualities that make them as 'extraordinary'; as also to not let them circumvent the boundaries of the human world, principally by not completely making them 'supernatural' beings which would promptly take them away to the world of intangible gods. The tussle in the narrative is to keep them close to the world of humans, while also giving them powers which are not otherwise acquired or exemplified by the ordinary people. They face the toughest hurdles in their life, which even the strongest person cannot endure with; they suffer and sacrifice beyond what an ordinary person can bear; they hunt bravely, quite unlike the ordinary hunters; they battle with a fearless heart and determined mind like no other warrior does; they heal the diseases which even the expert physician cannot cure; and they perform miracles that eliminate the miseries of the ordinary people.

One of the major propelling factors in the narrative of the story is the presence of recurring conflicts as encountered by the main character. The narrative gradually moves forward, creates a situation of crisis or conflict which gets resolved with the violent and sudden death of the main character. In most of the stories of local heroines and hero, the central conflict is the social discrimination that had to endure both along the lines of caste and gender. The *Thottam* songs of these heroines/heroes contain innumerable references to the extreme violence that is unleashed upon them by the powerful. Most of the main characters of these songs belong to the lower caste communities who eventually become the victims of the arrogance and brutality of the upper caste people. Invariably, the conflict arises when the person belonging to the lower caste community becomes a threat to the caste pride of the upper caste landlords. There are also stories in which the women (belonging to both upper and lower castes) become prey to the sexual exploitation of the men in power. This is one of the cardinal situations in the narrative which eventually results in the death of the hero/heroine, who in turn transmutes into a god.

Undeniably, the conflict has a larger significance in the social history of north Malabar, where caste rules were supposedly more stringent, and the killing and later deification of the dead is often seen as a form of resistance. The death, however, is not a sudden one, but the narrative is gradually built by intensifying the tension which leads to the killing of the main character. Indeed, it is through this annulment of the main character that the existing conflict situation is resolved; and the 'death', instead, of creating a vacuum, catalyses the transformation of the 'human' persona into a god. The incident of death in the narrative, therefore, is not a 'dead-end' where the story suddenly stops; rather, the death is 'lively and vibrant', which initiates the movement of the narrative to the next level. More than the fear of death, the songs establish a ritual context in which contact with the dead is created and celebrated. The 'dead' is invoked, requested to appear, and resolve the issues of the people. Importantly, making a connection between death and deification, Stuart Blackburn has suggested that "a violent death transfers its power to all death deities", and that once "[d]riven inside at the moment of death, that power then becomes a source that can be summoned to counteract other elemental forces of disease, disaster, or even death" (Blackburn, 1988: 218).

Not surprisingly, there are stanzas in the *Thottam* songs that directly target and question the dominant people for their harmful behaviour towards the common mass. Indeed, the reason why these songs are considered as a form of resistance is because of these verses which openly exposed the discriminatory social arrangements. For example, a section of the *Thottam* song of the '*Pottan Theyyam*' goes like this:

> *Haven't you crossed the river in the boat which I rowed?*
> *The banana grown in our dirty yard is the offering to your god*
> *The basil flower grown in our dump yard is the garland of your god*
> *Still why do you argue over caste?*
> *When you are wounded, isn't it blood that gushes out?*
> *When I, too, am wounded isn't it blood?*[11]

In fact, while on the one hand these songs may be used to convey critical assertions of advice, instruction or reprimand from the ancestors or gods, on the other hand they may be used to express the prayers, hopes, fears, rivalries, anxieties, or grievances of

[11] These lines are taken from Chandran (2006: 49).

particular individuals that might otherwise not be openly divulged. At any rate, the stringent criticism of the discrimination, especially on the grounds of caste, as incorporated in the songs should be seen as a form of social commentary. The cause of the triggering death or the reason of conflict in the narrative is primarily rooted in the social world in which the main character is living. This conflict mostly emerges from a hierarchical relationship between people who represent two extremely different social conditions.

The legend behind the *Vishakandan Theyyam* is another example of this.[12] One day, Kandan, who belonged to the Thiyya community, happens to see some people carrying the body of a snake-bitten woman; Karumaarath Namboodiri, who was known in that region for treating snake-bites, had already stated that the woman was dead.[13] Kandan enquires with the people carrying the wrapped 'dead body' of the woman about the incident. Seeing the corpse, Kandan chants some prayers and brings the woman back to life. Hearing this news about Kandan's 'heroism' and the sudden popularity that he gained among the village people, Karumaarath Namboodiri could not control his anger. For the latter, it was a kind of humiliation that a lower caste person had gained more respect and fame than him, and even posed a threat to his 'unquestionable' knowledge. Having decided to take revenge, one night when Kandan was going back to his home, Namboodiri's servants stabbed him to death. However, the slaughtered Kandan becomes a ghost and haunts Karumaarath Namboodiri, creating many troubles in the latter's household. Namboodiri meets with an astrologer, seeking help for his miserable condition. As per instructions, it is decided that Kandan should be worshipped as a *Theyyam*, and thus a Thiyya man comes to be deified as *Vishakandan*. Evidently here, within the terms of the story, the primary conflict arises when Kandan directly encounters Karumaarath Namboodiri by posing a threat to the latter's social privilege and caste position. The conflict is intensified to such an extent Kandan is even murdered. Even

[12] This *Theyyam* is performed at Chaathanpalli *kavu*, Kolachery in Kannur District on the first day of Malayalam month Thulam (October-November). The *Theyyam* season in Malabar generally begins with this enactment. The names of the main characters in the legend follows above.

[13] *Kandan* is the name of the hero who gets the name '*Vishakandan*' after he is deified. '*Visham*' is venom/poison in Malayalam. Kandan gets this appellation from the fact that he brings to life a person who was thought to have been dead by a snake-bite. The second named character, Karumaarath Namboodiri, is a reference to an upper caste landlord in Kolachery, Kannur.

though the confrontation is between two people belonging to two different social strata, it encapsulates the larger socio-cultural scenario of prevailing north Malabar society. The situation of conflict and confrontation is gradually built through the narrative, and finds a kind of resolution when the hero is killed. However, this resolution does not mark the sudden closure of the narrative; rather, the event escalates the movement of the narrative.

It must be reiterated that the narrative of the songs primarily maintains its flow through constantly presenting different conflict situations. Importantly, yet, even as these situations are not isolated ones, there is an underlying contingency between them; and often resolving one conflict gives rise to another one. It is thus through this recurring creation of conflicts and their 'solutions' that the narrative moves forward. All the same, the narrative world of the songs is vibrant and dynamic not only in terms of the formation of such situations, but also in terms of the movement of geographical settings within the narrative. The larger landscape in which the songs are set is the region of north Malabar. However, the ways in which the region is incorporated into the narrative is somewhat remarkable. One of the pervasive central themes in most of the *Thottam* songs is that of travel – essentially, the journey that the main characters are forced to undertake due to the life situations encountered. The narrative of the songs presents detailed descriptions about the movement of characters from one region to another. The places invoked are not mythical ones, but places in real, situated within and outside the boundary of the north Malabar region. The songs thus become an excursion through the landscape of the region, often doing the role of an itinerary. In fact, the movement of the narrative world happens through the constantly shifting geographical locations.

Accordingly, the notion of 'movement' within the narrative world happens not only in terms of the sequential life situations which the main characters confront, but also in terms of a transition across different places. This latter movement is not marked by the sudden shift from one place to another; rather, it is embodied, in the sense that the places are not passively incorporated in the lives of the characters but there is a continuous and vibrant dialectical conversation between the places and the individuals concerned. Indeed, the invocation of the region of north Malabar, and the captivating ways in which

the category of region is incorporated in the songs, reinforces the innate bond that the *Thottam* songs shares with the region as a whole. Clearly, the sets of meanings are not pinned or superimposed on the land. Rather, as has been urged elsewhere, and primarily through the medium of practical activities, the landscape comes to enter directly into the constitution of persons, not quite only as a source of nourishment, but also as a source of knowledge (see Ingold, 2000: 57).

Further framings of the narrative world of Thottams

Importantly, when we ask any *Thottam* practitioner or *Theyyam* performer what the songs signify, their immediate reply would be that they constitute the stories or myths behind each *Theyyam*. By and large, for them, the stories are the songs and the songs are the stories, and it becomes difficult to separate one from the other. The mutual implication of the story and the song has an intriguing significance not only at the level of the text and/or narrative, but also in the social and the cultural schemas of the region of north Malabar. These stories, as emphasized, are part of the collective memory of a region and are strongly rooted in the organisation and manifestation of the ritual assemblage of *Theyyam*. Even though the myths behind each *Theyyam* are popular and pervasive across the region as a part of the oral culture, they are known to be primarily contained in these songs and their ritual renderings. Therefore, there exists a historically significant as well as narratively coherent relationship between these local legends and the songs. The songs are not mere 'carriers' of the story, but as the category of the *Thottam* songs creates its own frame, each is capable of exhibiting their inherent features and qualities both in the textualized and performative form.

Interestingly, these songs are known to be intricately connected with the cultural matrix of north Malabar not only because of the repertoire of regional legends that these songs contain, but also in terms of the language (or languages) in which they are composed. M. V. Vishnu Namboodiri, who wrote extensively on various folk songs in Kerala, comments on the language used in *Thottam* songs:

> The language of the *Thottam* songs, which are handled by the regional artists of north Malabar, undoubtedly incorporates the language uses which are inherent to that region. At the same time, the language used in these songs might vary according to the community who deliver these songs. The language territory of

> these songs is voracious as it includes words and literary usages from different languages such as Tulu-Kannada, Tulu-Malayalam, the colloquial language used in north Malabar and *Manipravalam* (Vishnu Namboodiri, 1990: 371).

The body of the songs, both at the level of syntax and semantics, have evolved from and are informed by the structure of language and learning system peculiar to the region of north Malabar. Even the sensitivities and meanings that the *Thottam* songs embody is rooted in the language and literary resources inherent in the cultural and linguistic arenas of the region, which even has the potential to go beyond what the visual plane of the narrative can offer. I will not be going deep into the language structure of the songs, since each song, at the level of language especially, is crafted by expressing the nuances of the region's shared cultural values somewhat differently across social groups. Rather, I will try to give a sense of how the robust narrative world of the songs is created by employing multiple literary devices. Thus, elaborating on the significance of language and literary devices in folk songs, the American folklorist Barre Toelken has observed:

> Vernacular poetry gives voice to the recurrent, traditional, or striking activities and values that continue to animate everyday life. In doing so, the text of a folksong combines recognizable human actions into constellations of foregrounded meaning, into concrete dramatizations of cultural abstractions. The language used is the language of the everyday community and not the refined or specialised or private language of unique individuals. A fuller appreciation of the range and depth of vernacular expression leads to a greater comprehension of shared meanings in everyday life (Toelken, 1995: 28).

Indeed, the ways in which the narrative world is expressed in *Thottam* songs, primarily at the level of language, is especially noteworthy. The songs, while converging on a similar and seemingly 'simple' plot pattern, often expand and intensify the narrative by capitalising on the potencies of the vernacular knowledge system. The extensive use of literary devices in the songs, such as metaphors, metonyms, similes etc.[14] pushes them more towards descriptiveness than towards the chronological ordering of the story. Of course, most of the *Thottam* songs do follow a chronological unravelling of the narrative world; and yet the robust and detailed descriptions present in these songs can often be seen as shifting the focus from the linear and logical arrangement of the narrative to the effective articulation of experiential and lucid imageries that stem from the larger

[14] These are some of the common literary devices used in these songs. However, every *Thottam* has its own ways of employing multiple literary devices.

framework of the story. For example, we make take the following lines from the *Thottam* of the *Vettakkarumakan Theyyam* which describes the bodily features of *Vettakkarumakan*:

> *The lustrous contour of the body looks like a dark cloud*
> *Like peacock feathers, the hair is fluttering*
> *The eyes resemble a deep and dark abyss*
> *And an incomparable beard* [15]

Here these lines are not describing any particular event in the story, but giving a description of the majesty of the character. The vivid imagery presented through the artful use of similes makes the meanings richer and more engaging. The act of comparison carried out in the above lines through the recurrent usage of simile articulates a single idea in a dramatized way. What is more, the pair of images chosen for comparison is not suggestive of any abstract ideas, but stem from the shared cultural cues of a population.

These descriptions often involve the narration of the qualities of the gods, their heroic deeds and also the terms of their praising. The intentional and artful use of literary devices in order to build the narrative demonstrates the poetical and rhetorical potential of the language. These descriptions, as rendered, are not just narrating events, but are capable of creating and conditioning meanings that are culturally specific. While emphasising on the properties of the 'religious' language of ritual and its capacity to not confine ritual to plain convention or belief, the astute anthropologist Webb Keane has fervently urged: "I want to suggest that the semiotic properties of religious language commonly help make present what would otherwise, in the course of ordinary experience be absent or imperceptible, or make that absence presupposable by virtue of the special means used to overcome it" (Keane, 2008: 120). Even more emphatically, the descriptive realm of the narrative is so exuberant enough that even the mundane act of 'eating' or 'walking' or 'sleeping' and the extraordinary activities of 'killing someone' or 'battling' are explained with equal and sheer precision giving a lucid image of what is happening in the story. Clearly, the use of the many literary devices in the songs becomes

[15] Believed to be born as the son of Lord Siva and Parvati, *Vettakkarumakan* is a deity of hunting. *Vetta* in Malayalam means 'hunt', and *Makan* means 'son'. The Malayalam version of the lyrics has been taken from Vishnu Namboodiri (1990: 409), and translated by myself.

meaningful not in their arbitrariness, but in the deployment of them in particular situations. The literary devices are never randomly and arbitrarily applied in the songs; they stem, rather, from the cultural values and social surroundings of a society in order to give culturally specific meanings to actions or situations which are otherwise considered as mundane.

Significantly, there are *Thottam* songs which last for less than an hour, and there are also those which are sung for more than 5-6 hours. One of the primary reasons for this difference in duration is the intensity and thickness of the descriptions embedded in these songs. The crux of every *Thottam* is the stories which contain thick and elaborated descriptions. As we have been saying, they are not just about the narration of incidents, but also heap praises on the gods for the extraordinary lives they lived. However, the length and the intensity of the description vary depending upon many factors. When I met Sasi Peruvannan, who is known for performing the *Pulitheyyam* at my mother's native place Keezhallur in Kannur district,[16] he elaborated on the descriptive nature of these songs:

> In general, we can say that the *thottam* of the local heroes who became *daivakkaru* are very long. There are exceptions like *Baali theyyam*, which has a very long *thottam*. But the songs of heroes are generally very long. They contain detailed descriptions about the birth and childhood, the important incidents that happened in their life, their tragic proportions, and ultimately how they became the god. Because these are our gods, people from other places might not know the story. Even the people of these days who belong to this region don't know the story! For example, the story of Ramayana everyone knows. This is because it is everywhere. But the story of *Kathivanoor Veeran* or *Maakkam* is only present in our area. So when we perform these *theyyams* who are murdered by the upper caste people, and also who had a heroic life, it is very much important to inform the audience about the heroic life they lived and the struggles they had to face (Interview conducted on 20 February 2020, at Keezhallur, Kannur).

Yet another significant feature of *Thottam* songs is the extensive use of rhyme throughout the lyrics. The persistent use of rhyming schemes indeed adds poetic beauty to the songs, although this is not the only meaning it represents. In fact, when I pointedly asked about

[16] In my mother's native place, *Pulitheyyam* is called as '*Maathavu*', which means 'mother'. The people of the locality consider this *Theyyam* as their mother goddess.

the significance of rhythm in *hottam songs*, Sasi Peruvannan gave me a fairly elaborate answer:

> When you look at the lines of these songs, you can see that there is an extensive use of '*praasam*' [meaning 'rhyming words'] in these songs. It is one of the common features of almost all the *Thottam* songs. I think one of the reasons why these songs use *praasam* is that it makes it easy for the singers to learn these songs. *Thottam* songs are generally passed from one generation to another orally. We learn them by memorising them, and even by observing our elders sing. Since childhood we accompany our elders to see their performance, observe them singing and listen to the lyrics carefully. That's how we learn these songs. In such situation, rhymed lines really help us to memorise the lyrics. When we sing one line, we know that the other also starts with, or at least that there is some sound connection between the first line and the next line. Also, our forefathers who created these songs did not have good command over language like the upper caste people. We did not have access to education, like they had. So, by using rhyming words and ordinary vocabulary, our forefathers created these divine songs in distinctive ways. It is easy like this, right? (From the Interview, as above)

Here we can see that the use of literary devices such as rhyming schemes has a wider significance in their capacity to register multi-layered meanings, which not only enhances the poetic beauty of the songs but also informs about the social and cultural peculiarities of the region overseeing the artful employment of these literary devices.

The songs, as reiterated, are not shallow reporting of the lives of local heroines and heroes, but often unfold like a 'live commentary' or an 'immediate and elaborated description' of what was happening in a remote and yet resonant past. Pointedly, the way in which these songs capture a sense of 'pastness' in the narrative is striking. The narrative world seems to describe the 'presentness of the past', as it were, by extensively elaborating on the subtle details of the story. It is structured in such a way that the story is narrated by someone who is reporting the events as if she/he has witnessed them. Those who engage with the songs - whether through singing or bearing witness - become the 'spectators' who harness the events happening in the story from a close proximity. However, often they are not just spectators who observe the events from a distance, but are also able to feel the inner emotions, thoughts and moral dilemmas of the main character through the inner monologues employed in the songs. The songs thus are not just static embodiments of the stories; rather, they travel through and with the 'moving present' in the stories. The idea of a permanent, single narrator often collapses in the

case of *Thottam* songs, and just about anyone who engages with the song happens to re-experience the story. The reporting of inner monologues and detailed conversations between different characters unfolds as a vivid and dynamic alternative world to the reader/audience of the songs. The reported speech, in fact, enables to increase the stylistic and ideological heterogeneity by drawing on multiple speech events, voices and points of view. It also opens up possibilities for renegotiating meanings and social relations beyond the parameters of the performance itself (see also Bauman and Briggs, 1990: 70).

Such a vivid narrative world, clearly, is not merely commenting on the distant past in retrospection, but also brings about a 'presentness of the past' which is dynamic and moving. To be sure, the unfolding of the lively world in the narrative happens not in a linear manner, but often oscillates between different time frames. They are neither captured in a chronological order, nor adhere to the conventional temporalities. Palpably, in the rich narrative world of these songs, we have characters that grow from a child to a man/woman in days, who travel to distant lands in seconds, and who exhibit extra-human capacities. Accordingly, the narrative worlds of these songs are bringing about a sense of 'distant past' through lucid and vivid narrative techniques, and also by "defying conventional temporalities, eliciting, in the breach, a direct engagement with the senses and the unconscious, allowing for alternate modalities - a disarticulation and re-articulation of the linear progression of the form" (Conrad, 2014: 341).

The people who engage with the songs thus enter into a different world, which is very different from their everydayness, but at the same time part of a memory they commonly share. Through the songs, the stories which are already known are discovered. The rediscovering of the story, which is already known and very popular in the region, happens every time people engage with these songs. Thus, talking about how time and narrative are connected, the folklore scholar cited above, JoAnn Conrad makes a further interesting comment on the alternative temporalities that arise when people engage with folk narratives: "The conventionality of traditional narratives allows for a readerly/audience focus on interruption - an entry into alternative temporalities. This interpenetration of time requires a simultaneous apprehension of the whole (gestalt)

narrative which is made possible by its very traditionalism" (Conrad, 2014: 340; see also Ricoeur, 1980: 184).

Even though I have outlined some general observed patterns in the way the narrative world is manifested in these songs, it should be noted that the great variety of local legends present in every nook and corner of the north Malabar region is arranged within the framework of the songs in distinctive ways. In each *Thottam* song, irrespective of its significance and length, the narrative world is unravelled using the abundant possibilities of language and culture and also by employing multiple narrative techniques.

The Exchange of Words: On the 'Structure' of Thottam Songs

As elaborated in the foregoing section and sub-sections, the narrative world of the stories embedded in the songs (especially of the regional heroines and heroes who are deified and later worshipped) largely follows a common thread with ingrained historical and cultural resonances. Having elaborated on the larger pattern followed by the narrative of the stories, which form the backbone of the *Thottam* songs, it becomes pertinent to look at how these stories are getting unravelled within the framework of the songs (which exists both in textualized and performative forms). Before going to the performative context of the songs (where they are rendered as ritual activity), I will look into the textualized form of the songs to see the patterns of internal organisation and structure within their world.

As repeatedly stressed, these songs recount and 'rediscover' the stories which are already known to a region. However, both in their textualized form and the performative realm, the songs unravel themselves not merely as a 'carrier' of these regional legends, but present a formal structure having different segments. They have a fixed pattern, having multiple delineated parts arranged between a definite beginning and an ending. Even though this structure is almost the same in both these realms - primarily in terms of the sequencing of the different sections - the precise meanings that these patterns acquire in these two different worlds needs to be understood separately. My particular concern in this section is the structure of the *Thottam* songs in its textualized form, so as to grasp

how this structuring informs the world of *Thottam* songs both within and outside their ritual context.

Clueing into the 'structure' of the Thottam song

Every *Thottam* song begins with a section known as '*Varavili*'. It is the entry to the world of the *thottam* songs, as also to the cosmic world of *Theyyam*. The word '*varavili*' literally means 'a call to come'; it is a call, or an invitation, to the *Theyyam* to come to the physical place where the ritual is happening and to enter into the body of the performer. Even in those *Theyyams* which do not have elaborate *Thottam* songs, the *varavili* is a significant portion which cannot be avoided. *Varavili* is not very lengthy, being a collection of few lines, which together contain a set of meanings. Generally, every *Thottam* song has more than one *varavili*, with the meanings conveyed through each meant to establish an atmosphere for an appropriate and morally suitable entry point to the ritual. The first *varavili* of almost every *Thottam* song is an open command, directed to the people who are gathered at the ritual space, to venerate the lightened lamp and the sacred weapon kept inside the shrine by throwing rice grains at them. Everyone who is gathered at the place throws the grain, the idea behind the gesture being that a place is calling forth the spirit of the *Theyyam* to arrive and bless the people gathered.

This first *varavili*, which is an open instruction to enact a particular act, marks the beginning of the ritual at large and the singing activity in particular by ensuring the presence and participation of the people gathered. The second *varavili* is intended to create a pleasant and sacred atmosphere for the entry of the *Theyyam*. These lines are directed at bringing prosperity, good health and long life to everyone. For example, a section of the *varavili* in *Puthiya Bhagavathy Thottam* goes as follows:

> *Without inflicting any pain, suffering and misery to the village, swaroopam, the king who rules the country, the Kanalaadi who perform theyyam, the Komaram who accompany you, the cattle and their kids, and to all the common people here, please come and listen to the thottam I am singing ...*[17]

[17] *Puthiya Bhagavathy*, one of the most prevalent *Theyyam* in the region of north Malabar, is a goddess who is believed to cure diseases, especially smallpox. The myth behind *Puthiya Bhagavathy* says that she is the daughter of Lord Siva and was born out of the fire ember to eradicate all the diseases.

Without doubt, the second *varavili* is not a direct continuation of the first one; and, in fact, the lines of both these *varavili* are separated from each other especially in terms of the lyrical content they contain and convey. While the first *varavili* is often an open instruction given by the *Kolakkaran* (the one who is 'going to be' the *Theyyam*) to the people gathered at the ritual space to enact a certain act in order to ensure the participation and blessing of an entire region for the successful completion of the ritual, the second *varavili* is a request that the same *Kolakkaran* is making to the god to bestow a suitable and fulfilling atmosphere for the ritual. These two sets of *varavili* are separated from each other not only in terms of the natural progression of the lyrics, but also in terms of the mood that they attempt to bring about. In contrast to the first *varavili*, which instructs the people to perform a certain activity, the mood of the second *varavili* that follows suddenly changes to that of a plea or request, even though both these *varavili* are recited by the same person (the performer/*kolakkaran*) in the ritual space. Even though separated along the lines of the lyrics, the common theme that connects both these *varavili* is the idea of marking a sacred and appropriate initiation for the ritual and the singing activity in particular.

Every *Thottam* song has more than one *varavili*, although the first two sets of *varavili* are the same for most *Thottams*. It is in the third *varavili* that the *Theyyam* is named and summoned. This *varavili* is explicitly addressed to the *Theyyam*, where the god is literally invited to come and listen to the song that is being sung. There are different ways in which these names are incorporated in this *varavili*; some even contain many names of the *Theyyam*. This follows a general pattern, and the rough translation of this *varavil*i goes like this: "*Come and accomplish the things and heroism intended. Arrive in pomp and hear the songs of praise that I utter and speak good and bad and depart*". In fact, in this variant of *Puthiya Bhagavathy*, it is recited:

> *Cannot call you by a place, mother, since your place is unknown. Cannot call you by name, since your name is also unknown. If a place name is necessary, it could be Villapuram, Kollapuram, Thathottam, Perumala ...* [all places in the north Malabar region known for the *Puthiya Bhagavathy Theyyam*], *and if a name is necessary, it is Puthiya Bhagavathy Amma*.

Evidently, in this *varavili*, the goddess Puthiya Bhagavathy is called by her name as well as by mentioning the many places that she resides. All in all, the name of the *Theyyam*

and the respective regions associated with it will vary. Krishnan Peruvannan urged me the following:

> Puthiya Bhagavathy resides in many places. She is present everywhere. So it is difficult to call her by attaching a single place name. When in the *thottam* it is mentioned '*We cannot call you by a place, since your place is unknown*', it is not that we don't know the name of the place. We know so many places where she resides, but she doesn't belong to only a single place. That is why we mention the names of certain places which are known for Puthiya Bhagavathy. These places usually have some connection with the myth of the *Theyyam* (Interview conducted on 16 March 2020 at Kolachery, Kannur).

Importantly, the *varavili* that includes the name of the *Theyyam* is considered as very sacred, as it is through this invocation that the god is arriving in the ritual space. It can be seen that the words used in the *varavili* by themselves are not 'inherently sacred', but they 'acquire' sacredness when it is rendered in a particular ritual context. Here, the 'naming' of the god becomes significant. The idea, clearly, is to not conjure up a non-existing distant entity, but to summon the gods who already exist, who are very closely attached to the lives of people who sing and perform these songs. The names of the places which are mentioned in the *varavili*, as already mentioned, are the different locations in the north Malabar region, which are very familiar to the common people over there. Evidently, the power of the gods is not vested in another intangible realm that is unknown and unfamiliar to the people; rather, it is spread across the geographical region where the people live. The *Theyyam*, in its godliness, is not someone who descends from a mysterious place onto the earth, as it is usually seen in the case of high Hindu gods, but is someone who has to 'arrive', whose power and divinity are not restricted to any particular space, but pervasive across the region. Indeed, the fundamental difference between the act of 'descending' and 'arriving', as manifested through the initial part of the song (the *varavili*, that is), is not merely to showcase how these acts are qualitatively distinct; it also sets up an entry-point into the world of the *Theyyam* for which divinity and sacred power is not concentrated on any unknown or unfamiliar space, but is all pervasive. The *varavili* thus opens up by conveying the very essence of the event in which it occurs. The very beginning of the *Thottam* song hence reflexes back upon itself, and signifies the universe that the ritual unravels.

By and large, the *varavili* is almost the same for all the *Thottam* songs, except for alterations in the name of the *Theyyam* and the places associated. In that sense, the *varavili* is a fixed section in the repository of *Thottam* songs, where except the deity's name and the places alluded, the rest of it remains the same. However, this fixity should not be seen as an 'insignificant repetition' of the same lines in various *Theyyam* ritual performances in different contexts. The fixity associated with this particular portion signals not towards a 'lifeless, repetitive and rigid' section; rather, this invariability is suggestive of its vitality, one capable of encapsulating the cosmic world of the *Theyyam*. The words in the *varavili* directly open up to the world of the *Theyyam*.

The portion that comes after *varavili* is '*Stuti*', which can be translated as eulogy. They are meant to venerate the *Theyyam* and other deities and seek their blessings for the uninterrupted fulfilment of the ritual. The *stuti* is mainly addressed to the *Theyyam* who is going to occupy a particular ritual space, also to Ganapathi, Saraswathi and other local gods of importance. Seeking the blessings from each god, the *stuti* eulogises their power and divinity. For example, the Saraswathi *stuti* goes like this:

> *Saraswathi, please come and occupy in my mouth*
> *We are not educated enough to recite the history of god*
> *By taking away all my ignorance and broken words*
> *Bless me with the ability to sing without any mistakes*

Here the singer is praying to Saraswathi to assist in not making any mistakes or using improper words while reciting these songs. As per the Hindu mythology, Saraswathi is known as the goddesses of knowledge, music and learning. The intention behind singing Saraswathi *stuti* in the beginning of the *Thottam* song is to facilitate their deliverance without making any mistakes while singing, especially with the words and the lines. Thus, a further line in the *stuti* goes as follows: "*Driving away all the errors please let this song of truth we sing reside in our tongue forever*".

The *Thottam*, as we have seen, is a song that narrates the story of a human turned into a god who is thought to have existed, and accordingly seen as a song of truth. Whatever is being delivered through the song is taken to have actually happened in the past; and, given that 'uneducated' people are prone to error, the ostensible challenge is to deliver

the song in the 'right way'. The *stuti* of most *Thottam* are not very long, but they are sung plainly to acknowledge the presence of other 'significant' gods and make the ritual space even more auspicious. The *stuti* is also, sometimes, addressed to the local gods who are known in the place where the *Theyyam* is happening. The practitioners, however, perceive a difference between singing the *stuti* to the high caste gods and 'their gods'. Sasi Peruvannan categorically observed:

> *Stuti* is acknowledging the presence of different gods. When we call 'our gods' (He is here referring to the *Theyyam* as 'our god', setting them apart from the gods of high Hinduism) to come and make them present to the people through us, we need to seek the blessings of Ganapathi and Saraswathi as well. Ganapathi is known as '*Vighneswaran*', who is capable of eliminating all the difficulties and hurdles that come in our way. Saraswathi is the goddesses of knowledge. We need to have good command over the words and the lines of the songs when we sing. The lines should flow from one to another uninterrupted, without any gap. Then only the *thottam* will have its effect. For that, it is important to seek the blessings of Saraswathi (Interview conducted on 20 February 2020, at Keezhallur, Kannur).

The *stuti* indeed occupies a discrete position in the *thottam* songs, even while being identified as a significant portion of it. Some have even claimed that the *stuti* is fundamentally different from what is called as *Thottam* songs (Vishnu Namboodiri, 1990: 31). Clearly, the gods who are praised in the *stuti*, such as Saraswathi and Ganapathi, do not belong to the world of the *Theyyam*; they reside outside the purview of the pantheon of the *Theyyam*, often seen as occupying not just a different world but a contrasting world. The divide between these two worlds immanently points to the hierarchical relationship between them, as fundamentally based on the system of caste. As already seen, the regional legends behind the *Theyyam* allude extensively on the persons who fought discriminations of various kinds before getting to be deified. In fact, many identify the *Theyyam* as one of the strategies by which a living space is created by the dominated, through the medium of which they attempt to stave off the exercise of arbitrary authority by those in power (see Menon, 1993: 189). However, the portion of *stuti*, which is an unavoidable part of all the *Thottam* songs, forward the possibility of having a set of relations and associations between gods belonging to different worlds in the living space created by the *Theyyam* ritual.

Indeed, very often, a *stuti* explicitly addressing the *Theyyam* immediately follows another one honouring the gods of high Hinduism. Remaining as a fixed part of all the *Thottam* songs, the *stuti* encompasses a universe in which the notion of 'divine' is established and communicated through acknowledging the presence of multiple gods belonging to varying realms. As the practitioners themselves say, the *stutis* are meant to seek blessings from the gods, as well as to acknowledge their presence before the ritual begins. Therefore, what the *stuti* intends to create through the ritual speech is a temporary space of accommodation and harmony, which demands the recognition of hierarchically positioned gods. All the same, such an incantation is not capable of casting away the constraints imposed by the social hierarchies, which is directly connected to the religious beliefs prevalent in the society.

The social world of these two categories of gods is extremely different and their jurisdiction hardly overlaps. Therefore, in *stuti*, while the hierarchically positioned gods are not brought on the same plane, what still happens is the 'encompassment' of one by (or into) another.[18] However, this 'encompassment' in the case of the *Theyyam* ritual is not a one-way process in which the encompassing/encompassed relation is a permanent or fixed one, but should be seen as displaying inherent ambiguities. The fact that *stuti* stays outside the purview of the narrative world of the local legend further reinforces this. As we have seen, the *stuti* largely forms a section of the song which contributes to heightening the ritual efficacy of the *Thottam*. The pragmatic necessity behind the recital of *stuti* thus shows the 'dissociated attachment' which this particular section has with the overall structure of the songs. The acknowledgement of the presence of high Hindu gods and seeking their blessings in a ritual like *Theyyam*, one that apparently challenges the religious worship of the upper castes and openly questions social discrimination, shows how this ritual organisation of worship and the notion of divinity associated with it are encapsulated within the framework of the caste determined social hierarchy. This is certainly not to suggest that the counter narrative which the *Theyyam* presents should be undermined. However, the *stuti* occupies a peculiar position as it clearly stands 'outside' of the narrative world of the *Theyyam* legend, although at the level of its enactment it

[18] Dumont identifies 'hierarchy' as precisely 'the encompassing of the contrary' (see his 1980: 239ff).

(*stuti*) becomes an important element in the overall framework of the ritual. It is also imperative to note that even in the *Thottam* songs that question and challenge the social hierarchy of caste and gender, *stuti* is present. Accordingly, *stuti* is significant, not quite at the level of narrative, but at the level of the ritual performance, in a way assuring or affirming the hierarchies inherent to the organisation of religious worship.

Thus, commenting on the features of *varavili* and *stuti*, Y. V. Kannan, who is himself a *Theyyam* practitioner and has done extensive research on the form, explicitly states:

> The *varavili* and *stuti* can be considered as the preparatory phases before we actually begin to get into the story of the *Theyyam*. Also, for the singer it is a warming up session where he can adjust his voice, rhythm and tune before beginning to sing the long *thottam* (Interview conducted on 19 December 2019, at Payyannur).

Indeed, after the *varavili* and *stuti*, the songs slowly move into the narrative, the life story of the *Theyyam*. Here too, the narrative element of the *Thottam* exemplifies specific points of transition. The entry point into the narrative part is identified by its practitioners as the 'main *thottam*', which is organised into different segments often referred to as '*Anchadi*' and '*Polichupaatt*'. The *anchadi* of the Thottam song is generally directed at praising the deities in question and highlighting their historical significance (Vishnu Namboodiri, 1990: 32). In fact, this latter scholar, Vishnu Namboodiri, in his book on *Thottam* songs, elaborates on this *anchadi* segment, which has supposedly several meanings and significance in multiple contexts, and not quite only in the *Thottam*. The word '*anchadi*' is the combination of '*anchu*' and '*adi*', where the former refers to number five and the latter apparently has several meanings. Calling attention to various sources, Vishnu Namboodiri says that *anchadi* is often understood as songs having five lines or bear reference to a short moral song. The '*adi*' in '*anchadi*' is further taken to signify rhythm. But, of course, the *anchadi* in *Thottam* songs can also be identified as stanzas that need not necessarily have five lines (Vishnu Namboodiri, 1990: 32-33).

The other segment, '*polichupaatt*' also has similar features. It literally means 'praising song', and they again mainly contain lines which praise the *Theyyam* and venerate their heroic deeds. This section of the songs elaborates on the myth behind the *Theyyam*, their journey across regions, their multifarious activities and so on. It must be noted that the

'*polichupaattu*' is present in many other folk and ritual songs across Kerala. Thus, commenting specifically on the various songs in which '*polichupaattu*' is a part, Vishnu Namboodiri points out:

> In regional songs, many varieties of *polichupaattu* are present. In ritual songs such as *Kalam Paattu* and *Kenthron Paattu*, *polichupaattu* is sung for the singers to receive paddy and clothes. In *Poorakkali*, the *polichupaattu* is a prayer song. The *polichupaattu* is also known as '*Kattappaattu*' sung by the Pulluvar urging for a prosperous harvest. '*Pooppoli Paattu*' sung during the festival of Onam should also be remembered here. However, the *polichupaattu* sung during *Theyyam* and *Thira* is entirely different from these. The common feature of the *polichupaattu* in *Theyyam* is that they are songs which venerate the deities (Vishnu Namboodiri, 1990: 38-39).[19]

Another commonly present feature in the *polichupaattu* of almost all songs, including *Thottam*, is the usage of the word '*Polika*', which can roughly be translated as 'May it prosper'. A few lines from the *polichupaattu* sung as a part of *Kalam Paattu* will illustrate the point:

[Malayalam Version]	[English Translation]
Polika polika	*May it prosper, may it prosper*
Panthal polika, kalam polika	*Let the shed prosper, the Kalam prosper*
Kalamittoraacharyan kai polika Kalam prosper[20]	*The hand of the master who made the*

Similarly, the *polichupaattu* of *Bhagavathy Theyyam* presents itself thus:

> *Polika Polika Bhagavathiye*
> *Polika Bhagvathiye*
> *Bhagavathy piranna thirunaal polika*
> *Naadu polika bhagavathiye nagaram polika*
> *Ooru polika Bhavatahiye, ulakam vaazhka*

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[19] *Kalam Paattu* is a ritual art form, observed primarily in north Malabar. A *kalam* or picture of the deity is drawn on the floor using colours, and the song known as *Kalam Paattu* is recited for the well-being of women. The practice is primarily observed by the Kaniyan caste, a traditional astrologer caste listed under OBC by the Kerala government. *Kenthron Paattu* is the regional usage of the wider '*Gandharvan Paattu*'. It is also a ritual art form present in north Malabar, and is sung mainly by the Vannan caste and likewise meant for the well-being of the women. *Poorakkali* is a traditional dance ritual performed by men at Bhagavathy temples in north Malabar during the *Pooram* festival. The Pulluvar are a scheduled caste group in Kerala, who are known for singing *Pulluvan Paattu* as a part of snake-worshipping traditions in Kerala. Lastly, Onam is an annual festival celebrated across Kerala. It is a harvest festival, celebrated to commemorate the *Asura* king Mahabali.

[20] Obviously, I have added the Malayalam version in order to emphasize on the significance of the word '*Polika*' in these songs. The Malayalam version is taken from the book *Mukhadarshanam* [The Vision of Face] by Vishnu Namboodiri (2003) and translated into English by myself.

The above lines can be roughly translated as:

> *May Bhagavathy prosper*
> *May the auspicious day on which Bhagavathy is born prosper*
> *May the village prosper, may the city prosper*
> *May the town prosper, may the world prosper*

Indeed, the above-mentioned examples, taken from two different song traditions, show the broad similarity in the nature of *polichupaattu*. In fact, the repeated usage of the word '*polika*' is also present in the songs sung by the Porunar community of the Tamil region. Thus, commenting on the significance of this particular word, Kailasapathy makes a connection between these songs and the larger Dravidian culture:

> One of the expressions used for praising persons or things is the optative '*polika*', may [it] prosper. The word *poli* means to flourish, prosper, abound, increase, live long and prosperously. The meaning of its cognates in the other Dravidian languages strongly suggests that its primary meaning has agricultural implications (Kailasapathy, 1968: 68).

We may further note in this connection that, as in the case of *Anchadi* and *Polichupaattu*, the section known as '*Stuti*' is also present in many other song traditions. For example, in *Kalam Paattu*, there are many *stutis* addressed to the gods of high Hinduism such as Vishnu, Ganapati, Saraswati and the like (the same trend can also be found in *Thottam* songs, as mentioned before). It can be seen that the many ritual song traditions of Kerala, primarily practiced by the lower caste groups, share very similar patterns in their content and structure. Even though their rendering context and narrative world are different, these multiple song traditions should be perceived as mutually contributing in the creation of each other.

Apart from these segments, many *Thottam* songs have also sections known as '*Thaalavritham*' and '*Neettukavi*'. *Thaalam* in Malayalam means rhythm, and as such the section known as *thaalavritham* in the *Thottam* song gives importance to rhythm. This portion is also, one might say, a kind of *stuti*. With reference to *Neettukavi*, '*neettuka*' means to stretch or elongate. Understandably, many practitioners identify this portion as one in which more importance should be given to the tune in which it is sung. At any rate, both these sections are seen as eulogies addressed to the *Theyyam*, which gives considerably more importance and priority to the tune and rhythm of the song. Of

course, there are also *Thottam* songs in which these sections are not present. All the same, these variations in the structure of the songs and the different names attached to these sections clearly points to the flexibility inherent to the *Thottam* as a category. As has already been pointed out, a great variety of *Thottam* songs are present not only in terms of the legends invoked, but also in terms of how each song is organised and constituted within its own framework.

In most of the songs, the final section is referred as '*Urachil Thottam*', which marks the moment of the transformation of the human performer into the spirited *Theyyam*. The word '*urachil*' broadly means 'possession'. The *urachil thottam* of the *Rakta Chamundi theyyam*[21] can be presented thus:

> *Daughter wearing the sword and dancing*
> *Three-eyed mother Chamundi, the terrible*
> *Coming in the form of Sakthi*
> *Rakta Chamundi, goddesses, come in front of me*
> *Shining bright with snakes in the hair*
> *Blood, black and purple coloured*
> *...*
> *Good breasts and good nose*
> *Bhairavi, appear in this place*

As should be evident, in this particular *Urachil thottam* the physical features of the god are described. They are meant to heighten the efficacy of the ritual situation, since it is after the recital of this portion that the human turns to the *Theyyam*.

Even though it is said that the *Thottam* songs are delivered before the commencement of the *Theyyam* dance, there is a section of the songs which is rendered after the completion of the ritual dance. This latter portion is known as '*Munpasthanam*', which is delivered by the *Kolakkaran* himself after the completion of the dance performance. In *munpasthanam*, a condensed version of the legend in prose form is delivered in a particular tune. All in all, it can be seen that, within the structure of the songs, the local legend which form the narrative basis of the song is expressed, contained and transported

[21] This is one of the famous female *Theyyams* in north Malabar. According to the mythology, Chamundi is another name of the goddess Kali. Chamundi is also associated with goddess Durga, who becomes *Raktha* (blood) *Chamund*i when she drinks the blood of the demons killed by her.

through various segments and sections. Of course, it cannot be stated that all the *Thottam* songs follow the same pattern. The naming of the different parts can vary, and the overall narrative need not necessarily be unravelled in a chronological manner. For example, in the *Thottam* of *Kathivanoor Veeran*, the segments of the main song are known by different names and also the story is told as a flashback. We will be examining this *Thottam* in some detail in the next chapter, and therefore defer further comment.

The names given to the different segments and sections of the song directly allude to what they are each meant to convey and what their role or responsibility is with respect to the overall framework of the song. A particularly interesting aspect to be noted, while exploring the connection between these segments and sections, is that there is no single logical or narrative link that connects them together (although they are all part of the ritual situation). Thus, with respect to the content of the verses that constitute each part, *varavili* is not 'leading' to *stuti*, or the latter is not 'leading' to the main *Thottam*. The meaning of these two segments, at the level of the text, is not interconnected. They are independently existing components within the *Thottam* song, which are to be understood on their own terms and do not require the presence of each other to convey the meanings contained by them. The *varavili* in itself has a beginning and a definite closure, but that is not required to understand what the *stuti* is conveying. In fact, as we have seen, the *varavili* is an appeal urging the *Theyyam* to come to the ritual space, while the next segment *stuti* is a eulogy addressed to different gods. From *stuti*, the song directly enters into the life story of the *Theyyam* without making any gradual and narratively coherent connection. At the level of the content, besides, *stuti* is not leading to the main *Thottam*. Each segment begins and ends in itself, maintaining intact the meaning inherent to them. Altogether, within the *Thottam* songs as a whole, while having a kind of autonomous existence within the ritual assemblage, there are segments and sections that each demonstrate their capacity to be self-integrated and self-organised.

Undeniably, the story of each *Theyyam* is different, but there is also significant variation in the ways that the given pattern of the song incorporates and unfurls the narrative world. The notion of ordered arrangement of a given structure differentiated on the basis of chronologically determined narrative boundaries clearly fails to hold value here. The

structure of the songs indeed becomes the creative way in which the narrative world arranges and rearranges itself. The textualized form of the song, every time one engages with it, exhibits the creative and pragmatic ways in which it has arranged itself. The world that these songs unravel in their textualized form, even while having its own autonomy, permeates into the actual realm of enactment as a ritual activity which attains different and yet mutually exclusive modes of significance.

The Life of Thottam Within the Ritual

Obviously, in the ritual assemblage of *Theyyam*, the *Thottam* occupies a significant position not only in terms of the narrative world embedded within the songs, but also because of the ways in which the activity of singing these songs itself imparts meanings and significance to assemblage as a whole. In what follows, I further strive to explore the relationship that the *thottam* songs share with the *Theyyam* ritual, addressing in particular the ways in which the organisation of the ritual itself can lead to a variation in the significance, vitality and oratorical power of the *Thottam*. As already emphasized in the foregoing pages, these songs have an autonomous life outside the realm of the ritual per se, although the latter is still a constitutive reference point. Indeed, in the ritual assemblage of *Theyyam*, the songs are performed and this singing performance itself is a form of ritual activity done in a particular context.

Sung before the commencement of the main dance – and mostly on the previous day - either by the *Theyyam* performer himself or accompanied by a group of *Thottam* practitioners, these songs and their rendering are an integral part in the ritual assemblage of *Theyyam* as a whole. They unravel the myth associated with each *Theyyam*. The practitioners of the *Thottam* songs identify their singing performance as a constitutive part of the *Theyyam* ritual through which the *theyyam* comes to occupy the body of the performer. Dineshan Peruvannan, one of the famous *Theyyam* practitioners in Kannur, elaborated on the 'intention' behind singing the *thottam* songs in a long conversation at his home:

> *Thottam* songs contain the complete story behind each *theyyam*. The idea is to invoke and invite God to the body of the *kolakkaran* by singing these songs. In our vocabulary, this process is known as '*thottuka*' or '*thotti chamakkal*'. This means that, through singing, the *theyyam* attains its completeness and perfection.

> Once the singer goes in front of the shrine to sing these songs, it is mandatory that he should sing it from beginning to end without omitting any part of the song. Because it is only by the end of this continuous singing activity that the human performer is turned into God. This is the relation between *Thottam* and *Theyyam*. The god descends only after the completion of the singing activity. The becoming of *Theyyam* reaches its utmost perfection when the *kolakkaran* also sings these songs. Because he is the one who is becoming the god; and, therefore, he has to invoke the god and ask him/her to descend upon his body. In fact, a *kolakkaran* is recognised as the god only after the completion of the songs (Interview conducted on 14 March 2020 at Azhikode, Kannur).

Strictly, the crucial significance of *Thottam* singing according to the practitioners is to bring about the spirit of the *Theyyam* to the *kolakkaran*. The transition of the human into the *theyyam* is not a spontaneous one, but is a gradual process. In fact, the process of 'becoming *Theyyam*' through the recital is known as '*thotti edukkal*', which literally suggests that one has to invoke the spirit of *Theyyam* through a continuous and elaborate ritual process of reciting these songs, one that gains full momentum as it progresses. Like the way a sculpture is carved out from a rock, with continuous and focused effort, the god is also made to descend on the performer through the methodical rendering of the songs. In this context, it is important to note that there is a transaction happening between two distinctive modalities through the very medium of the singing activity: namely, the transition of the human into *Theyyam* and the mediation of the very form of singing with that of dancing. The practitioners themselves identity the transaction as a kind of 'process', which takes place in a specific time and space, rather than a sudden static change from one world to another. They, in fact, perceive it as a process by using the word '*thotti edukkal*' or '*thotti chamakkal*' which signifies the 'becoming' of a new sphere of reality, one that is different from the initial world of the song. The *Theyyam* should arrive at the ritual space and enter into the body of the performer, and only then the human performer becomes the *Theyyam*. Thus, alluding to the process of *thotti edukkal* in *Vettakkarumakan theyyam*, Y. V. Kannan explicitly noted:

> The *thotti edukkal* of *Vettakkarumakan* is happening through these songs and their rhythm. It narrates the whole story of the *Theyyam*. There is a particular rhythm for this *Thottam* song. It begins with narrating the birth story of *Vettakkarumakan*. By the time the *thottam* song finishes, the feet of the performer should merge with the slow pace of the songs. So, it is a continuous process through which the world of humans is merged with that of the gods (Interview conducted on 19 December 2019, at Kunjimangalam, Kannur).

Clearly, what is being highlighted here is not the transition or transformation of one substance to another or a linear movement from one point to another, but a process which generates a continuous play of forces. When practitioners state that the human becomes *Theyyam* through the activity of singing, it should not be interpreted as a mere linear shift from one form to another (human to divine and/or song to dance); rather, there is a dynamic field that comes to be created between the realms, one that actualises their potential by engaging with each other.

Ritual elucidations, acoustical transitions

The singing of *Thottam paattu*, as it were, mostly happens on the previous day of the possession dance performance. Standing in front of the shrine, the *kolakkaran* along with two or three singers utters these songs which narrate the myth of the particular *Theyyam*. As already specified, most of the *Theyyam* stories are local legends about the heroines and heroes who faced caste and gender discrimination and get killed, with the songs capturing the whole life history and heroic deeds of each *Theyyam*.

The *Theyyam* performer along with the *Thottam* singers and the drummers reach the place where the ritual is to proceed on the previous day. In a single ritual space, on the same day, many *Theyyams* can take place. They will either be performed one after the other or will be simultaneously presented at the same space. In such situations, where there are many *Theyyams*, the songs are sung one after the other on the previous day of the dance performance. With the *Thottam* singing, the *kolakkaran* of the *Theyyam* in focus comes out of the '*Aniyara*' with very slow-paced dance steps.[22] Accompanied with the sound of drums, he goes in front of the shrine, even as the people who are gathered in the ritual space take small steps to seek blessings. On the day of *Thottam*, the *kolakkaran* will not wear the full costume, since he becomes the *Theyyam* only after the completion of the *Thottam* singing. At this moment, he is neither human nor a god, but in a transient stage.

[22] As indicated earlier, the *aniyara* is the temporarily made 'green room', where the *Theyyam* performers and companions stay. It is also considered as a sacred space where the power of the *Theyyam* resides.

After the preliminary rites, the *kolakkaran* along with one or two accompanying singers come in front of the shrine and starts singing the songs. The accompanying singers wear a white cloth, termed '*mundu*', over their waist. The *kolakkaran* and the singers once again bow in front of the shrine. Facing the shrine, they stand in a row or semi-circle and start singing the songs. The preliminary rites before the beginning of singing vary for each *Theyyam* as it is intrinsically connected with nature and character of each ritual performance. All the same, the rites are meant to set an atmosphere for the singing and the dance performance that is to take place. The place where the *Theyyam* is happening needs to be sanctified for the god to arrive.

Following these preliminary rites, the *Thottam* song begins with the *varavili*. As already indicated, even in a *Theyyam* which does not have elaborate *Thottam* songs associated with it, *varavili* is mandatory. In every *Thottam*, there are sections that the *kolakkaran* sings alone, and no one else sings it. *Varavili* is that one section of every *Thottam* song which is to be sung solely by the *kolakkaran*. Needless to say, the *heyyam* performers consider *varavili* as having prime importance in the ritual assemblage, and not just in the *Thottam* songs. Indeed, from the conversations I had with various *Theyyam* performers, I discovered that the recital of *varavili* occupies a paramount position not just in the *Thottam* songs, but in creating an atmosphere of intervention through which the bifurcation between the world of gods and humans begin to collapse. From the moment the performer starts to recite the *varavili*, the *Theyyam* and the attendant deification of the local heroines and heroes' re-enters into the human world and again becomes a part of the human concourse. Thus, the 'call' made through the human sound - by the *kolakkaran*, belonging to the lower caste community - has the capacity to make the god/*Theyyam* a part of the present reality in which the ritual worship is taking place.

Varavili, accordingly, also signifies the contribution of the human sound in the organisation of the ritual worship of Theyyam. Beginning with the recital of *varavili*, a sonic atmosphere comes to inhabit the ritual space, one through which the presence as indeed the arrival of the god is marked out. Beginning with *varavili*, the *Thottam* songs communicate an acoustical space, with the singing of the songs permitting specific words to take on the cultural resonances and style of a community (see also Beck, 2012: 22).

All the *Theyyam* performers who I met and had a conversation with emphasized on the importance of *varavili* in the overall ritual. Rupesh Peruvannan was the first performer I met during my fieldwork. He is from my village and is known for performing *Muthappan Theyyam* in our area as well in different parts of Kannur district.[23] When I asked him about the very significance of *Thottam* songs, the first thing he talked about was *varavili*:

> *Thottam* is very important in the *Theyyam* ritual; and in the *thottam* songs, *varavili* is a significant part. All the *Thottam* songs start with *varavili*. You are calling the god to come and inhabit the body of the *kolakkaran*. In *Theyyam*, humans are turned into God. But for a human to become God, the energy or the spirit of the god has to reach and sustain in the human body. The *kolakkaran* should deliver it. Then only the energy will enter into the performer's body (Interview done on 04 March 2020 at Munderi, Kannur district).

Thus, it is through the *varavili* that the *Theyyam* is urged to come and reside in the body of the performer. Even though the whole *Thottam* is geared to the presence of *theyyam*, the nature of the god is unravelled in this beginning segment itself. Clearly, 'god' is not an abstract entity, one that cannot be reached through human means, but is someone who connects with and becomes part and parcel of a history of the community (primarily through responding to the songs created and delivered by certain communities who are socially and culturally marginalised). Vannan Krishnan, who is known for singing the *Thottam* for '*Kathivanoor Veeran theyyam*', makes an interesting point about the ways in which this particular segment is delivered:

> We don't generally say that we sing *varavili*. Still, there could be people who say that they sing *varavili*. But singing is different from calling, isn't it? In *varavili*, we are literally calling the god who does not reside in our world to come to that space where the *Theyyam* is happening and to enter into the *kolakkaran*. We do '*Varavilikkal*'. On the other hand, other parts of the *thottam* songs are to be sung. For example, we sing *stuti* and *anchadi* etc. (Interview done on 16 March 2020, at Thrikkaripur, Kasargod).[24]

The difference he makes between 'calling' and 'singing' is worth paying some attention to here. *Varavili* is being seen as a distinct act, which although a part of the *Thottam* song is being broached as qualitatively different from singing per se. We may term the

[23] Muthappan, also known as Sree Muthappan, is known as the clan deity of the Thiyya community. It is the most popular and worshipped *Theyyam* in the region of north Malabar.
[24] More about Vannan Krishnan and *Kathivanoor Veeran Theyyam* will be presented in the next chapter.

delivery of *varavili* as an 'illocutionary act', where the uttering of words/sentences cannot be considered merely as saying something, but is a part of 'doing' some action.[25] Therefore, what is uttered through *varavili* is what it 'does' or accomplishes through the ritual. This segment of the song, with which the *Thottam* singing begins, clearly manifests itself as different from singing, by the way in which it is delivered in the ritual context. The distinction between singing and calling is being made not only at the level of enactment, but also at the level of the naming of the segment itself. The names of the other segments and sections of the *Thottam*, such as *stuti*, *polichupaattu*, *urachil thottam* etc., are suggestive of the fact that they are supposed to be 'sung'. Indeed, their potency as song, and meant to be 'sung', is actualised only in their enactment, and not quite through the individual identity they have (as in the 'calling' that is *varavili*). Thus, the practitioners' often claim: "After *Varavilikkal* (the act of *varavili*), we begin singing the *stuti*". Indeed, the demarcation between the act of 'calling to come' and singing is made at a level prior to their rendering, which gets substantiated with the 'intention' behind singing these segments/sections. To be sure, this distinction is also being created on the basis of the common understanding that people associate with the general activity of singing. Accordingly, when someone says that 'calling' is different from singing, they are making this assumption on the basis of the qualities they commonly associate with both these activities – the former (that is, 'calling') is directly invocatory and the latter ('singing') more narratively ordered in the specific ritual contexts prescribed.

Likewise, another section of the *Thottam* song '*Munpasthanam*' should also be seen in this light. As we indicated earlier, the *munpasthanam*, as a part of the overall song, is a condensed version of the legend that is delivered by the *Theyyam* performer after the completion of the ritual dance. If the portions of the *Thottam* sung before the *Theyyam* dance is meant to invite the *Theyyam* to the ritual space, the *munpasthanam* is the portion of the same *Thottam* which is delivered by the *Theyyam* in person. More particularly, this particular rite of delivering *munpasthanam* is known as '*Munpasthanam Parayal*' (where '*parayal*' means saying). Even though the name of this portion indicates the act

[25] J. L. Austin, in his remarkable book *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), talks about the 'illocutionary act', relating it to an utterance that has a certain conventional force and, as such, translates as a performative act which does something.

of ‘saying’, in terms of its delivery this section is identified as a ‘prose’ form which is rendered in a particular tune. In fact, these two segments/sections – namely, *varavili* and *munpasthanam* - suggest how *Thottam* songs, as a category of ‘songs’, in itself has distinctive capacities that need to be addressed in their own right. What happens in the ritual context is not the mere rendering of the songs, but each segment/section of the song exerts its own features, both at the level of text and performance. Indeed, it is this ‘doubleness’ that grants the *Thottam* songs and their rendering an autonomous existence within the ritual assemblage.

During the delivery of *varavili*, the *kolakkaran* stands facing the shrine by folding his hands and enacts the *varavili* at one stretch. The vocal emission of *varavili* is completely different from the other segments/sections of the *Thottam*, each of which is marked by specific singing styles. In a single stretch, the *kolakkaran* gives voice to these lines without any pause or break. Even though there will be three or more *varavili* in one *Thottam* song, it becomes very difficult to grasp where one ends and the other begins. The expeditious delivery of *varavili* also contributes to creating a close-knit and intimate communication between the *Theyyam* and the performer in an open public space. The intimacy, decisively, is not created in a clandestine space that is inaccessible or inaudible to the common people. In fact, such a context of intimate intervention gradually emerges through the activity of continuous singing. The acoustical space of the practitioners exerts a powerful force, one capable of moulding an efficacious ritual context while also aligning these voices with a particular tradition of song and singing.

The *varavili* in particular, therefore, is not only an invitation to the *Theyyam*; it is also making the community of performers and spectators a part of the larger brotherhood of *Theyyams* and their world. It is primarily through the delivery of *varavili* that the social relationship between the performer and *Theyyam* starts to develop in the ritual space; and, as the rest of the song is delivered, these two worlds merge into each other. The *varavili* thus not only marks the transformation of gods into humans; it also makes for the entry of the songs into the ritual world. From this point, the songs will gradually start travelling from the world of its own to the ritual world, by slowly unravelling and encapsulating the narrative world of the *Theyyam*.

Indeed, in the different sections of the song after *varavili*, it becomes very difficult to categorise which part or which lines are sung by the *kolakkaran* and which are sung by other singers. Often, the choice of 'who sings which portion' is dependent upon the length of the *Thottam* song itself. It is usually seen that in *Thottam* songs which are short in length, the *kolakkaran* himself sings the whole *Thottam*, whereas in the songs which are longer the *kolakkaran* is accompanied by other singers. This decision is often based on the physical exhaustion of the *kolakkaran* while singing, as also the time gap between singing and dancing. For example, in *Pulitheyyam*, which has a shorter *Thottam*, the *kolakkaran* himself is the singer. The *Thottam* song will be sung on the previous day, and the *Theyyam* dance will begin early in the morning of the next day. In such cases, the *kolakkaran* gets enough time to relax and prepare for the god-dance which demands high physical energy and complex body movements. However, as we will see in the next chapter, in the *Theyyam* such as *Maakkam* and *Kathivanoor Veeran*, the *Thottam* singing lasts for many hours. The *kolakkaran* here sings very few portions of the song even though he is present with the singers throughout the rendering. In such *Theyyams*, besides, the interval between the *Thottam* singing and the *Theyyam* dance is very less. In fact, singing the long *Thottam* is bound to make the *kolakkaran* more exhausted, and accordingly his involvement in the singing is truncated.

After the *varavili*, there is a pause for a few seconds, which not only marks the beginning of the next section but also gives time to the *kolakkaran* to prepare for the next part, the rendering style and tune of which is different from that of *varavili*. The pause, however, is not characterised by the sudden silencing of the sonic atmosphere or even an announcement of the upcoming part of the song; rather, the shift is manifested through the singing itself, where the movement from one part to another is marked by subtle changes in the tone and rhythm, as also the content of the lyrics. Even during the small pauses between the different parts of the songs, the instruments, especially the drum, will continue to be played, not letting the sonic atmosphere to fade off. The instruments, besides, are not played at the 'background', but are very much in the forefront, not merely as 'assistants' but as active participants facilitating the songs to flow uninterrupted.

Indeed, the fact that the singers too carry a *chenda*,[26] which is usually small, on their shoulder is quite indicative of this active involvement of instruments in the singing activity. The singing and the drumming take place simultaneously by the same performer, thus implicitly emphasising on the unity of multiple sounds. Dineshan Peruvannan talks specifically about the rationale behind the singers carrying musical instrument with them:

> One important thing to be followed in the *Thottam* singing is the synchronisation of '*kottu*' (beating the drum or any instrument while singing) and *paattu* (song). The one who sings the song, beats, and the one who beats, sings. This is the most significant aspect of *Thottam* songs. Even though there might be other people to beat the drum and other instruments, the singer who sings the *Thottam* has to make sure that his singing and beating is in the same rhythm (Interview done on 14 March 2020, at Azhikode, Kannur).

Clearly, he is here explaining how the instruments and the lyrics of the narrative are merged into each other in such a way that it becomes almost impossible to separate the two. In many ways, they are not two separate entities that constitute the song, even as the song in itself has an autonomous existence as a distinct category. Indeed, the materiality of this unified sonic ambience, in which the singing sound of the performer is merged with (or substituted by) the sound of instruments, embellishes the contextual and dynamic interaction between the performer, the devotees present and the *Theyyam*. It is through the interaction of these multiple sounds that the presence of the divine comes to be reasserted in the ritual space.

Further intimations on the singer and the singing

Dineshan Peruvannan is also further pointing out that the idea of the synchrony between '*kottu*' and '*paattu*' are intrinsic to *Thottam* singing, and they tend to merge in the ritual space of the *Theyyam*. Evidently, it is a skill that is learnt and acquired by the practitioners from their childhood through continuous practice and training. Thus, he elaborates:

> This synchrony between '*kottu*' and '*paattu*' is not accidentally emerging during the ritual, for this is how we learn these songs since our childhood. While we learn the songs by memorising, we also clap or pat our hands in the thigh in the same rhythm. My father used to say that any mere learning of the lyrics or even

[26] This is a cylindrical percussion instrument prevalent in Kerala, and is mostly played in Hindu temple festivals. It is known for its loud sound.

> singing the songs in the given tune will not do, but that making the hands clap or pat on the thigh is very important in the learning process. Then only the practitioner can internalise the merging of '*kottu*' and '*paattu*'. In *Thottam* singing, they are not separate, but are merged into each other. Also, the *Thottam* singers often have to beat the *chenda* or other instruments while singing. So without knowing both, the singing will not be effective. That is why I say, even though it is our *avakasham* [rightful opportunity, or even privilege] to sing these sacred songs, it is also a skill acquired through many years, by observing the elders perform and learning the songs ourselves (From the Interview, as above).

The inculcation of these skills - of observing, learning and performing - has to be seen as evolving in a culturally and historically specific environment. That is to say, although these skills are acquired over time through practice and training, the identity of a *Thottam* practitioner is hereditarily granted, as it is considered a privilege or responsibility to sing these songs in the particular ritual context. This hereditary right or privilege thus becomes a prerequisite to become a 'skilled practitioner'. To be a *Thottam* singer, therefore, is not only about acquiring these skills; it also has to do with the fact that the cultural resource to learn these skills comes from the hereditary privilege they embody. Significantly, Kailey Reid Mason, in a doctoral thesis on Malayan community, understands '*avakasam*' both as a socio-economic and ancestral family matter (see Mason, 2006).[27] As he explicates: "[A] Malayan's *avakasam* simultaneously points to obligations toward the spiritual world, their own ancestors as well as towards living elders, high caste patrons of *taravatus* [Tharavads, or ancestral homes], and the broader village community they are socially obliged and legitimised to serve" (Mason, 2006: 30). The '*avakasam*' and the skills acquired thus are mutually dependent upon each other, which gets manifested in the ritual space as well. In fact, during the long conversation that I had with Dineshan Peruvannan, he further talked about this interconnectedness. He seemed clear that being born in a *Theyyam* performing family will not make someone a skilled *Thottam* singer or even *Theyyam* performer. Sounding quite exasperated, he explicitly stated:

> Everyone cannot learn or sing the *Thottam* song. It is our hereditary right to sing these songs. But imagine you are born in a *Theyyam* performing family and your father is known for singing the *Thottam* in the region. Will that make you a good *Thottam* singer? No, it will not. Definitely, you have the right to sing, but that is

[27] The work is a detailed analysis of how hereditary musicality serves as a strategic means of social mobility for a marginalised community (the Malayan, in this instance). The latter is a caste group which is known for their traditional and hereditary musical lineages. They are also one of the *Theyyam* performing castes.

> not enough, right? Learning these *Thottam* songs and rendering it in the ritual space in the right way requires hard work and commitment. The songs are lengthy; one needs to master the lyrics; imbibe the rhythm; and understand the emotions that are conveyed through each song. There are people who just memorise the lyrics, often of a short *Thottam* song, and render it during *Theyyam* without any emotional attachment. There is no commitment attached to such activities. Now we don't have many *Thottam* singers alive who can sing these songs in the way they are supposed to be sung. Why? This is because the younger generation does not have the patience to learn these songs (From the Interview, as above).

Dineshan Peruvannan is thus clear that very act and occasion of *Thottam* singing is carried out through the active involvement of the singer/singers each of whom materialise their hereditary resources, cultural values, and acquired skills in every performance. Every event of singing adds more significance and meanings to the living tradition of *Thottam* songs. Instead of mechanically reproducing the given formula associated with the singing, the singers must each employ their creative potential doing the singing. In fact, one is here reminded of Tim Ingold, who speaks eloquently of the specific ways in which a technical skill comes to be mastered and/or appreciated:

> First, a generative schema or programme is established in the novice's mind from his observations of the movements of already accomplished practitioners; secondly, the novice imitates these movements by running off exemplars of the technique in question from the schema. Now I do not deny that the learning of skills involves both observation and imitation. But the former is no more a matter of forming internal, mental representations of observed behaviour than is the latter a matter of converting these representations into manifest practice. For the novice's observation of accomplished practitioners is not detached from, but grounded in, his own active, perceptual engagement with his surroundings. And the key to imitation lies in the intimate coordination of the movement of the novice's attention to others with his own bodily movement in the world. Through repeated practical trials, and guided by his observations, he gradually gets the 'feel' of things for himself – that is, he learns to fine-tune his own movements so as to achieve the rhythmic fluency of the accomplished practitioner (Ingold, 2000: 353).

Getting back to the structure of *Thottam* songs, the parts that come after *varavili* and *stuti*, as mentioned earlier, are different not only in terms of their content, but also in terms of the form and the ways in which they are rendered. The following parts, after *varavili* are usually sung together by the *kolakkaran* and the singers who accompany him. Even though the *Thottam* singers carry a *chenda* (drum) on their shoulder, the

singing also involves a set of traditional artists carrying other instruments such as *chengila*.[28] For the practitioners, the portion of *stuti* that comes after *varavili*, is more 'musical' and entirely different. In fact, as far as *Thottam* singing is concerned, the quality of being 'musical' is often associated with a particular tune and mood in which each portion is sung. Needless to say, this varies for different *Thottam* songs depending upon the nature of the story which is being unfolded. Evidently, the idea of 'musicality' associated with *Thottam* songs is quite generational, and often does not adhere to the conventional understanding of the musicality of songs per se. Dineshan Peruvannan, again, explicitly commented:

> We sing these songs not by learning music scientifically. It is just that we are singing the same way our elders have taught us. We don't know in which rhythm or in which tune these songs are sung. As also we don't know whether they have any specific names. Our *Thottam* songs (of Vannan community) do not have such a scientific relationship with music. Those who are trained in music may be able to comment more on it. But we are not trained in music, right! We follow certain rhythm and tune while singing, which our elders have taught us. What is important in that sense is the '*bhavam*' that we invoke while singing (From the Interview, as above).

Likewise, in a conversation that I had with Rupesh Peruvannan, he too shared similar thoughts on the 'musical' aspect of *Thottam* songs:

> Even though we are not trained in music, it is significant to follow the rhythm and tune taught by our elders while singing these songs. I don't know whether there are specific names for them, but it is to be noted that the rhythm and tune of every *Thottam* is different. We need to understand these differences and should be able to sing this in an appropriate way. This comes through intense practice and training (Interview conducted on 04 March 2020, at Munderi, Kannur).

Undeniably, from the various conversations I had with *Thottam* practitioners, one significant point had to do with how the '*bhavam*' that they are able to invoke while singing is seen as the main attribute of the musicality associated with the *Thottam*.[29] In the case of *Thottam* songs, particularly, 'being musical' is closely connected to the sentiments shared, mediated and expressed though the singing. Even though there are particular tunes in which the songs are rendered, the essence of each singing event lies

[28] This is a percussion instrument, which has a thick bell metal disk that is struck by a short wand.
[29] '*Bhava*' in Sanskrit means the emotion or mood conveyed by performers during their performance.

in the emotional textures which the performers are able to produce. Indeed, once the *Thottam* singing moves from the preliminary parts to the main *Thottam*, the story starts to unfold. The mood of the *Thottam* singing here is dependent upon the major themes and emotions evoked in the legend. Accordingly, the primary responsibility of the singer is to evoke and convey the mood peculiar to each *Theyyam* through the very act of singing. Rupesh Peruvannan presented an illustration:

> Take, for example, the *Thottam* of mother goddesses or a *Theyyam* who imparts the mood of meekness - this gentleness of the *Theyyam* is also reflected in the way the songs are sung. If the *Thottam* is of an aggressive hero, that aggressiveness should be conveyed through the *Thottam*. By carrying this mood while singing, the *Thottam* creates a suitable atmosphere for the *Theyyam* to appear (From the Interview, as above).

The unravelling of these stories, for sure, touches upon the most sensitive and even mundane human emotions and conflicts. Through the detailed descriptions about pain, struggle, violence, sacrifice, divinity etc., the songs carry multiple emotions in and through them. The singers who render these songs are in fact 'revisiting' the lives and experiences of the past. They should, consequently, be emotionally invested in the songs they are singing, which is also mandatory so as to provide an emotional background to the ritual ceremony. Thus, it is believed that the *Theyyam* appears not through the mere narration of the story; rather, the singers can (and should) develop an emotional bond with the content of the songs as they are singing. The activity of singing is thus about 'reliving' the memories of the past through the song, and it is through this emotionally driven unfurling of the story that the presence and the power of the *Theyyam* is affirmed.

Now, even as it is acknowledged that '*bhavam*' plays a significant role in *Thottam* singing, one pertinent question that arises is how the singers are able to emotionally connect with the experiences and lives that they are narrating? Susanne Langer, the famous American philosopher who has worked on the influence of art on the mind, in her well-known work *Feeling and Form* (1953) talks about how singers exhibit the potential to 'imagine' the experiences narrated in a musical work:

> Yet every performer has what one might call a 'proper repertoire', consisting of the pieces he is temperamentally able to play: music that is within his emotional ken. For, although he need not have actually experienced every feeling he conveys, he must be able to *imagine* it, and every idea, whether of physical or

> psychical things, can be formed only within the context of experience. That is to say, a form of sentience, thought or emotion that he can imagine must be *possible for him.* Within the range of his own emotional possibilities, however, he can even learn, purely through music, some way of feeling that he never knew before. In the rich fabric of our own subjective existence, we make discoveries, as we make them in the outer world, by the agency of adequate symbols. Through art, we learn the character and range of subjective experience, as though discourse we learn in great detail the ways of the objective world (Langer, 1953: 146, emphasis in original).

Clearly, in these lines, Langer is highlighting the power of imagination that a performer is able to associate with their art, especially music. In any performer, there always lies a potential to evoke a feeling that she or he has never experienced before. As far as *Thottam* singing is concerned, within its given framework, the practitioner must exhibit their creative ability to make the singing more appealing to the audience. The *bhavam* invoked by the singers is quite clearly one way through which the singers use their creative potential. Sasi Peruvannan elaborates on this point,

> Since *Thottam* is a song to be sung, why would people come and gather together to watch the performance? That is where the *bhava* becomes important. Who will watch *Thottam* singing, if the singer goes on singing in a monotonous way? Therefore, it would be good if the singers can evoke the *bhavam* both in their face and in the way they modulate their voice (Interview conducted on 20 February 2020, at Keezhallur, Kannur).

To be sure, the singers themselves consider *bhavam* as an integral part in expressing the narrative world. However, this voice modulation and the evocation of appropriate emotions in singing are to be done within the given framework of the *Thottam* song, especially since every *Thottam* has a particular tune and a larger pattern associated with it. In fact, while singing the '*Urachil thottam*', the final portion of the *Thottam* song which marks that particular moment of the human turning into a god, the singing itself reaches a faster pace, the voice of the singers is heightened, the sound and rhythm of drum beat get intensified, all creating an efficacious sonic atmosphere to signal the 'divine moment'. All the same, this creative capacity of the singers to attach emotional texture to the songs does not only stem from the motives and themes of the narrative; it is also closely knitted to the experiential and emotional connection that the practitioners share with the practice of singing itself. As mentioned earlier, the practitioners start engaging with the songs since their childhood, as both a hereditary right and source of

livelihood. Obviously, the engagement with the songs over the course of time demands emotional and physical investment of the singers:

> We start learning these since childhood, and for us it is as important as what we learn from school. So, the songs are there in our life since then, or we can even say before birth. Therefore, every day I had to memorise a certain section and recite it in front of my father. We learn from the beginning to end in the exact order - just like how we sing during *Theyyam*. And simultaneously, we would be going with the *Theyyam* group to different places to observe how the elders sing. So, once we learn these songs, we will also be assigned to sing along with our elders. What I am saying is that from generation after generation we live through these songs. For us, this is granted to us through our forefathers. Now we are carrying it forward and will pass on to the next generation (Vannan Krishnan - Interview conducted on 16 March 2020 at Thrikkaripur, Kasargod).

Undoubtedly, then, the emotional texture that the singers are able to produce during the ritual activity of singing has multiple layered meanings attached to it. For them, the singing activity is pivotal in reinforcing the bond they have with their forefathers, thus keeping the hereditary rights safeguarded, and entering into the cosmic world of *Theyyams*. The activity of singing *Thottam* songs is, therefore, powerfully intertwined with reaffirming and rearticulating the intergenerational relationships which indeed is informed by the system of caste and its determination by birth and descent. Importantly, the space where the singing takes place also witnesses the emergence of different social relationships anchored by the songs. In fact, in the ritual rendering of those *Thottam* songs which is a group activity carried out by a set of participants, how the song directs and shapes the interpersonal bonds becomes more significant than being attentive to 'who sings which portion?'. This is certainly not to eliminate the involvement of individual singers in the activity of singing, but to see how this 'individual singing' itself is an offshoot of the ways in which the songs integrate and configure different singers in relation to each other in the act of singing. The relationship thus emerging while the song is rendered is not a vehicle or representation of some values, but is lived through experiences emanating within the very space and span of the rendering. Dineshan Peruvannan explicated the way in which the relationship emerges in a ritual space:

> When one singer sings a line, it should end only where it should. There is a particular way in which the singing of that line needs to be ended. Otherwise, there will be a gap. The singer who is supposed to sing the next line won't be able to sing it if the first singer is not finishing it in the right way. Every line has

> to reach a particular point (Interview done on 14 March 2020, at Azhikode, Kannur).

This seemed quite confusing for me, when I heard it. Seeing my perplexed face, he explained it further with a wry smile:

> You have seen relay running, right? It is similar to that only. The first runner needs to hand over the baton to the second one. Then only the second one can run. There is hardly any gap between the handing over of the baton by the first runner, and the running by the second runner. The second one cannot run, unless the first one hands over the baton. In *Thottam* singing also this is what happens. The other singer can take up the first line only if the former singer finishes the last line in a perfect way. Thus, the lines flow continuously without creating any gap. And that is what is important in the singing - not creating a gap in between (As above).

Clearly, this mutually reinforcing and systematically orchestrated relationship between the singers is established not according to any prescribed script, but through the relational configurations that the song brings about in its rendering world. While the songs are being sung, there will be occasions in the singing activity where the singing of two singers overlaps with each other's. Recognising a synchronicity in their singing, they immediately glance at each other. In such situations, either both of them sing together to complete that particular line/lines, or the one who is 'not supposed to sing' that line gradually lowers his volume making a convenient way for the other singer to continue singing.

Of course, there are also situations in *Thottam* singing where a singer unknowingly or accidently sings a wrong line or jumps from one stanza to another, omitting the lines in between. In such situations, the accompanying singer who identifies this mistake immediately starts singing the appropriate lines in a louder voice – obviously, louder than what is required - overpowering the sound of the other singer to signal the error. The former singer, hearing this unexpected intervention of his co-singer, immediately understands what went wrong, lowers his volume and stops' singing that line, as the other singer has already begun or they both start singing the line/lines together. Rather than correcting the other singer, the primary intention of this mutual understanding between the singers is to not lose the flow of the song. It is clearly through these evolving

relationships that the singing activity is actualised. Michael Houseman, who has addressed the 'relationality' in ritual practices, explicitly comments:

> According to this view, the participants' commitment to the supposed effectiveness of the ceremonial performances they undertake, that is, to the reality of the relationships these performances actualize, derives less from the optional and partially idiosyncratic, substantive interpretations they may ascribe to them, than from the well-defined pragmatic conditions of their execution. It is the performances themselves - the fact of doing them - that serve as the experiential grounds for the irrefutable yet difficult-to-define 'truths' they are held to enact (Houseman, 2006:421).

However, it must be stressed that this is not the only set of relationships that is established in the course of singing. In my earlier pages, when I talked about how in an assemblage multiple networks are formed, I had also elaborated on the relationships that are emerging between humans and non-humans. Being a constitutive part of the ritual assemblage of *Theyyam*, the ritual activity of singing not only enacts relationships between different participants, but also with the non-human objects. The songs, indeed, connect with the instruments, the multiple objects that are directly or indirectly handled while the songs are rendered, to the belief system, and so on. Every rendering thus witnesses the emergence of new, vital networks of relationships, which reconfigure and integrate the social relations into a new reality. The songs whenever it is delivered in the ritual space - during different seasons, or in the same season but in different places - becomes a site for the continuous and dynamic interaction between persons, places and objects. Therefore, the songs and the relationships arising in the performative context of these songs are not mere vehicles or representations of any value system or ideas, but they are real, active and very much alive.

Without doubt, as transferred from one generation to another orally, the *Thottam* songs are learnt by the practitioners by memorisation, and this technique of memorisation is often associated with the fixity of singing. However, this can translate into simplistic understanding of *Thottam* singing as a lifeless 'repetition' or 'reproduction' of an already existing form. Obviously, such an understanding underplays the vital engagement that the singers have with the songs. It cannot be categorically stated that the *Thottam* singing does not give any room for improvisation, using which the singers can express and exercise their creative potential. However, any kind of 'improvisation' that the singers

make has to fit in within the general framework of the singing pattern as we have been outlining. Interestingly, the word which the practitioners use to refer to the creative freedom they experience while singing is '*manodharmam*', which they describe quite literally as 'as the mind says or directs'. In fact, when asked about the tag of 'rigidity' and 'repetition' associated with *Thottam* songs, most of the practitioners agreed upon the exercise of '*manodharmam*' during the performance. This supposedly calls attention to the scope of improvisation that is available to every singer in their renditions.

The *manodharmam* of the singers, yet, is confined to the overall grammar of the *Thottam* songs. Among the performers I interviewed Vignesh Peruvannan was the youngest one, and he was quite emphatic in pointing to the role of *manodharmam* in singing:

> It is a must that in *Thottam* singing we should follow the same pattern as taught by our elders. However, within that we have the freedom to sing as per our *manodharmam*. As in, while singing, we might feel that some lines should be sung twice or some lines need to be sung in a more musical way. As such, there are singers who just recite these songs, but there are other singers who make the songs more musical by stretching or flattening the lines. Even the *bhavam* we produce through singing is like that; we do it according to the *manodharmam*, as our mind says. But this does not mean one can sing these songs in any way. That's not possible (Interview done on 31 December 2019 at Kolachery, Kannur).

Likewise, Nijesh, who belongs to a *Theyyam* performing family and is currently working at D.C. Books in Kannur, stated as follows:

> In *Thottam* singing there is always the possibility of making our own marks and signature. For example, when my father and elder brother sing the same *Thottam* song, there are differences. My father just recites the songs as he is taught in that way. Father gives more importance to the *bhavam* conveyed. When my brother sings, as he has an aptitude towards music, he just makes it more musical, giving more importance to how 'musical' the song can become. So, the challenge is how, within the pattern of *thottam* songs, the singers can exhibit their capacities in their own way. It's according to their *manodharmam* (Phone-in interview, conducted on 29 December 2019).

Even more finely, the *manodharmam* exercised while singing shows that the same line sung by the same singer on different occasions can have variations. The singers are 'not allowed' to add or delete lines and the possibility of expressing their *manodharmam* on this front is restricted. All the same, one of the general areas of improvisation is the evocation of emotions appropriate to the content of the lines that the singers are singing.

While singing, the singers repeat certain lines twice as a way of indicating the significance they have in the narrative world. In fact, the lines which convey important events or dialogues in the narrative are often repeated while singing. However, there is no fixity on which lines need to repeated and which lines need to be lengthened while singing and the improvisation here is carried out according to the *manodharmam* of the singer. Even though this improvisation is entirely situational, this is clearly not an example of spontaneity, but rather of the creative ability of the singer to recall the lines of the song and to present them in an expressive way. This presupposes the singer's in-depth knowledge with the narrative world of the songs. The singer is always expected to actively dwell and engage with the world of songs, especially in its narrative realm in order to present it in an appealing way. Thus, a mere mechanical memorisation of the song lyrics is not enough; rather, the singer should be attentive to the different sensibilities and nuances that the world of songs carries within them. In fact, Vannan Krishnan, who is known in north Malabar for singing the *Thottam* songs of *Kathivanoor Veeran* - a study of which we attempt in the next chapter - mentions specifically about how the practitioner has the right to correct mistakes in the songs if they find any. He points out that there may be factual errors and also pronunciation issues in the songs as they are passed from elders who did not have the chance to rectify the mistakes. Vannan Krishnan is clear:

> All most all the *Thottam* songs, especially of *Kathivanoor Veeran* mention about so many places in the region of north Malabar. The song is about the long and heroic journey Kathivanoor Veeran had to undertake. So, the *Thottam* song includes the names of so many places. In the older days, it was not possible to visit all these places and therefore the names of the places are pronounced in the exact way as mentioned in the *Thottam* songs. For example, the place '*Kannappilavu*' was pronounced by my brother and other elders as '*Vannappilavu*'. See how the misplacement of one letter has changed the name of the place? I am not blaming them; they did not have the situation to rectify the mistake. I had also learned it like that. But I changed it over the course of time, and I pronounce it as '*Kannappilavu*' as it is the right name. Now I can teach the song to others by incorporating these changes. It is not like that what we are taught once can never be changed. So as much as I can, I correct the mistakes of what has been learned and teach the younger people without those mistakes. (Interview conducted on 16 March 2020, at Thrikkaripur, Kasargod).

It can be seen that the practitioners, using their own experiential knowledge and creative potencies, do make some changes in the songs. Whether it is in the lyrics or the way the

songs are sung, it becomes obvious that an 'unchanged' or 'uniform' version of the song does not quite obtain (although it often so claimed). The 'currently available versions' of the *Thottam* songs can therefore be seen as subjected to multiple changes and rectifications at different time periods, while also being susceptible to further modifications in its future renditions.

All the same, the *manodharmam* of the singers is not restricted to the way they make sense of the emotional realm of the narrative world of the songs, but is also actively used in order to meet the requirements of the particular ritual situation in the physical space where the singing is happening. Evidently, the *Thottam* singing in the ritual space is as much about unravelling the narrative world as it is about the observance of certain rites in the ritual space, elements of which are congruent with each other. In the conversation that I had with Y. V. Kannan, he particularly elaborated on the importance of the congruence or harmony between the activity of singing and other ritual activities happening at the same time. He refers to it as '*arangumayulla porutham*', '*arangu*' in Malayalam meaning stage or arena. In this context, the stage refers to the overall ritual space in which multiple activities are taking place, and '*porutham*' means harmony. Clearly, he was highlighting the fact that in a particular ritual space where multiple activities are happening and relationships are being formed simultaneously, what is mandatory is a congruence between all of them. In the case of the *Thottam* singing as well, there should be a mutual agreement on how the songs interact with the surroundings and vice versa. In order to make the point clear, he mentioned about a particular situation from the *Thottam* of *Muchilottu Bhagavathy*[30]:

> There is a particular section in the *polichupaattu* of the *thottam* song, which elaborates on Lord Siva's elaborate bath in Kailasam. Further, these lines describe him wearing the red clothe and sandalwood paste on his forehead. When these lines are sung in the ritual space, the *Velichapaadu* [31] who does the ritual rites for *Muchilottu Bhagavathy*, goes to take a bath in the pool adjacent to the ritual space. The singing of lines which narrate Lord Siva's bath and the activity of *Velichapadu* going and taking bath happen parallelly. By the time these lines

[30] *Muchilottu Bhagavathy* is the tutelary deity of the Vaniyan community (OBC) of north Malabar. Born in a Brahmin household, she was expelled from her community on the charge that she is not a virgin. She immolated herself using the oil given by a man from the Vaniyan community. Seeing his pot filled again after reaching home, the man realises that the woman he had met was not an ordinary being. The man and his community, as claimed, decided to worship this woman.

[31] Literally means the oracle, who is considered as a mediator between devotee and deity.

> are sung, the *Velichapadu* should have taken the bath. If he takes longer time to finish bathing, the lines which corresponds to that situation are either repeated or lengthened. The lengthening, however, does not mean the addition of extra lines, but is often identified as the elongation of the vowel sound that comes at the end of the line. This elongation of the vowel sound is sung in the same tune in which that particular line is sung. This vowel elongation is highly used in the *Thottam* singing to make it congruent with the ritual. We can see many more examples of this sort in *Thottam* songs. What I am saying is that the harmony is very important (Interview conducted on 19 December 2019, at Kunjimangalam, Kannur).

Surely, then, there is a correlation between the narrative pattern of the song and the unfolding ritual enactment, which is certainly of some significance. The flexibility of the songs themselves, and the potencies and possibilities that they embody for the activity of singing itself, all lend a striking coherence to the *Theyyam* ritual.

As already emphasized, the repository of *Thottam* songs is vast, and even for a particular *Thottam* the singers have the option to choose from the available repertoire. For instance, there are so many *stuti* which are available for a given *Thottam*. This is also the case with '*polichupaattu*', which includes the description of the heroic deeds and qualities of the *Theyyam*. Indeed, for any given *Thottam* song, what is sung in the ritual space is actually a small part of what the songs actually comprise. Y. V. Kannan was particularly keen to emphasize this point:

> The repository of *Thottam* songs is actually huge. It, in fact provides the practitioners with so many options out of which they can pick which is more convenient to sing. For example, in the case of *Vettakkarumakan Theyyam*, only some portion of the original song is sung during the ritual. I am not saying that the singers are not bothered about the structure. The *Thottam* will definitely follow the structure, but under each session what is sung and what is omitted is important. There will be many '*Neettukavi*' available in a particular *Thottam*. In that case, the singer can choose a *neettukavi* which seems convenient for him; or even choosing one through which he can exhibit his singing abilities to the audience (From the Interview, as above).

We may clarify that *neettukavi*, as a particular portion of the *Thottam* song, is a part in which the lines are sung by stretching or elongating them. This demands the practitioner to hold his breath for a long time while singing these lines. Thus, as Kannan had disclosed, the singer has the option to select from the available repository of the *Thottam* songs, through which as a practitioner he can express his capacities. The songs thus provide multiple options for the singers to exercise while singing. As individual singers,

they have the option to pick the convenient and suitable lines that are included in a particular section. This not only demands the awareness about the depth of the world of songs, but also to the situational rendering of the chosen lines.

However, there are situations in which the singer will have to make some compromises in the singing. Indeed, this pressure to make such compromises for the convenient manifestation of the ritual often falls on the singers' shoulders. Dineshan Peruvannan makes this clear:

> Time is an important factor in the *Theyyam* ritual, as one needs the time to sing the *Thottam* songs fully and the *Theyyam* dance can begin only after the completion of the songs. There are places in which many *Theyyams* are happening on the same day. So, the *Thottam* song of these *Theyyams* have to be sung on the previous day. Therefore, if we begin the singing late, we won't have time to finish them. In such situations we will have to cut short some portions of the songs, but definitely not the important portions. Thus, instead of singing three-four *stuti*, we will sing only two, and also cut short some descriptions. *Thottam* songs contain so many descriptive lines. Ideally, the whole songs should be sung without eliminating any portions. But in some situations, we have to do so, but without eliminating the lines mentioning about important incidents or events. But these days what happens is that, if we go to some temple or *kavu* to perform *Theyyam*, the programme committee people will approach us on the day of *Thottam* and say, 'See, we have a *Ganamela* [or children's dance programme] scheduled at night. So please try to wrap up the singing bit early so that those programmes won't be delayed'. In such cases what can we do? They don't care if we sing the whole song. So, we will have to cut short the songs. But as committed practitioners we can't cut short important portions in the song. Without singing the songs in its completeness, how are they expecting the *Theyyam* to arrive and perform? (From the Interview done on 14 March 2020, at Azhikode, Kannur).

Indeed, in both these situations - that is to say, where the singer exercises a choice about which portions to sing so as to exhibit his capabilities, and the other where they have to voluntarily cut short the song without eliminating the significant portions - what becomes evident is how, according to the demand of the varying situations, the narrative world of the songs move into the ritual world. The singers need to be always aware about the multiple possibilities that the world of the songs presents in front of them. As practitioners, it becomes their responsibility to find a balance between what the ritual situation demands and what the world of songs offers. Such situational choices, alternations and modifications that are being made at every given performative context

clearly illustrates that the interaction of the songs with the ritual assemblage is always in a constant state of flux and is dependent upon the complexities and demands of the context. Thus, we can say there exist a mutual relationship of performance, communication and traversability across the space of the ritual and the songs that come to be sung.

Back to the ritual space

We have already stated that the structure of most of the *Thottam* songs starts with *varavili* and ends with *urachil thottam*. However, it must be emphasized that the pervasiveness of *Thottam* songs throughout the *Theyyam* ritual goes beyond this linear structure of the songs. On the previous day of singing, the singers all render the song from 'start to end'. But the presence of the *Thottam* songs in the ritual does not end there. After this 'official singing activity' is done, there are situations in which certain portions from the song have to be sung. One such situation is when the *kolakkaran* is adorning the *Theyyam* costume in the '*aniyara*' (note, some performers say that the more appropriate word is '*animara*'). The '*aniyara*', as already noted, is the temporarily made shack in which the costumes and ceremonial dress of the *Theyyam* is kept. This is also where the *Theyyam* performers and the *Thottam* singers rest, keep their belongingness and sleep on the previous day when they arrive. The *aniyara*, again as specified earlier, is considered as a sacred space in which the energy of the *Theyyam* resides. The *Theyyam* performers, after reaching the space where the ritual event is happening, make the *aniyara* using dried coconut leaves. There is a particular rite observed on the previous day of the *Theyyam*, where the *kolakkaran* receives '*kotiyila*' from the *karmi* of the shrine[32] and takes it to the *aniyara*. The belief is that the *kotiyila* contains the power of *Theyyam*; and that, once it reaches the *aniyara*, from then the *Theyyam* is not residing in the shrine but in the *aniyara*.

The *kolakkaran*, after the relevant *Thottam* singing is done, goes back to the *aniyara* to wear the full costume and the dress of the *Theyyam*. When this preparation happens, the *Thottam* singer/singers who is also present in the *aniyara* renders some further portions from the song. These lines are either extensions from the *Thottam* that had been sung

[32] '*Karmi*' is the priest in a shrine; and '*kotiyila*' is a banana leaf which has five betel leaves, five areca nuts, rice and burning oil wicks.

earlier or they pick from the repository of different songs available. All the same, the *Thottam* that is sung during this time is known as '*Aniyara thottam*' – literally, the *Thottam* sung in the *aniyara*. Generally, the *aniyara thottam* contain lines which praises the *Theyyam* for her/his heroic deeds, life qualities and the like. This *aniyara thottam* is also an announcement that the dance performance would commence soon. Alongside, there is also '*Kaithangi thottam*', which is sung in situations where the accompaniers of the *Theyyam* (such as those who help the *Theyyam* to tighten his headgear and ornaments and also provide him relief by doing the fanning in intervals) hold both the hands of the *Theyyam* from each side and take him to the *peetam* (stool) placed in front of the shrine.[33] Specifically, the word '*kai thanguka*' means to hold or support the hands. When the accompaniers hold the hands of the *Theyyam* and bring the latter to the *peetam*, the singers render some portions from the song.

Both the instances mentioned above in which the *Thottam* is sung are not considered as a part of the 'structure' of the songs. However, these lines are taken from the repository of the *Thottam* song and come to be rendered in different situations of the ritual. As stressed earlier on, rather than which lines are sung what becomes significant is the activity of singing itself. The nomenclature gives to these lines are not explanatory of what is being sung (unlike in *varavili* or even *stuti*), but they signify the junctures in which they are sung. There is no fixity about which lines are to be sung in these junctures, being often chosen according to the '*manodharmam*' of the singer. These situational rendering of the songs, as we have seen, are intricately connected with the other ritual activities that are happening at the particular space in which the *Theyyam* ritual is taking place. There always emerges a mutually reciprocating relationship between the song, the activity of singing and the other ritual actions taking place. They complement and contribute to each other. The world of songs in the ritual space is therefore not confined into the activity of singing alone.

[33] The *peetam* (or stool) is considered as the sacred seat, which serves as a seating place for the *vellattam* or *Theyyam* during different junctures of the performance. Freeman in his doctoral thesis talks about the different meanings attached to the term, which goes beyond being an object of furniture. He explicitly connects it with the Dravidian worship system, which etymologically referred to the royalty and political charisma of people (see Freeman,1991: esp. 223).

Chapter 4

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The Song in Motion: Engaging the *Thottam* of *Maakkam* and *Kathivanoor Veeran*

Standing Close, Moving Closer: On to the Thottam of Maakkam

The first Maakkam Theyyam that I attended was at Perumachery in Kannur district, and it was many years ago. It was a 'nercha theyyam', as offered by a family.[1] *The theyyam was not happening at a Kavu or temple, but in the middle of a paddy field, which after the harvest looked like a playground. We reached there just after the thottam singing had begun, and as expected there was a huge crowd, mainly comprising women. Two thottam singers and the theyyam performer were standing in a row and singing the songs. Standing in the middle, 'Maakkam' (the performer) responded to the singing through mild body movements and facial expressions. I still remember the part where the songs narrated the incident of Maakkam reaching her puberty. When the singers were singing these lines, the theyyam performer timidly looked at the mirror (looking at the hand as a symbol of mirror), smiled and nodded her head in shyness and folded the cloth on her hand to cover her breasts. In between, the thottam singing people were going and seeking blessings from Maakkam. She was hugging them with affection and blessing them. Even though I could not follow the thottam song much, as I was listening it for the first time, whenever some characters' name or a particular incident is mentioned in the song, I could easily recognise them as the legend of Maakkam was very familiar to me.*

When the thottam singing was happening, an old man was distributing a small booklet among the audience which described the legend of Maakkam. He was persuading the people to buy the book. When he reached me, I did not know what to do, and a lady standing next, who had already bought the book told me "Get it dear, the complete story of Maakkam and her children is there in it. Read it and you will know who Maakkam was". The book was priced ten rupees, and taking money from my mother I bought one. We listened to the whole recital staying there till the early morning of the next day (I must admit the fact that I was falling asleep in between!). As I was feeling too sleepy staying 'awake' the whole night, I was not ready to stay there to watch the dance performance which followed the recital. Therefore, we left the place after the thottam singing was over. That was the first time I listened to the Thottam song of Maakkam. After that, when I grew up and was 'actually' able to stay awake during the whole night

[1] '*Nercha*' means offering. Apart from the scheduled seasonal *Theyyam* performances, it is also performed as an offering made by families of individuals. People usually offer *Theyyams* in order to ward off the inauspiciousness, bring prosperity to the family, and also as a way showing gratitude for resolving a crisis they had to undergo. Such *Nercha Theyyams* need not necessarily be performed in the temple, but it could be at the household site that made the offering.

to attend both the thottam singing and theyyam performance, I attended Maakkam theyyam few more times, each time standing close and moving closer into its world.

The *Maakkam Theyyam* is not very 'common' across north Malabar as far as the number of places in which it is performed is concerned. It is mainly performed at two places in Kannur district - the Kadangottu Maakkam Bhagavathy Temple, Kunjimangalam and Chaala Kadavangottu Maakkam Bhagavathy temple. These two places - Chaala and Kunjimangalam - have utmost significance in the legend of *Maakkam*. It is in the Kadangottu *tharavadu* situated in Kunjimangalam where Maakkam is supposed to have been born. The legend says that it was a woman from the Puthiya Veettil *tharavadu*, situated in Chaala who gave milk to Maakkam and her children (even though they had asked for water to satiate their thirst) during the long journey they had to undertake. As a remembrance of the compassion that the Puthiya Veettil *tharavadu* had shown towards the helpless Maakkam and her children, it was here that the first *Maakkam Theyyam* ever was performed. Since then, each year the *Maakkam Theyyam* gets to be performed in the Chala Puthiya Veettil *tharavadu*. The *Thottam* performance that I attended was here, at the Chaala Kadavangottu Temple on 28th and 29th February, 2020.

Who is Maakkam? Unfolding the legend

The legend has it that Unicheriyamma, a member of Kadangottu *tharavadu* in Kunjimangalam,[2] had given birth to twelve male children, and her fervent wish to have a girl child had not yet been fulfilled. She went in front of the Bhagavathy temple and pleaded to the goddess to fulfil her long-time wish. She complained to the deity, "You have blessed every other *tharavadu* with a girl child. But what you have given me is sons; not just one or two, but twelve sons".[3] At last, after forty-one days of intense and dedicated prayers, the goddess appeared in front of her. Unicheriyamma (also referred as Unicheriya) narrated her worry, and the goddess blessed her that she would have a girl child soon.

[2] Kadangottu is one of the oldest Nambiar Tharavadu is Kunjimangalam, Kannur district. Nambiar is an upper caste group in the north Malabar region who were known for their warriorship and who enjoyed a socially privileged life.

[3] During those times, the rules of inheritance were governed by the practice of *Marumakkathayam*, a custom that was prevalent in north Malabar, where the inheritance of property is traced through females. Consequently, even after giving birth to twelve sons, Unicheriyamma was desperate for a girl child who could take care of the *tharavadu* and its property.

After receiving the blessings, Unicheriya walked back home. She was very tired and exhausted after the fasting and visits to the temple, and therefore after taking bath, she went and slept. During her sleep, Unicheriya had a dream: two giant cobras had wrapped around her waist and her hair, and a parrot, fluttering its wings, came and sat on her lap. In the dream, even as she glanced at the parrot again, she noticed that it was really a beautiful girl child who was looking at her with a mesmerising smile. The child stretched both of its hand to press Unicheriya's breast, and sucked at the milk that flowed. Upon waking up, Unicheriya realised that it was all a dream. However, after some days, she realised that she was pregnant, and with much excitement she waited for the arrival of her daughter. When she was seven months pregnant, she asked all her twelve sons to build an *'Eettillam*' consisting of seven rooms and seven floors for her delivery.[4] The *eettillam* that Unicheriya demanded was a huge one, and as per her wish the sons eagerly complied. The weeks passed by, and one day, while Unicheriya was walking inside the *eettillam*, suddenly her delivery pain started. Her sons arrived and according to Unicheriya's instruction they went and brought the midwife at home. She cried aloud, calling the names of all the gods she knew. After exactly ten months, ten days and ten *nazhika* [5] Unicheriya gave birth to a girl child and they named her as Maakkam.

Maakkam had a wonderful and luxurious childhood, and was provided with everything that she asked for. As the only sister of twelve brothers, Maakkam grew up enjoying all the attention and care. When she reached the age of five, her mother and twelve brothers decided that it is time for her '*Ariyil Ezhuthal*'.[6] The twelve brothers went and invited the *Kurukkal* ('*Gurukkal*' is also pronounced as *Kurukkal*, which means guru or teacher) who introduced her to the world of words. When she reached the age of seven, it was time for her '*Kaathu Kuthal*' (or ear piercing).[7] Her mother and twelve brothers ensured

[4] The '*etttillam*' is the room or space used by the women in the *tharavadu* during their pregnancy period, and their delivery takes place in this space. '*Eettu*' is Malayalam means delivery and '*illam*' is used to refer primarily to the abode of upper castes, especially of Namboodiris and Nairs.
[5] In Kerala, '*nazhika*' is used as a unit of time and distance. A day is supposedly divided into 60 *nazhika*.
[6] '*Ariyil ezhuthal*' is a traditional ritual performed by most Hindus in Kerala, where the children are introduced to the world of knowledge by writing '*Hari sri ganapaatye namah*' (Salutation to Vishnu, the god of prosperity and Ganapathy) using their index finger on rice-filled plates. It was done under the supervision of a Guru (teacher) who would make the child write '*Hari sri …*' on the rice filled plates.
[7] In the upper caste households, the ear-piercing ceremony of a girl child is an important event.

the best childhood for her as they fulfilled all her needs and wishes. The time for Pooram festival also arrived.[8] She woke up early in the morning, went and collected all the flowers from the nearby places. Being the only girl child in a *tharavadu*, she had people all around her who were ready to run errands. When Maakkam was unable to find a particular flower called '*Kilithinnipoo*', which is found only in a faraway land, she sent Eeyavanatan, a Thiyya servant to collect the flower for her.

After the Pooram festival was over, it was the time for her marriage. A particular custom existed during the time, where the girl child in the Nambiar families who is celebrating the Pooram festival for the first time would get married to a person who cut the hanging seven *ada* by discharging arrows.[9] The word about Maakkam and her beauty had spread wide, and many people had gathered at Kadangottu *tharavadu* to compete for her hand. Among them was also present a young boy, Kutti Nambar, who was also her *muracherukkan*.[10] Even though Maakkam did not like Kutti Nambar, he was the one who won in the game. Soon thereafter, though, Maakkam and Kutti Nambar started loving each other and were enjoying a joyous married life.

After a few months, Maakkam got pregnant. Enduring much suffering and pain, she gave birth to two kids, a girl and a boy. The twins were named Cheeru and Chaathu, and like Maakkam they too were enjoying a blissful childhood at their mother's house. The wives of Maakkam's twelve brothers did not have children, and obviously they did not like the fact that Maakkam gave birth to two children. However, they could not show their dislike openly as they were scared of their husbands. Chaathu and Cheeru were growing up in Kadangottu *tharavadu* receiving all the love from parents and twelve uncles. One day the twelve brothers received a letter via a messenger from the Kolathiri

[8] 'Pooram' is a unique festival celebrated in the north Kerala region, especially in the upper caste households, where the young girls offer worship for a joyful married life. In the legend of *Maakkam* there are elaborate descriptions about Pooram and related rituals. During the Pooram festival, the young girls make an idol of Kaman (signifying love and desire) using flowers for nine days, each day collecting different flowers. On the last day, they bid farewell to the idol, and request him to visit them the next year.
[9] *Ada* is a snack specially prepared during the festival of Pooram.
[10] In Kerala, there was a custom that the girl child was supposed to get married to her cross-cousin, that is either mother's brothers' son or father's sisters' son). Note, while in the *Thottam* song, the name of the person is mentioned as Kutti Nambar, some practitioners also address him as Kutti Nambiar.

Raja.[11] The latter had requested the help of the Kadangottu Nambiars to fight a battle against the *Neriyottu swaroopam*.[12] The twelve brothers decided to go for the battle, and they told Maakkam about their situation. Quite aware of the jealousy and hatred that her sisters-in-law had towards her, Maakkam was quite distressed upon hearing her brothers' decision to join in the battle. Seeing the helpless Maakkam, her brothers consoled her by assuring that nothing bad would happen to her and her children. They also promised that after reaching back winning the battle, they would take her and the children along with them to visit the '*vilakkumadam*' at Kottayam.[13] Reluctantly, and with much agony, Maakkam sent off her brothers. Having heard Maakkam complaining about them to their husbands', the sisters-in-law were quite furious, and they waited for a suitable opportunity to deceive her.

Maakkam's brothers were fighting the battle in a faraway land. One day, she noticed that the oil to lighten the lamp kept in the room of 'Veerachamundi' was getting over.[14] She called the Vaniyan, and asked him provide some oil.[15] The sisters-in-law overheard this, and thought that this was the best time to deceive Maakkam. On the day when the Vaniyan was coming with the oil, all the twelve sisters-in-law purposefully went out of the home telling Maakkam that they were going to collect wood. But actually, they did not go anywhere, but were hiding in one corner of the house and secretly observing what was happening. The Vaniyan came carrying a pot of oil. Maakkam, who was

[11] Kolathiri Raja was the king who ruled Kolathunadu, which consisted of the existing Kannur district.

[12] *Neriyottu swaroopam* is one of the '*swaroopam*' in pre modern Malabar. '*Swaroopam*' refers to the ruling houses of particular *nadu* (land or area) [see broadly Mailaparambil, 2011). The Nambiar caste in north Kerala were warriors who had to provide the king with human and economic resources during a battle. According to the social arrangements of that time, the wealthy upper caste people had the responsibility of providing the king with these resources. The Kadangottu Nambiars were known for fighting and winning the battle for Kolathiri.

[13] The word '*vilakkumadam*' literally means lighthouse, and bears reference to the lantern lit in temples and homes dedicated to the gods. There was the custom in north Malabar that, upon winning a battle, the warriors would visit the place known as Kottayam in Kannur district to see the *vilakkumadam* over there. They would go there, pray and make offering to the god. It must be noted that the 'Kottayam' mentioned in the legend is not a reference to the present Kottayam district of Kerala. The Kottayam of pre-colonial Malabar indicates the present Tellichery taluk of Kannur district.

[14] 'Veerachamundi' is a famous deity who is worshipped across the region of Kunjimangalam, although there are many Chamundi temples in north Malabar. In his novel, Sunil Kumar (2015) says that Veerachamundi is the mother of all living beings in Kunjimangalam. The Kadangottu *tharavadu*, where Maakkam lived, had a shrine of its own where they worshipped Veerachamundi.

[15] The Vaniyan community in north Malabar belongs to the OBC category. Their traditional occupation is oil extraction using *Chakku*, a machine with a large bowl-shaped structure and a pestle which is run by bullocks.

menstruating at that time, told the Vaniyan that there is nobody at home, and since she was menstruating, she cannot come out. Both of them did not know what to do. Finally, Maakkam told the Vaniyan to keep the oil pot inside the room - which was next to the place where Maakkam was relaxing - by keeping his one leg inside the room and one leg outside.[16] After keeping the pot, the Vaniyan was just about to pull his leg out of the room, when the sisters-in-law who were watching suddenly jumped on him and raised an alarm about Maakkam having an illegitimate affair with the Vaniyan. Maakkam was really shocked to hear the false things that her sisters-in-law were saying about her. She pleaded with them not to cook up such stories about her. But the sisters-in-law, who were always jealous of Maakkam and her children, were extremely happy about the plight that Maakkam had to face. They eagerly waited for their husbands to come back to tell this story, so that the brothers too would start hating Maakkam and her children.

After some days, the Kadangottu Nambiars returned home winning the battle.[17] Seeing their husbands arriving, the twelve wives ran towards them and held forth the story about their 'immoral' sister. At first, the brothers were not ready to believe what their wives were saying. But seeing the audacity with which they were explaining the story, the brothers also believed that their sister had indeed gone through a wrong path. Unaware of the changed mindset of her brothers, Maakkam was making all the preparations to welcome them. Indeed, Maakkam could not accept the sudden behavioural changes of her brothers; and kept begging of them to believe her and that she had not done anything wrong. The brothers were, however, unwilling to listen to her. Angrily, they asked Maakkam and her children to get ready for the journey to visit the *Vilakkumadam* at Kottayam. She sensed that something disastrous was going to happen to her and the children. Realising that any attempt to convince her brothers is futile, Maakkam decided to go with them. Even as she was disappointed with her brothers and even furious at their behaviour, Maakkam started to prepare for the journey. She made her children take

[16] Obviously, in the caste society of north Malabar, the lower caste people were not allowed to enter into the spaces of 'purity', such as the family shrine, the *tharavadu* proper, etc. They were all supposed to keep a distance, given that the presence of the lower castes was considered as polluting. This is clearly why Maakkam tells the Vaniyan not to enter the shrine space completely, but to keep one leg outside.

[17] After winning the battle, the Kolathiri Raja granted them the name '*Kadangottu Achanmar*' ('Achan' literally means father, although in the context specified it refers to the privileged position accorded to the Kadangottu Nambiars.

bath and wear a new dress, and burnt the rest of the clothes. She crushed all her gold ornaments and threw it in the pond. When she was leaving her home, her sisters-in-law were laughing at her plight. Maakkam cursed them, saying that they would suffer for their treachery.

The twelve brothers, Maakkam, Chaathu and Cheeru started their journey. The brothers who were walking in the front did not even look behind nor were they bothered about Maakkam and her children. The journey was long, and the children soon got really tired and asked for water. Maakkam requested her brothers to arrange some water for her children. Pointing a dirty pond close by, the elder brother asked them to drink water from it. Upon this careless response from her brother, Maakkam got really depressed and said she cannot have her children drink from a dirty pond. Soon, she saw a house nearby and she took her children there requesting for some water. It was the 'Puthiya Veedu' in Chaala.[18] The house owner, a landlady who was sitting in front of the house, felt sad seeing the pathetic condition of Maakkam and her children. Though Maakkam had only asked for some water, seeing their pitiful condition, the lady gave them enough milk to drink. Maakkam and her children drank the whole milk and emptied the vessel. Before leaving, Maakkam, in a gesture of gratitude, removed the ornaments that she was wearing and kept it in the vessel. They resumed their journey.

After walking for a long time, the children got tired again and pleaded with their mother that they could not walk any further. When Maakkam pleaded with her brothers, they pointed to a well nearby and asked her to fetch water from it. Having noticed the well, they also thought that this was the best opportunity to deceive Maakkam and her children. They urged her to peer into the well so as to see the magic star which blinks even at the day light. Maakkam wondered, and eagerly looked into the well to see the magic star. While she was looking into the well, the brothers beheaded her and the children and dumped their bodies into the well. Since it was a forest area the brothers thought that nobody was watching them. But a youth from the Mavilan community was watching all

[18] As mentioned earlier, the *Maakkam Theyyam* was first performed in this tharavad. Even now, each year the *Maakkam theyyam* is being performed here during the Malayalam month of Kumbham (February-March of the calendar year).

this.[19] Indeed, upon seeing the Mavilan hiding in the forest, one of the brothers went and grabbed him. Along with Maakkam and her children, they beheaded this tribal youth also and dumped his body in the same well.

The murder of Maakkam and her children created havoc. The brothers soon started fighting among themselves, and eventually killed each other. At the same time, the Kadangottu *tharavadu* at Kunjimangalam caught fire and, except the room where *Veerachamundi* was residing, everything was burnt into ashes. The sisters-in-law who were trying to escape the fire, were hanged to death in a banyan tree. Maakkam and her children transformed to be immortal *Theyyams* and people started to worship them. Along with them, the Mavilan who was murdered by the Kadangottu Nambiars is also worshipped.

The Life of the Song Within the Ritual

I reached Chala Kadangottu Maakkam Bhagavathy temple around 4 o'clock on 28 February 2020. The temple is situated quite close to the Chala Kadangottu *tharavadu*. In fact, the house and the temple have a common courtyard, and it is in this shared space that the *Theyyam* ritual performance takes place. The courtyard, which is shared by both the temple and the house, is a pretty wide one, having enough space for the godly *theyyam* dance to take place. Facing the main shrine, towards the front corner of the courtyard, there were layered seating arrangements - long steps made of bricks - for the people to sit and watch the ritual happening in the courtyard. When I reached the place, the whole courtyard and the surrounding were filled with many people, and most of them were women. People had already occupied the sitting areas, which would give them a good view of the performance that was going to take place.

In the courtyard, there was the '*Vellattam*' of *Dharma Daivam Theyyam*.[20] Soon after, the *vellattam* of *Gulikan Theyyam* entered the courtyard with some more dance

[19] The Mavilan community is a Scheduled Tribe in Kerala, predominantly present in Kannur and Kasaragod districts. They were traditionally hunter gatherers.

[20] The '*Vellattam*' is the younger version of *Theyyam*. Our previous chapter contains a brief general description of this form. The *Dharma Daivam Theyyam* is the family god who is worshipped in a particular

movements.[21] After this latter performance which did last for some time, the Gulikan *vellattam* sat on a *'peetam*' in one corner of the courtyard to receive offerings from people. These supposedly 'minor' *theyyams*, I soon came to know, are also worshipped in this particular temple during the yearly *Theyyam* festival. In fact, the latter at the *Chala Puthiya Veettil* (as referred) lasts for three days, and the *Maakkam Theyyam* is performed on the last two days of the festival.[22] In one corner of the temple precincts, the headgear for the *Gulikan Theyyam*, which was to be performed on the next day after the *Thottam* of *Maakkam*, was being prepared. Indeed, when I reached the temple that day, what I witnessed was an atmosphere which was already equipped for the arrival of *Maakkam*. The sound of the drums and the murmuring sound of the crowd - with many a people conversing with each other, some about the *Theyyam*, some sharing the excitement of meeting each other after a long time, some engaged in mundane conversations and so on – these were all pervasive in the surrounding.

Needless to say, the people gathered in the temple surrounding were all excited and waiting patiently in anticipation. In fact, this was so, when I interacted with some people in the gathering – they were all looking forward to the *Thottam* song of *Maakkam* to begin. Let me recollect some of the conversations, so as to give a flavour of the moment. A middle-aged woman, whose house is close the temple, spoke to me about the importance of finding an appropriate place from which to watch the *Thottam* singing. Since her home is nearby, she said that she comes to watch the performance every year:

> It will take some more time to begin the *Thottam* singing, I think. I reached here an hour before. If we don't come early, we will not get any place to sit and watch the singing performance. It will go on till next day morning. So having an apt and comfortable place to sit throughout the performance is mandatory. Don't you see that people have already started rushing in, do you? Once the singing performance begins more people are going to come. Everyone who is gathered here are waiting for the *Thottam* singing to begin. See, I have carried a towel,

house since many years. It is also known as a guardian deity, worshipped for the well-being of the household and its people.

[21] The *Gulikan Theyyam* is known as the clan deity of the Malayan community. It is believed that Gulikan is born from the thumb of Lord Siva's left leg. When Yama threw the *Yamaprasham* (rope of death) to kill Siva's most devoted devotee Markandeya, who was clinging to the Siva Linga, Lord Siva got extremely angry. His anger and wrath took the form of an extremely frightening form - Gulikan. Gulikan, who is born to eradicate death (Yama), is worshipped by people for long life and to eliminate all evil energies from their lives.

[22] Broadly, the *Thottam* singing happens on the second day, and the *Theyyam* dance on the third day early morning.

> some snacks and a bottle of water with me. You know why? Because if I get up and go in between, I will lose this place that I have now occupied. Sitting here I can see and listen to the singing clearly.

Likewise, I also met a young man who was part of the organising committee of the ritual event, who in fact clarified my doubts regarding the presence of *Vellattam* in the courtyard:

> These *Vellattam* who are wandering in the courtyard will be moved aside, once the *Maakkam Thottam* begins. All these people who are scattered here and there will start paying attention to the song once the performance begins. You will witness the transformation by yourself. Like you, all these people gathered here are waiting for the singing to commence. Once it begins all these noises will be gone. Ideally the singing should have begun by now. I think it will take some more time. You also find an appropriate place for yourself to sit and watch the performance. Otherwise, it will be difficult as more people are going to come.

The eagerness of the people gathered was visible from their facial expressions, the short conversations they were having with each other etc. I often overheard people asking each other curiously when the singing would begin. Even though many of them did not have much of an idea, they 'consoled' each other by saying 'soon'. Some also referred to the last year's timing, saying partly in consolation that 'Last year, the singing had begun much earlier. I hope they finish on time this time'.

As I had been warned, in a matter of few minutes the people started rushing in, and occupied convenient places for themselves. Obviously, for them, it was important not only to listen to the singing performance, but also to witness the unfolding of Maakkam's life in the courtyard. Presently, when the sound of the drums began to be heard aloud from the *aniyara*, the crowd slowly started settling down in their own places, marking the beginning of the *Maakkam Thottam* performance.

Into the world of singing: the preparations

Accompanied by the sound of the drums, the *Kolakkaran* (who is going to be *Maakkam*) arrived in the courtyard from the *aniyara*, making slow paced dance movements.[23] He was not donning the full costume of the *Theyyam* yet, and the make-up and the

[23] In Chala, *Maakkam* is taken on by Mangadan Haridasan Peruvannan, who has been performing the *Maakkam Theyyam* since the past 15 years.

adornments were minimal. He was wearing a red *mundu* with white streamlined border over his waist. There was a glittering red scarf tied on the waist, using which he was covering the backside of his body. The upper part of his body was bare, except for some ornaments like a long-beaded necklace. His face was fully coloured with red, over which some decorative designs were done using yellow, orange and white colours. The costume and make-up at this stage is not very elaborate; it is quite preliminary as the *kolakkaran* himself is in the process of becoming *Maakkam*. The performer arrived at the courtyard accompanied by a person who walked in front holding a lightened lamp. After reaching the courtyard, the performer first went in front of the Chala Puthiya Veettil *tharavadu*, bowed his head and stood in the courtyard facing the house with folded hands.[24] The women of the family who were gathered in front of the house threw rice on the performer. From there, by making slow paced dance movements, he further went to the devotees gathered in the courtyard and sought blessings from them as well. Finally, after circling the courtyard and receiving the blessings of all, the performer reached in front of the shrine. Facing it, he held his hands seeking the blessings from the deity who resides inside the shrine.

The *kolakkaran* had sought the blessings from the house which, as the legend has it, provided succour to a helpless Maakkam and her children. Every year in Chala, before the performance, it is a rite that the performer should go in front of the home and seek blessings. This is obviously about recalling the past, and re-establishing the bond which had been formed long back. Every seasonal performance of *Maakkam* in Chala, therefore, becomes an occasion in which this bond is reinforced and reminds all about. Before becoming the god, the performer also seeks blessings from the people who have gathered in the ritual space. For the devotees, the performer is *Maakkam* herself, and for the performer the acknowledgment and blessings of the people is significant in entering into the world of *Theyyams*. It is a mutual transaction of multiple emotions, as it were, which encompasses the intricate historical relationship between the *Theyyam* worship, the region and the people. The conventional god-human hierarchy is often challenged as

[24] The Chala *Maakkam* temple and the Chala Puthiya Veettil *tharavadu*, as already mentioned, share a common courtyard. Thus, the performer coming from the *aniyara*, which is situated at the backside of the shrine, goes directly to the house to seek blessings. Also referred to as *Chala Puthiyaveedu*, it is a Nambiar *tharavadu* which is situated in Chala, Kannur.

the ‘process of becoming god’ demands the acknowledgement of people. So also, when the *kolakkaran* moved to the front of the shrine, the people who are milling around make way for him. The idea, clearly, is to re-establish the bond that the ritual shares with the people and other entities belonging to multiple realms, as also to invoke a sense of community. In fact, more than seeking the blessings from different people, it shows the interdependency that the ritual shares with the region and its people.

After praying in front of the shrine, the *kolakkaran* slowly came back to the courtyard. By the time he had finished the praying, a few helpers who are part of the *Theyyam* group had carried a *peetam* and kept it in the courtyard facing the shrine. A few persons stood around the performer, and helped him to tie the scarf around his head. Along with the headscarf, the helpers also made the performer wear some ornaments around his neck, hands etc. The persons gathered around the performer also made sure that the costume and ornaments of the performer is fixed and tightened properly so that there would not be any inconvenience during the performance. After doing all these preparations, the performer again bowed in front of the crowd and the shrine. The performer stood facing the shrine, and throws the rice received in a piece of banana leaf towards the shrine and to the people who were gathered around him. He faced the shrine again, and joins the percussion by beating the drum which is kept near the *peetam*. After a few minutes, the percussion stops, suddenly creating a silent atmosphere and the performer starts reciting the *Varavili* facing the shrine. The *varavili* is not accompanied by any sound other than that of the performer who is delivering it. After the *varavili*, the performer is considered and worshipped as the *Maakkam* herself, whose life story is going to be narrated through singing.

Since the beginning of the performer’s arrival in the courtyard, a few persons standing in front of the shrine in a row were beating drums in a loud sound, and in a particular rhythm, creating a sonic ambience in the ritual space. The preparatory phase before the commencement of the singing was marked by this intense sound of drums which was capable of transforming the space into a ritually more efficacious one. Besides, the loud sound of the drums is an announcement to mark the beginning of the *Theyyam* ritual itself. Indeed, as far as the ritual space is concerned, the sonic atmosphere created is

present throughout the duration of the ritual, although the sound of percussions which began with the arrival of the *kolakkaran* in the courtyard lasts till the entry of the songs.

There was a sudden shift from the fast-paced sound of drums to the slow-paced sound of songs sung by the *Thottam* practitioners. However, this transition in the mood of the ritual atmosphere is not only marked by the sudden shift to a different sonic environment created by the rendering of the songs, but is also physically manifested by the departing of the drummers and the entering of the *Thottam* singers. The entry of the singers, unlike that of the *kolakkaran*, is neither accompanied by any particular rites nor attracts the attention of the people gathered in the ritual space. In fact, the attire of the singers and the helpers in the *Theyyam* group who gather around the performer during this initial phase is the same; all of them were wearing a white *mundu* over their waist. The sudden silence created in the ritual space after the ending of the loud drumming lasted for a few minutes. In that interval of few minutes, the helpers gathered around the performer and the drummers departed from the ritual space. From there onwards, the space belonged to the *kolakkaran* and those two *Thottam* singers.

The emergence of a 'singing space'

Clearly, the *Thottam* song of *Maakkam* did not quite enter into an already assigned space; rather, the song and the singing gradually establish a space of its own through their very rendition. Therefore, rather than saying the 'space of singing', it would be more appropriate to term is as a 'singing space' which is not assigned, but one that evolved in the courtyard as the song unravelled its narrative world. The 'singing space' of the song not only involves the physical space of singing occupied by the singers, but it also encapsulates all the meanings and significance that the singing activity brings about.

As mentioned initially, when I reached the temple, there were already two *Vellattam* present in the courtyard. When the rendering began, the two *Vellattam* had already occupied two different corners of the courtyard receiving offerings from the devotees. The people were gathered around each of them seeking blessings. The courtyard, in a manner of speaking, witnessed a continuous movement of people from one *Theyyam* to another, seeking blessings from each. Even though there was a huge crowd gathered at

the surroundings much before the commencement of the ritual, the middle portion of the courtyard and the part in front of the shrine were considered as sacred, and no one entered this latter space without being barefoot. The people, indeed, had access to this space as they pray in front of the shrine and seek blessings from the *Theyyam*. However, it is delineated from the surroundings outside through the practice of people being barefoot. It can be seen that, as the performances progressed in the courtyard, considerable changes happened in this performative space. The physical space in which all of these performances were taking place remained the same (namely, the courtyard); and yet various worlds were being manifested and encapsulated in this common ritual space. The *Thottam* song of *Maakkam* enters into such a space which is continuously evolving and transforming.

After the preparatory performances, as mentioned above in the previous sub-section, the singers and the *kolakkaran* stood in a row facing the shrine. Unlike the *kolakkaran* who was engaged in multiple activities, such as making slow paced dance movements, blessing the devotees etc., even as the singing progressed, the singers were solely dedicated to their recitation without even changing their position. They stood facing the shrine, singing and beating the *chenda* (drum) carried on their shoulder without moving hither thither. Even though the larger ritual space is all encompassing, the singers required a small space for their performance. Throughout the performance they maintained a static posture without much bodily movements. The physical space occupied by the singers had no prior visible identifiers or spatial markers that made it an exclusive space of singing. Rather, when the singers come there and start singing the song carrying a *chenda* in their hands, it gradually develops into a singing space. Thus, the very actualisation of the singing space occurs through the practice of singing. Indeed, the practice and the space contribute to each other's evolution and progression granting an exclusivity to both. Such an exclusive space, however, is temporary as once the singing ends and the singers leave from there, its modality gets transformed into a different one based on the further enactment of the ritual.

The temporality associated with the singing space should be seen in close connection with the dynamics of the overall performative space of the ritual as it obtains in the main

courtyard. The loud sound of drums played in the preparatory phase of the recital and the following singing performance seem not to be directly interfering with the rest of the ritual space. In fact, when the legend of *Maakkam* was being unravelled at one side of the courtyard establishing a world of its own, in other parts of the same ritual space the *vellattam* of two *theyyams* were engaged in their own worlds. The *Thottam* song of *Maakkam* entered at a juncture where the *vellattam*, after their minor dance performance, had occupied separate positions in the courtyard receiving offerings from the devotees. These activities were simultaneously taking place in the courtyard, without interfering in each other's spaces.

Primarily, the *Thottam* song and *vellattam* have an obvious and visible distinction between them.[25] All the same, the distinctions between these three *Theyyams* - *Gulikan*, *Dharma Daivam theyyam* and *Maakkam* - are manifold. The legends behind them are very different from each other and there is no narrative connection between these three performances. In fact, their overall attire, the songs sung, the dance performances and the rites observed during their manifestation, all varied from each other to a great extent. The distinctiveness of these three worlds was also manifested in terms of the social position of the practitioners. Both the *Maakkam Theyyam* and *Dharma Daivam theyyam* are performed by practitioners belonging to the Vannan caste, whereas the *Gulikan Theyyam* is performed by the Malayan caste.[26] The right of particular castes to perform specific *Theyyams* is always already determined based on the customs prevalent. The spatial distribution of these three worlds, and the territorial rules they signify, each materialises the historically and culturally defined rights and symbolic capital of the participants.

Accordingly, we can say that the two *vellattam* and the *Thottam* song of *Maakkam* are not only distinct from each other in terms of the physical space they occupied. They are distinct in terms of the very nature of their being, the ways in which they expressed

[25] We have highlighted this difference between *thottam* and *vellattam* in the previous chapter. What is, however, noteworthy here is that, in the given ritual space, the *vellattams* of two *theyyams* and the singers singing the *Thottam* are all spatially present.

[26] Both these caste groups, belonging to the 'Scheduled Caste' category, are known for performing the *Theyyam*.

themselves in the ritual space, the customarily and socially defined roles of the performers, and the absence of a common narrative thread that could connect the legends behind each of them. However, the factor which made their co-existence possible in a common ritual space was their belonging to the larger fraternity of '*Theyyams*'. They all belonged to the same pantheon, and are celebrated and worshipped in the same region. Even while creating their own meanings which are seemingly different from each other, they also together bring about other complementary sets of meanings. Like a montage, these multiple worlds converse with and merge into each other, even when they manifest their own worlds differently. The ritual space is thus dynamic and active and is constantly orienting and reorienting itself and the participants towards multi-layered meanings and structures of valence.

In the further manifestation of the singing performance, it could be seen that there was a continuous and dynamic interaction happening between the singing space and the larger ritual space (of which the singing is clearly a part). The *Thottam* singing, obviously, created a sonic atmosphere which was capable of permeating through these multiple worlds pre-existing in the larger ritual space. On the one hand, the physical distance in the courtyard between the *Theyyams* and the singing performance made it seem that there is no direct interaction between these three realms. They were not even facing each other, as there is an evident territorial demarcation between them. However, on the other hand, the voice of the singers is not restricted to the space of singing alone, but it encapsulated the larger ritual space in its totality.

The nature and dynamics of this interaction underwent significant changes as the singing activity proceeded. Thus, while the singing was progressing on one side, in the rest of the courtyard necessary arrangements were being made. Once the song reached the portion talking about Maakkam getting pregnant, the nature of the ritual space gradually started to change. The two *vellattam* in the courtyard slowly left the space altogether accompanied by the helpers, making space for the arrival of Maakkam's children - Chaathu and Cheeru. As the *vellattam* left the courtyard, the other helpers also instructed the people gathered to move aside in order to make enough space in the courtyard for the further manifestation of the ritual. By the time the singing reaches the portion of

Maakkam's delivery, the middle part of courtyard is emptied for the arrival of Chaathu and Cheeru.

All these preparations and changes taking place were gradually shifting the mood of the ritual space. These 'transformations' were taking place simultaneously with the progression of the singing performance. It is no longer a shared space, but has evolved as a unique one which solely contained the world of the *Maakkam Theyyam*. Once the delivery of Maakkam happens, along with the *Maakkam* performer there are two other *kolams* (meaning the shape or form of *Theyyam*) also present in the space in the form of Chaathu and Cheeru. It was the very rendering of the song that channelised the formation of such a space. The idea is that, by the time song mentions about the arrival of Chaathu and Cheeru, the courtyard should be cleared and enough space should be available for the entry of these two characters.

Evidently, even though the singers occupied the same physical space throughout their singing performance, the *Thottam* song through gradual unravelling of its narrative world was consistently engaging with the multiple worlds that existed in the particular ritual space. This engagement was materialised not only through the pervasive sonic atmosphere, but also through the manifestation of tangible and dynamic changes that were taking place in the ritual space. Once the singing is completed and the singers departs from the space, the nature of the space changes as it gets completely prepared for the dance performance of Maakkam and her children. The transformation happening within the larger ritual space, clearly, is not unilinear in the sense of having a self- evident demarcation between the beginning and ending of the ritual spaces created by different practices. Rather, what is witnessed is a continuous process of evolution, co-existence and overlapping of these multiple spaces, with each actualising its own potential even while actively interacting with the others (cf. also the assemblage idea forwarded in the previous chapter). It often seemed like a collage formed as a result of an assemblage of multiple autonomously existing fragments which imparted its own meanings and significance.

The song and singers: interweaving networks

As the song of *Maakkam* slowly starts to unravel, it can be seen that the ritual space is manifesting the emergence of multiple social relationships and negotiations. Depending upon the demands of the given situation and the *manodharmam* of the singers, who ostensibly have enough experience and skill in singing the *Thottam*, the activity of singing facilitates the formation of multiple networks, all of which ultimately contribute into the overall ritual project of the *Maakkam Theyyam*.

As part of our situation, there are two singers who are assigned to sing the *Thottam* of *Maakkam*. Wearing a while *mundu* over their waist and carrying a small *chenda* on their shoulder, the singers were positioned on both the sides of the *kolakkaran*. Throughout the singing performance, they were beating the *chenda* using both their hands. As we mentioned in the previous chapter, the idea of synchronisation between *kottu* and *paattu* are important to *Thottam* singing. Thus, as far as the *Maakkam* song is concerned, the two *Thottam* singers present are referred as '*mun thottakkaran*' and '*bai thottakkaran*'. As the word goes, '*Thottakkaran*' is the one who sings the *Thottam* songs as a practiced accomplishment. '*Mun thottakkaran*' means the main *Thottam* singer who leads the recital; and '*Bai thottakkaran*' roughly alludes to the secondary singer who follows the *mun thottakkaran*. Dineshan Peruvannan talks about the distinction between these two positionalities:

> For the *Maakkam Thottam*, there is a *mun thottakkaran* and *bai thottakkaran*. The *mun thottakkaran* stands on the right side of the performer and *bai thottakkaran* stands on the left side. The control of the singing activity is on the who stands in the right side. He is the one who decides how much each line should be elongated, in what time the singing should be concluded, etc. Usually, the *Thottam* of *Maakkam* lasts for 6-7 hours. However, when it is performed as an offering in Vayalthara, we usually do not get that much time to sing. There the singing commences around 8 o' clock in the night and we will have to complete it around 3.30 in the morning. Then only the *Theyyam* dance can be commenced around 5 o' clock. In such situations where there is a shortage of time, the *Thottam* song will be shortened; shortening means the elaborate descriptions will be eliminated. Just like how we take a short-cut route when there is huge traffic! It is the *mun thottakkaran* who has to do it. The *bai thottakkaran* continues the singing according to the changes made by the *mun thottakkaran*. A mutual understanding between these two singers is extremely important during the *Thottam* singing. They are not to be bothered about what is

> happening around them (Interview done on 14 March 2020, at Azhikode, Kannur).

In Chaala, there were three *Thottam* singers who were physically present - Naanu Peruvannan, Prasoon Peruvannan and Pradeepan Peruvannan - even though at a given time only two singers were engaged in the singing. Naanu Peruvannan from Azhikode Thaliyil House of Kannur district is 76 years old, and he is one of the renowned *Maakkam Thottam* singers alive in north Malabar region. He is known among the *Theyyam* performers as one who has immense knowledge and experience in singing the *thottam* of *Maakkam*. I remember in the initial days of my fieldwork, when I asked any practitioner about the *thottam* song of *Maakkam*, they would direct me to go to Azhikode and meet Naanu Peruvannan and Dineshan Peruvannan who were known for singing and performing *Maakkam* (Dineshan Peruvannan, incidentally, is the nephew of Naanu Peruvannan). Along with Naanu Peruvannan, his son Pradeepan Peruvannan was also there as one of the singers.[27]

The singing activity is initiated by the *mun thottakkaran*, who starts singing the invocatory lines of the *Maakkam Thottam*. The singers communicate to each other, to the world outside, and to the cosmic world of *Theyyam* through the *Thottam* song they are singing. The *Thottam* of *Maakkam* is arranged into couplets, and in the singing process, one singer renders a couplet, and following which the other singer recites the next one. It is through this sequential delivery of couplets by the singers that the singing activity progresses. The fundamental interaction happening between the *mun thottakkaran* and *bai thottakkaran* is primarily through these song couplets. There is no other mode of communication between the singers. For example, let us look at a portion of the song where Maakkam asks her mother's permission to go and play with her friends in the neighbourhood (in the rendition below, **M** stands for '*mun thottakkaran*' and **B** stands for '*bai thottakkaran*'):

[27] The *theyyam* performers in Azhikode, especially from the Thaliyil house, is known for performing *Maakkam*. Even though they do perform other *theyyams*, which are meant to be performed by the Vannan community, they are often known for performing *Maakkam*. Since *Maakkam* is mainly performed at two places in the north Malabar region (Chaala and Kunjimangalam) there are not many *thottam* singers who are active in singing the *Maakkam thottam* song. Since some years, the *thottam* of *Maakkam* is sung only by the practitioners from Azhikode.

B: *Anganeyavide pala dina divasam kazhinjaduthu* Thus, as many days went by
Pettammayodu chodikkunnallo kunji maakkam The little Maakkam asks her mother
M: *Kelkkunnundo ningalumente pettoramme?* Are you listening to me, mother?
Njanorikke angottumingottum kalippaan poykkotto? May I go and play in the neighbourhood?
B: A*ppozhallo parayunnallo Unicheriyamma* At that time Unnnicheriyamma says,
Thammil thammil poru kuthi kalikkalle kuttiye Dear child, don't quarrel with each other while you play
M: *Pettammayodu anuvadam vangi yaathrayakunnu* (She) leaves after receiving permission from mother
Angattilum ingattilum adukkunneram Once (she) reaches the neighbourhood
B: *Doorennu kanunnavar kuttikal* Children who see this from away (says)
Kanunnundo kaatholakkathichiyude varav kanunno? Can't you see the arrival of a *kaatholakkathichi*?[28]

It is quite evident how the couplet rendered by a singer is followed by another couplet sung by the other singer. Even though the couplet sung by one singer is syntactically coherent, the contextual significance is granted to those couplets when they are linked to one another as parts of a longer sequence that have their own coherence.

Indeed, the flow of couplets from one singer to another is also manifested in the way in which the lines of the *Thottam* are sung. Let us take the example of the couplets given above:

M: *Anganeyavide pala dina divasam… … kazhinjaduthu… … …..*
Pettammayodu chodikkunnallo… … kunji maakkam… … …..
B: *Kelkkunnundo ningalumente… ….. pettoramme?… … …..*
Njanorikke angottumingottum… ….. kalippaan poykkotto… …..

It could be seen that while singing, there is an elongation of the last syllable of the second last and the last word of each line (the dots mentioned in the above couplets refer to the elongation). This pattern can be observed throughout the singing. For more clarity, let us look at the first line of first couplet mentioned above:

[28] The immediate reference here is to the custom where the children, after getting their ears pierced, wear a small piece of the coconut leaf in their ears as a ring. Here the children with whom Maakkam had gone to play make fun of her, calling '*kaatholakkathichi*' - the one who is wearing coconut leaf in her ears.

Anganeyavide pala dina divasam (am…….) kazhinjaduthu (uu……..)

Here, the elongation comes towards the end of the words '*divasam*' and '*kazhinjaduthu*'. The '*am*' sound and the */u/* sound pronounced towards the end of these words are elongated - in general, it can be said that the vowel sound coming towards the end of these words are elongated - with an intention of making the activity of song rendering more musical. However, the vowel sound elongation of the last word of each line lasts longer as compared to the vowel elongation associated with the second last line. One significant point to be noted here is that, during the singing of *Thottam* songs, whether a syllable is phonetically short or long does not matter, as it is always possible that a short vowel can be elongated during the recitation. Rather than the phonetical accuracy of each word, how each couplet is conversing with the couplets above and below it in order to bring about a coherent meaning – and not only in terms of the content but also in terms of delivering it in the particular rhythm – seems more important in the rendering.

From the singer who finishes his couplet through this elongated emphasis on the vowel sound, the other singer begins the first line of the couplet assigned to him. In fact, there is no break between the ending of one line and the beginning of the other, even though they are sung by different singers. Thus, the listeners get a strong sense that a single line is not completed until the next line is sung, irrespective of which singer sings it. These modifications that the song entails in its rendering context is crucial in the effectiveness of the singing practice. In fact, it is through this mutual delivery of couplets in a particular tone that the singers reciprocally validate themselves. In fact, during the whole performance, the singers rarely looked at each other, as what mattered the most was listening to the co-singer and singing the couplet that they are each supposed to sing. When one singer finishes singing a couplet in the assigned tune, his 'accuracy' in singing - both in terms of the tune and the content - is legitimised by the other singer who takes up the song from where the first singer stopped. Thus, what is invoked through this mutual validation is the positional and not the personal identities of the singers. Having positioned themselves in a restricted singing space, the singers throughout the performance negotiate with each other through this 'exchange' of couplets.

The positionality of '*mun thottakkaran*' and '*bai thottakkaran*' is not strictly assigned to any particular singer; rather, there is always a 'limited' flexibility associated with these two singing positions. As mentioned previously, the singing group consisted of three singers, even though at a time only two singers are involved in the singing. When the song reached a particular point, the position of the then '*mun thottakkaran*' (Naanu Peruvannan) was occupied by the 'third' singer (Prasoon Peruvannan) for a short span of time. Naanu Peruvannan after finishing a line he was singing, handed over the *chenda* to Prasoon Peruvannan, took a step back and stayed behind him. However, he did not leave the place, but stood behind Prasoon chatting with some people gathered in the courtyard. While this exchange was happening, Pradeepan Peruvannan, as the *bai thottakkaran*, was singing the lines assigned to him. Since the singing of *Maakkam* is in a slow pace, Prasoon got enough time to settle down in the singing space, and he started beating the *chenda* accompanying the singing of the *bai thottakkaran*. When the *bai thottakkaran* finished his lines, Prasoon started off singing the lines without losing the flow. After a few minutes of singing the same process happened, where Naanu Peruvannan got back to the position of *mun thottakkaran*. As Naanu Peruvannan himself reminded:

> At a given time, only two singers sing the *Thottam* of *Maakkam*, the *mun thottakkaran* and *bai thottakkaran*. However, since the song is very long and demands the singers to stand and sing for many hours, usually there would be one or two people in the *Theyyam* group who know the song well. Sometimes, we feel like taking a small break to clear our throat or to give some rest to the legs. In such situations, however, the *Thottam* singing should not be paused. There should not be any break in the singing. When I take a break, there should be a singer who substitutes my place; otherwise, the singing will not happen. But it is not necessary that the need of a substitute always occur. It depends on that particular situation (Interview done on 14 March 2020 at Azhikode, Kannur).

Likewise, when the song reached towards the middle portion, the *bai thottakkaran* Pradeepan Peruvannan also took a break, as Prasoon Peruvannan became the *bai thottakkaran* for some time. In both these situations of replacement, the other singer (*bai thottakkaran* in the first instance, and *mun thottakkaran* in the second instance) continued the singing without being bothered about the 'exchange' happening on the other side. Clearly, there is no assigned or predetermined rule regarding whether there should be a

substitution of singers; and, if at all the substitution happens, there is no predetermined time for that. The only 'condition' is that the singing should not be paused.

Strictly, the situational change of the singing position is made during the actual singing performance. One of the major reasons for this temporary replacement of the singers, as Naanu Peruvannan had indicated, is to make a balance between the possible physical exhaustion of the singers and the imperative of maintaining the continuity of singing. The singers, throughout the process of singing, are supposed to stand still in the restricted singing space and sing the *Thottam* beating the *chenda* without any discontinuity. This is precisely why there is no predetermined time for this temporary replacement of singers. Such a demand arises from the context of rendering, as the potential of the singing activity to lose its continuity poses a threat to the manifestation of the overall ritual project. The replacement of the singers thus becomes inevitable in overcoming this danger that could occur during the singing.

One of the ways in which the replacement of the singers manifested itself is through the handing over of the *chenda*; the singer who takes a break, hands over the *chenda* to the singer who is going to substitute him. The exchange of the musical instrument between the singers, importantly, is not only the handing over of the responsibility of singing, but also of the substitution of human labour, acquired skills and experiences of one singer by another. It also signifies the mutual assurance and self-belief that singers share with each other as a kind of collective. Indeed, for the singer who passes the *chenda*, it is a conviction that the one who receives it will take over from where he has stopped. For the other singer, the receiving of the *chenda* entails safeguarding that conviction without making any pause in the singing activity. Thus, the handing over of the musical instrument, in a way, eliminates the potential threat of the songs losing its continuity. In fact, every single rendering of the song is a tenuous effort to eliminate the potential risks inherent to the practice of singing. Such threats are present in each and every point of the singing activity; as, for instance, it could be the omission of couplets, syntactical and pronunciation errors, the lack of understanding between the singers and so on. Therefore, the task of the singers and the relationship they build with each other and the surrounding

is to make the necessary adjustments in the course of the singing activity and to circumvent these risks.

It was also observed that in the initial part of the singing, the *mun thottakkaran* (Naanu Peruvannan) stresses on the first few syllables while singing. He recited these syllables in a heightened volume, whereas the *bai thottakkaran* sings his couplets without any specific emphasis on any syllables:

> **M**: ***Kelkku****nnundo ningalumente pettoramme?*
> ***Njanor****ikke angottumingottum kalikkan poykkotto?*
>
> **M**: ***Pettamm****ayodu anuvadam vangi yaathrayakunnu*
> ***Angatti****lum ingattilum adukkunneram.*

However, as the singing progressed and reached towards the middle portion of the song, it could be observed that it is the *bai thottakkaran* (Pradeepan Peruvannan) who stresses on the first syllable of each line more, and not the *mun thottakkaran*. But there were also occasions when this special emphasis was made by both the singers. When I ventured this point with Naanu Peruvannan, he had the following explanation:

> The *Thottam* of *Maakkam* is very long and the rhythm in which it is sung is the same throughout the singing. The singing is very mellow. Therefore, there is a possibility that, when we sing it continuously, people might lose the flow, especially when there is no dance performance happening in the space. Also, for the singers it is reminder about where we have reached. So, when there is a sudden raise in the sound, it brings back the people to the song. It is like a pat on the shoulder (From the Interview, as stated above).

To be sure, this emphasis on syllables, as Naanu Peruvannan had reminded, keeps both the singers and the audience in the loop of the singing and the song. However, what is interesting to note here is how the singers negotiate with each other and the surrounding. In the initial part of the singing, as we had indicated earlier, the larger ritual space of the courtyard is crowded and the singing of the *Maakkam Thottam* is one among the many performative spaces present. In such a situation, the extra emphasis on the beginning syllables of each line and the heightened volume of the singers is instrumental in establishing a world exclusive to the *Thottam* song of *Maakkam*. A sudden raise in the volume, as Naanu Peruvannan had mentioned, is a pat on the shoulder or a ‘sound’ sign that gathers the attention of the participants to the activity of singing. All the same, as

the singing progresses, the singers, especially the *mun thottakkaran* because of his continuous stressing on words, face difficulties while singing. Often, the latter's voice is tired and he repeatedly clears his throat while singing. Consequently, when the *mun thottakkaran* is tired due to this exertion, the *bai thottakkaran* takes up this 'responsibility'. However, as the ritual space gradually evolves into an exclusive and autonomous space for *Maakkam*, the heightening of voice to emphasise on the beginning of each line becomes less mandatory, even as the courtyard is witnessing the arrival of Chaathu and Cheeru. Accordingly, the lessened significance associated with the singing technique of stressing on certain syllables is the result of a negotiation happening between the singers, the ritual space and the audience per se.

The Life of the Song Within the Ritual Continued: Further Congruences

Like any other *Thottam*, the *Maakkam Thottam* also narrates the life story of a local heroine, her life and the tragic death she had to embrace. Even as the song, which is lengthy and rich in intense and detailed descriptions, unfolds itself in the performative context, there emerges an active interaction between the textualized form of the song and the context of delivery, which clearly goes beyond the mere narration of a life story. The interaction between the text of the song, so to say, and the ritual space is not only brought about through the singing, but also through how the events narrated in the story are enacted in the ritual space by the *kolakkaran* and other *kolams* who enter the ritual space in the course of the singing. The life of Maakkam, who had led a joyful and luxurious life with her children, takes an unexpected turn, which resulted in her tragic and ruthless death – all this is not just verbally narrated through the singing, it is also being enacted in the ritual space alongside the song and the singing. However, there is no preassigned pattern about how each line or a particular event narrated in the song is manifested in the ritual space through the enactment of the performers. Therefore, based on my actual observation, I have made two categorisations through which the congruence can be elaborated, one relating to the 'changing patterns in the singing' and the other having to do with (what I render as) 'singing the context'. There is a mediation that I effect between these two orders of categorisation, which will become clear in course.

Changing patterns in the singing

With reference to the first axis of categorisation (namely, changing patterns in the singing), let us take an important narrative event of the song as a whole - the delivery of Maakkam - and see how it is enacted in the ritual space along with the singing. Maakkam giving birth to her two children - Chaathu and Cheeru - is an important event in the narrative of the song. This particular portion of the song elaborates on the preparations for the delivery and the pain Maakkam had to endure. I have divided this particular section mentioning about the delivery of Maakkam as **S1** and **S2**, so as to elaborate on how the song is intertwined with the visual enactment, singing and the ritual space:

S1

M: *Appozhutane parayunnallo kunjimaakkam*	Thus says the little Maakkam suddenly
Enikkithiri chootuvellam kutikkanamamme	Mother, I want to drink some hot water
B: *Chootuvellam oothiyoothi kutikkunneram*	As (she) was drinking the hot water
Itapuriyunnu valapuriyinn ilakunnu paithal	The kids move from left and right sides of her stomach
M: *Enikkottum sahichukoodaa ente pettoramme*	I cannot bear this pain, mother
Paayyaram koottalla kuttee, kunjimaakke	Don't be afraid dear child Maakkam
B: *Eettukayar pidichu novu sahikkente munjimakke*	Maakkam, tolerate your pain by holding the eettukayar.[29]
Hari daivame, sooriya daivame, bhagavanaare	God Hari, the god of sun and all the gods
M: *Onnu vilichu oru lokam vazhka daive*	First hailed, may the lord rule the world
Randu vilichu sivasathi swaroopam vazhka	Second time hailed, may the power of Siva rule the *swaroopam*
B: *Moonnu vilichu thrimoorthikal moovarum vazhka*	Third time hailed, may the three *thrimoorthi* rule
Naalu vilichu narayana swami vaazhka	Fourth time hailed, may Narayana swami rule
M: *Anchu vilichu panchagurukkanmare vazhka*	Fifth time hailed, may the five gurus' rule
Aaru vilichu aarumukha subrahmanyan vazhka	Sixth time hailed, may the six faced Subrahmanya rule

[29] Eettukayar is a coir tied on the top of the bed in which the pregnant lady lies. The tied coir helps her to slowly wake up and lie down without anyone's help.

B: *Ezhu vilichu sapthamaathakkal vazhka*	Seventh time hailed, may the seven mothers' rule
Ettu vilichu thiruvaksharam ettum vazhka	Eighth time hailed, may the eight sacred letters rule
M: *Onpathu vilichu ohm namaskaram, vazhka daive om namskaram*,	Ninth time hailed, may the god rule
Pathu vilichu pathinonnam vili thikayum munne	Hailed the tenth time and before the eleventh hail is completed
B: *Eettukayarilakki natu cherikkunn kunjimaakkam*	Kunji Maakkam bent her back holding the *eettukayar*.

S2

B: *Manakam parakkunnoru chembarunthe*	Hawk, flying in the sky (it's a call to the hawk)
M: *Onnu vannente maaru kulire veethippone*	Please come and blow on my chest
Malayarike adikkunnoru malankatte	Wind, who blows in the valleys of hills
B*: Onnu nee vann maarukulire veethippone*	Would you please come and make my chest cool?
Anthivelicham, aadithyante chenkathir pole	Like a light in the dark and the red ray of sun
M*: Pathara nalloru maattulloru thankam pole*	Like pure gold without any impurity
Kurunthotti niram kananne	Like the colour of *kurunthotti*
B: *Pathu maasam, pathu divasam, pathu nazhika chellumbo*	After ten months, ten days and ten *nazhika*
Chorappolika prasavikkunnu ponmakkale	The dear children are delivered.

These are the lines in the song which narrate the event of Maakkam's delivery. One could clearly discern that when these lines are sung, the atmosphere of the ritual space suddenly starts to change. The *kolakkaran* who was walking around in the courtyard slowly comes back in front of the shrine and directs the people who are gathered to move sideways. Since the delivery of Maakkam is a decisive event in the narrative and a sacred one in the ritual context, it is believed that the deity who resides in shrine should also witness the event.

Along with that move, the rhythm of the singing is hastened, especially towards the last two couplets of **S2**, and the singers start to beat the *chenda* faster. The words were neither

stressed nor elongated; instead, the singers hastily recited these lines, and often the voice of the singer is merged with the loud beats on the *chenda*. The narration of a crucial event in the narrative is manifested in the singing through this sudden change in voice modulation, rhythm and presentation of the singers. In fact, the material changes that the ritual space witnessed happened simultaneously with the progression of the singing. To be sure, these sudden and mutually complementary arrangements elevated the overall efficacy of the ritual atmosphere as it guaranteed a visual 'recreation' of the narrated event.

Moreover, when these last lines (of **S2**) were sung, from one side of the courtyard (where the *aniyara* is situated) Chaathu and Cheeru, the children of Maakkam, entered. Indeed, the way in which both Chaathu and Cheeru entered into the ritual space need to be described here. From the *aniyara*, the children of Maakkam reach the ritual space accompanied by the helpers. The helpers were holding a long white cloth over their head like a roof and stood under it forming a kind of circle. Chaathu and Cheeru, who were in their costume, stood in the middle of the circle. Holding that cloth roof, as it were, they (Chaathu, Cheeru and the helpers holding the cloth) entered the ritual space and moved towards Maakkam. Without unfolding the cloth roof, Maakkam also entered into that circle, and all of them sat in the courtyard. By the time the last line of **S2** is sung, Maakkam, Chaathu and Cheeru are sitting in the courtyard under the covering of the white cloth. It is to be noted that Chaathu and Cheeru are not yet visible to the audience, as they are still under the cloth roof. Once Maakkam also joins with them, the singing is paused. The halt in the singing, however, is not sudden; instead, a silent atmosphere is created through the gradual withdrawal of the sonic ambience. Naanu Peruvannan, after singing the last line in **S2** twice, beats the *chenda* continuously for a few seconds as a way of marking a temporary conclusion for the singing activity. This is generally known as '*kotti nirthal*', which can roughly be translated as 'halting by beating' (the beating implying the drum beat). Soon after that, Naanu Peruvannan casually said to the audience gathered around: "Anyway, let her lie down there for some time. She gave birth to the children after enduring lot of pain and suffering. We will also be back shortly after taking some rest".

This last performative comment of Naanu Peruvannan vividly shows how the narrative world of the song, the singing activity itself and the overall ritual space are connected to each other. As far as the narrative element is here concerned, the delivery of Maakkam occurs after overcoming many hurdles. This is precisely why Naanu Peruvannan observes, "Let her lie down there for some time", so that Maakkam can recuperate. At this precise juncture, the flow or continuity of the narrative is not quite maintained through the singing, but primarily through employing a temporary halt in the singing activity. Here, the pause in the singing does not indicate stagnancy; it is rather an active dwelling within the narrative world, one which ultimately works as a push factor in carrying the singing forward.

For the singers, quite literally, this 'inevitable' halt is a break from hours of continuous singing. They rest for a while, drink enough water, and come back to the singing refreshed. For the *kolakkaran* (who is Maakkam) too, having been present in the courtyard throughout the singing, it is the time for some rest. Therefore, the temporary pause in signing also caters to the basic and material requirements of the various performers. In such a situation, when the narrative itself demands a pause in singing, the performers do not have to bother about losing the flow of the singing. In fact, it is their temporary withdrawal that enables the narrative to flow. After this temporary halt of 5-10 minutes, the singing is resumed. During this break, Maakkam and her children also sat on the courtyard covered with a white cloth. Once the song is resumed, Maakkam slowly came out of the covering, and after a few seconds both Chaathu and Cheeru also appeared on the ritual space.

A somewhat similar situation obtained towards the end of the singing performance, specifically when the song narrated the murder of Maakkam, her children and the Malayan who had been a witness. With the narration of this portion, the song comes to a close, and the dance performance of Maakkam and her children takes over. In what follows, we shall see how this particular event in the narrative is manifested in the ritual

space. I give below the last portion of the *Thottam* song of *Maakkam* which concludes the singing.[30]

B: *Kunjimaakkavum daaham theere kudichu vellam* Little Maakkam drank enough water to satiate her thirst
Appozhutane parayunnallo moothangala Then says the elder brother suddenly
M: *Kaanmu kaanmu neeyumente kunimakke* Look, look, my little Maakkam
B and **M**: *Nattuchakkale nakshathramudichu kanunnu maakke* Maakkam, see the star which blinks even at the day light
B: *Annerame melbhagam nokkunneram* Thus when she was looking up
M: *Maakkathinte chanku kothi, karalaruthu* Maakkam's head is severed and heart is torn apart
Oodi vilichu payunnoru ponmakkaleyo The children who were running around screaming
B: *Odippidichu chanku kothi kinattilittu* They were also caught, their heads were severed and were thrown in the well
Kandu kondu vannulloru maavilane The Mavilan, who was seeing this
M: *Avaneyum kothikkinattil ittu kollunnu* He was also beheaded and thrown into the well.

The rhythm of the singing here suddenly changes, and is accompanied by the continuous beating of *chenda* by both the singers. When the last two lines were being sung, a group of drummers also arrived at the courtyard, also beating the drums they were carrying on their shoulders. In fact, towards the end, the voice of the singers was not decipherable as it was drowned in the loud sound of the drums. The singing is not concluded, as it happened in the case of the example mentioned previously. Rather, the song and the singing suddenly reach a kind of dissipation with the entry of the drums.

The dynamics of the ritual space was also undergoing significant changes during this last phase of the singing performance. Maakkam and her children were present in front of the shrine, near to the singers who are about to end the song. Indeed, when the singing was reaching its end, the three *kolams* were doing the last-minute preparation for the

[30] Note, in the singing performance that I attended, the singers concluded their singing with these lines. However, in the textualized version, the song does not end with these lines. The culmination of the singing, in the given ritual context, ought to be considered in the light of requirements of the ritual space, especially of time and duration of the ritual.

frenzied dance, which followed the singing. The helpers who gathered around them were tightening their headgears and the cloth tied on the waist so that their dance performance is not interfered. By this time, the character of Mavilan had also entered the ritual space. He runs around the courtyard howling, even as his appearance and mannerisms are quite different from the others. He was wearing a black cloth over his waist, wearing a cap made of the areca leaf sheathe and holding a bunch of leaves in his hand. The difference of Mavilan from that of the other characters, in terms of their caste position and the divinity attached to them, were very much visible.

The sudden acceleration of the rhythm of singing and the entry of percussion, clearly, heightens the affective texture of the lines which are sung. The hitherto relaxed mood of singing takes a completely different turn with the sudden intensification of rhythm and the induction of drums. The sound of the drum beat is very loud and rapid, which induces a significant qualitative change in the sonic atmosphere. Interestingly, while talking about the role of different musical instruments in inducing a state of trance, the ethnomusicologist Gilbert Rouget pointedly observes that it is not the individual quality of any particular instrument which induces the trance state, but rather it is the combination of various acoustic qualities that the instruments produce (Rouget, 1985: 78). In fact, the very character of the sound of the drums, the singing, the event being narrated and the specificity of the dance performance that followed, all seemed to naturally combine and flow into each other. Dineshan Peruvannan had this to say about the specific relationship that the end portion of the song has with the larger ritual scheme of *Maakkam*:

> The *Maakkam Thottam* is very long. So, when it sung in the ritual space, as I have already said the singers make some compromises in the singing in order to fulfil the requirements of that particular ritual context. Therefore, when it comes to the end of the singing, we cannot conclude the song without talking about the death of Maakkam and her children and the Mavilan - can we? Particularly, Mavilan can enter in the ritual space only if his death is mentioned in the singing. Also, how can Maakkam and her children show their anger and vengeance, if it is not narrated in the singing? However, even if we do not sing the few lines which mentions about the aftermath of the killing, it is not an issue. Because, after the singing, the dance performance, especially the *payattu* of Chaathu, you see is the symbol of extreme anger and vengeance that Maakkam and her children have towards her brothers and sisters-in law. Time is also a significant factor. For, after the singing and this *payattu*, the performers have to go back to the

> *aniyara* to get ready for the main dance performance. This preparation requires a good amount of time (Interview done on 14 March 2020 at Azhikode, Kannur).

Furthermore, as Y. V. Kannan had maintained - and which we had drawn specific attention in the previous chapter – the '*arangumayulla porutham*' or the harmony with the stage and context is also what matters here. The withdrawal of the singers from the ritual space becomes a necessity so as to maintain this harmony. The conclusion of the singing activity is not only synchronised with the demands of the ritual space, but also with the narrative of the song. Even though the singing is terminated, the song and its narrative world continue to stay till the completion of the whole ritual assemblage of the *Maakkam Theyyam*. The vengeance and anger of Maakkam, her children and Malayan, as expressed through the dance performance, is very much part of the narrative world of the song. Note, at this point, the narrative world of the song is not quite manifested in the ritual space through the singing, but through other quite different factors such as the sound of drums, the frenzy dance of the *kolams*, the howling of Malayan, and so on. Therefore, the retirement of the singers from the ritual space does not indicate the disappearance of the *Thottam* song; rather, the song is very much present in the ritual space, vibrantly revealing its narrative world in different ways. The song and the singing bring about a different set of meanings in the ritual context. Thus, as the philosopher Theodore Gracyk who works on the broader area of the relationship between music and aesthetics has urged, the context-dependent aspects of a song's meanings should not be confused with context-dependent aspect of a performance's meaning (Gracyk, 2013: 23).

A perturbation

Even though the song narrates the life story of *Maakkam* in a particular rhythm, there is a particular portion in the rendition at which another 'song' is incorporated in the body of the larger *Thottam*. This insertion within the *Thottam* is sung in a different rhythm, which grants it a unique position within the overall song of *Maakkam*. There is a particular context in the legend, where Maakkam sends Eeyavanatan (a Thiyya) to collect '*Kilithinnipoo*' (a special kind of flower, which Maakkam was unable to find) so as to decorate the idol of Kaman during the Pooram festival. Eeyavanatan goes to Kithinnimala (the hill where the flowers bloom) to collect the flower. However, upon

reaching there, the *kilikal* (birds) who reign in the hill urge Eeyavanatan to sing a song for them if he wants to collect the flower. The perplexed Eeyavanatan tells the birds:

M: *Ithuvareyoru manalude vazhi poyilla njaanum* I have never entered into the world of words
Ithuvareyoru olamuriyaa pidichilla njaanum olamuri [31] I have never even touched
B: *Kunjimangalathe kunjimaakkathine ninakkum neram* When I thought about the little Maakkam in Kunjimangalam
Navummel ozhukunnallo paattum chinthum The song started to flow from the mouth
M: *Paattariyaatha njan padunna paattu kettolu* I don't know singing, albeit listen to my song
B: *Cheviyorthu kelkkenam ningal kilimakkale* Sharpen your ears, birds, and listen to the song

Now, till this portion, the lines are sung in the same rhythm; and after this comes the song sung by Eeyavanatan. When the *bai thottakkaran* sings the last line, he increases the number of beats on the *chenda*, indicating a change in the rhythm of singing. Following this change in the rhythm of beats, the *mun thottakkaran* starts singing the song.

M: *Onnam thengummal oru matalolamel onnallo kili kootanachu* In the first coconut tree, within a bunch of coconut leaves, one bird came back to the nest
B: *Randam thengummal, irupatalolammal randallo kili kootanachu* In the second coconut tree, within two bunches of coconut leaves, two birds came back to the nest
M: *Moonnam thengummal, naal madalolamel naalallo kili kootanachu* In the third coconut tree, within three bunches of coconut leaves, three birds came back to the nest
B: *Naalam thengummal, naal matalolamel naalallo kili kootanachu* In the fourth coconut tree, within four bunches of coconut leaves, four birds came back to the nest
M: *Oranacholkkili eerana painkili vasavan kili penne nallola painkili, nellola painkili nettippanakili penne* — These lines are about the different names given to those birds so as to make the song more poetic.

[31] The writing was on palm-leaf, and the word '*ola*' refers to leaf. Eeyavanatan is saying that he does not know how to write.

B&M: *than kothi thina kothi thammiliru kothi koothaaduvor kili, koothaaduvor*

The lines end by saying that the birds are playing with each other and eating together.

Once both the singers finish the last line of this song, the *mun thottakkaran* gets back to the old rhythm by beating the *chenda* for a few seconds. Here, the beating of the *chenda* indicates the '*kotti nirthal*' of the embedded song as well the returning of singing activity to the previous tune. The changing rhythm of drum beating plays an instrumental role in manifesting the nuances of the narrative world of the *Thottam*. The inserted song is indeed a part of the narrative world of the *Thottam* song, although its attribute as an inserted 'song' attaches distinctive texture to it and grants a unique status to it within the overall body of the *Thottam*.

Singing the context

We have been attempting to show how the narrative world of the song is penetrated into the ritual by making significant changes within the activity of singing itself. In this sub-section, I will try and elaborate on how the congruence between song and singing is further manifested through the visual presentations of the *Theyyam* performers. One main feature which sets apart the singing of the *Maakkam Thottam* from most of the other *Thottam* songs is that, along with the rendering of the song, the *Theyyam* performers also visually enact the events narrated by the song. The presence of Maakkam from the very beginning of the singing, and the timely entry of Chaathu, Cheeru and Mavilan, all contributes to the prolonged singing activity. The visual enactment of the performers also attracts the attention of the people gathered, as they often find it difficult to follow the lines of the song due to its length. An old man, who was standing next to me while watching the performance, told me matter-of-factly:

> The *Thottam* is very lengthy. It is not actually possible to focus on the lines for a long time. When we go for dinner or while talking with each other we will lose the continuity of the singing. But once we get back, upon seeing Maakkam or her children, we get to know where the story has reached. Also, think about the people who come late for the *Thottam*. They will also get to know where the *Thottam* has reached by seeing the performance.

For the audience, surely, these visual enactments are a cue to the narrative of the song. They keep the people focused on the ritual space. Indeed, the congruence between the narrative world of the song and the enactment of the performers offer multiple entry points to the song and the singing. There are many instances in the singing performance where we can witness this harmony. However, I will be taking only a few examples to illustrate this.

During the rendition of the initial part of the song, which narrated the story before the birth of Maakkam, the *kolakkaran* largely stayed in the middle of the singers and received offerings from the devotees. Maakkam has not been born yet, and therefore the *kolakkaran*, while physically present in the ritual space, is not enacting any of the events in the song. His entry into the narrative world happens only when the birth of Maakkam is described. Accordingly in the initial phases, the only way he responds to the singing activity is by shaking his head sideways to the rhythm of the singing. But, as the narrative world of the song is gradually unfurled and Maakkam is born, the interaction of the *kolakkaran* changes according to the events narrated in the song. One instance is where Maakkam is enduring pain and difficulties before her delivery. The *thottam* song goes along the following lines:

M: *Appozhutane parayunnallo kunjimaakkam*	Then Maakkam is saying immediately
Enikkithiri chootuvellam kutikkanamamme	Mother, I want to drink some hot water
B: *Chootuvellam oothiyoothi kutikkunneram*	As (she) was drinking the hot water
Itapuriyunnu valapuriyinn ilakunnu paithal	The kids move from left and right sides of her stomach
M: *Enikkottum sahichukoodaa ente pettoramme*	I cannot bear this pain, mother
Paayyaram koottalla kuttee, kunjimaakke	Don't be afraid dear child Maakkam

During the rendering of these lines, the *kolakkaran*/Maakkam walked around in the courtyard, gripping the stomach and showing facial expressions indicating the pain being endured before the delivery. When the lines mentioned about Maakkam asking hot water from her mother, the *kolakkaran* was given some water in a bowl. The *kolakkaran* again

walked around the courtyard, often standing in the middle holding his stomach and bending his body to show the unbearable pain Maakkam is facing.

Likewise, another event is when Maakkam is getting prepared to go along with her brother, even though she knows that it is a trap for her and the children. Maakkam shows her anger and frustration by doing odd things:

M: *Seshichulla enna maakkam thekkunnallo*	Makkam used the leftover oil
Seshikkunna enna Bharani eduthu maakkam	She then carried the oil pot
B: *Kunjimangalathe irakallilittu pottikkunnallo*	She broke the pot by throwing it
Ithenthoru athishayamaanu kaattunn maakke?	What craziness are you doing Maakkam?

While these lines are sung, the *kolakkaran*/Maakkam takes a pot, goes in front of the shrine and breaks it. Here, the shrine in Chaala temple is imagined as her *tharavadu* in Kunjimangalam. A similar trend is noticed in the lines that follow:

B: *Kuttikalkk venda thuniyeduthu Maakkam*	Maakkam takes enough dress for her children
Kuttikale mundu uduppikkunnu	She is making them wear the dress
M: *Kunjimakkavum vendolam pudava udukkunnallo*	Maakkam also wears enough dress
Seshikkunna thunitharangalellam eduthu maakkam	After taking the left-over clothes
B: *Kunjimangalathe nadumuttathittu kathikkunnallo*	She burnt them in the courtyard of Kunjimangalam house.

While these lines are sung, the *kolakkaran*/Maakkam takes a cloth piece, goes inside the shrine and burns it. Using a stick, she carries the burning cloth, and put it in the middle of the courtyard.

In these episodes, it can be seen how the enactments alter the symbolic significance attached to the given physical space, that is, the courtyard. According to the demands of the narrative, the shrine and the courtyard is transposed into the Kunjimangalam *tharavadu*. Similarly, when the song mentions about the different places that Maakkam and her children reach during their journey, the performers go from one corner of the

courtyard to another enacting the long journey they had to undertake. Here, obviously, different spots in the courtyard suddenly transforms into the many places of the legend. Understandably, the practitioners attach different meanings to the ritual space according to the moments in the narrative, which they call attention to as '*sankalppichu kodukkal*', implying 'giving (meaning) through imagination'. The unfolding of the narrative world grants different meanings and significance to its surrounding. The same courtyard is transformed into the playground of Chaathu and Cheeru, the Kunjimangalam *tharavadu*, various places that Maakkam and children reach in the course of their journey, and many more. The '*sankalppikkal*' is not only made in terms of the places, but also in terms of the objects available in the given ritual space. The pot which Maakkam broke, the cloth which she burnt, as well as the use of turmeric powder to show how Maakkam crushed all her gold ornaments into dust before her journey, all show the connection established between words and things as well. As the anthropologist Freeman has pertinently observed:

> The linkage between words and things moves from those mundane objects which are actually present as they are described in the song - the stool, its cloth covering, lamp, sandal paste and mirror - to the appearance of the deity itself, which is being built up in stage on the dancer's body. Through the preparation and performance, we encounter a variety of modalities in which these elements may be said to exist: those which are actually present as described, those whose portent and imaging are enhanced by the verbal and cognitive content of the verses, and those which are altogether absent, save in the images of the words (Freeman, 1991: 236).

Importantly, the congruence between the narrative world of the song and the context is not only manifested though these enactments which correspond to the lyrics, but also in the way these enactments, even where they do not correspond to the exact lines, convey the major themes of the song. The *Maakkam Theyyam* is known as a mother goddess, the epitome of motherhood and a manifestation of the pain and suffering a woman had to endure. Accordingly, a larger section of the visual enactments taking place in the ritual space caters to actualising the major themes that the legend is known for. After the birth of Chaathu and Cheeru, the story takes an unexpected turn, when Maakkam faces a setback from her brothers and sisters-in-law. The larger portion of the visual enactments of the performers, after the birth of Chaathu and Cheeru has occurred, demonstrate the kind of affection, love and intimacy that Maakkam and the children shared with each

other. Even when the singing was narrating the jealousy of the sisters-in law towards Maakkam or the description of the battle that her brothers fought, the ritual space continued to depict the intense bond between the mother and her children though the enactment of the performers. Maakkam played with her children, often hugged them tightly to show her affection, scolded them, fed them and so on. The lines sung here and these actions as played out often do not have any direct connection between them; that is to say, the actions of the performers were not representing what is being sung in that particular time. Rather, the visual enactments intensely portrayed the general theme of the narrative, namely, motherhood. Similarly, when the song narrated the trap laid by the sisters-in-law and its aftermath, Maakkam showed her plight by holding the children in both her hands, lamenting and pacifying them.

Thus, the visual enactments were not always providing a line-to-line reference; rather, the core themes that the narrative world invoked were being visually enacted by the performers. As the *Thottam* singers elaborated to me during the break:

> Without showing the pain and suffering of Maakkam and her children, the *Theyyam* cannot '*urayal*' [meaning 'possession', the process really of becoming *Theyyam*]. The godly dance of Maakkam and her children shows how much they had to suffer and how much the spirit of vengeance that they had towards the brothers and sisters-in-law. Maakkam had such a tragic life which no other woman can endure with.

The singing and the visual enactment by the performers, therefore, are necessary and inevitable for the further manifestation of the ritual.

These sub-sections, as elaborated here, show further how the narrative world of the *Thottam* song is entering into the ritual context. This interaction of the song with the context is not established through forms of 'passive' singing, which is often highlighted for its blind mimetic character; in fact, the mimetic function is only a single part of it. Indeed, mimesis does not disappear, but is resituated as one component of a practical and semiotic complex (see Keane, 1997: 10, albeit traversing another context). The song, using the potential of its narrative world and the significance it attaches to the larger ritual project, dynamically engage with the unfolding context by capitalising on different resources available in the ritual space.

Who are the singers? What are they singing? A quick digression

The *Thottam* song, as the singers themselves say, has been created and composed by their primordial ancestors; also, that rendering the song during the *Theyyam* ritual is their birth right. As is maintained, it is a promise made and commitment disclosed vis-à-vis their forefathers, who had handed over the song to them; and that, therefore, the singers who render the song during the ritual cannot take the full authority over its composition. The singers, as was claimed (and we saw this in the process of the previous chapter), cannot add or change the lines of the song and have to comply with the particular rhythm in which the song has been already composed. Even though the singers employ their '*manodharmam*' in accordance with the contingent demands and requirements of that particular rendering context, these situational modifications are always to be made within the given framework of the song. Therefore, the command that the singers have on the song is always partial. On the one hand, *Thottam* singing is their '*janmaavakasham*' (birth right); and, on the other hand, they have less freedom to decide on 'how to sing' and 'what to sing'. As far as the *Thottam* song of *Maakkam* and the activity of singing it is concerned, this partial authority of the singers over the song gets more complicated especially when we ask the question: 'Whose song are they singing?'

To put it bluntly, the singing of the *Maakkam Thottam* is the veneration of the life of an upper caste woman through the ritual performance of the *Theyyam* as enacted by the lower caste (Vannan caste).[32] In north Malabar, the Vannan is a lower caste, placed much below the Thiyya caste. They are known for their caste occupation, including *Theyyam* performance, healing, tailoring and washing clothes.[33] Performing the *Theyyam* is indeed

[32] *Maakkam* is not the only upper caste symbol who is worshipped in the region. There are other *Theyyams* as well, such as that of Muchilottu Bhagavathy, which commemorates a Brahmin woman. Even though the *Theyyam* is performed by the lower caste groups of the north Malabar region, the deities worshipped in the *Theyyam* are not always of their own. The origin stories and the social position of these deities significantly vary from each other, however.

[33] The Vannan caste is known for washing the clothes of even the lower caste communities (Kannan, 2011: 19). A custom prevalent in north Malabar known as *Vannathimaattu* (from '*maattu*', which means clean cloth) is a practice followed by the Vannan community in the caste-ridden milieu of local society. The upper caste people, in order to ward off the pollution caused by birth, death or menstruation, received *maattu* from the Vannan caste (the latter considered it their privilege and occupation). Therefore, *maattu vilakkal* (the denial of clean cloth) was one of the severe punishments inflicted upon the people who opposed the landlord. The landlord would instruct the people not to receive *maattu* from that particular Vannan family, which resulted in their joblessness.

the caste occupation of the Vannan community; and the *Thottam* of *Maakkam* can be seen as the way in which a lower caste community, by doing their hereditary occupation, is preserving the life story of a caste group which ruled and burdened them. It is through their seasonal renderings and ritual performances that the story of Maakkam is preserved in the region and in the memory of the people. Thus, what the singers sing, that is, the content of the legend and the life experiences narrated through the song, does not have any immediate connection with their social life. In that sense, the singers connect not with the song, but with the activity of singing, for to sing the *Thottam* song is their birth right and seasonal occupation, one that is carried out through intense human work and also in the light of the promise that they had made to their forefathers. In fact, the partial authority that the singers have on the song gets more perspicuous here, as there is an evident gap between 'what is being sung' and 'who is singing'. However, the singers consider *Thottam* singing, and the larger *Theyyam* ritual, as very sacred and intricately connected to their life and existence. The song, the activity of singing and the social position of the singers formulate a complex and contingent 'semiotic network' that gets actualised in every seasonal rendering of the *Thottam* song.

Undeniably, the actualisation of this social semiotic network becomes clearer when we look at how the narrative world of the legend is unfolded through the activity of singing. Arranged in couplets, the song is the narration of an already occurred event which carries elaborate descriptions, dialogues between different characters and inner monologues. It is the voice of these singers belonging to the Vannan community that give 'life' to the song in the ritual world. The extensive use of reported speech as employed in the song makes this point more lucid. The song is structured in such a way that it gives an in-depth description of the life of Maakkam. It includes lengthy conversations between different characters which push the narrative world of the song forward. As far as the singing activity is concerned, it becomes pertinent to look at how these dialogues between various characters are exchanged between the two singers. Let us take an example from the song:

M: *Kelppithundo ningalumente ponmakkale*	Are you listening my dear children?
Enikkazhakulla eettillamonnu paniyikkanam	I want a beautiful *eettillam* to be built

B: *Aaranamme eettillam paniyikkunnath?*	Mother, who is going to construct *eettillam*?
Ezhu viswakarmimaare varuthuka venam	The best *viswakarmimaar* (craftsmen/workers) should be called
M: *vegathaale karmimaare varuthiyavitam*	The workers were brought in soon
Appozhutane chodikkunnallo viswakarmimar	Then, the *Viswakarmis* ask
B: *Enthinaanappa njangaleyivite vilichath ningal*	Why did you ask us to come here?
Appozhutane parayunnallo Unicheriyamma	Thus, says Unicheriyamma
M: *Enikkazhakulla eettillamonnu paniyuka venam*	I want a beautiful *Eettillam*.

Here, the situation being narrated is that Unicheriya (Maakkam's mother) is asking her twelve sons to build an *eettillam* for her delivery. It is a conversation which includes more than two characters. However, when the song is sung, the lines are not split on the basis of the character; rather, the main rule of singing is that a singer should sing one couplet. The lines that follow the above ones go as follows:

M: *ezhu thattum ezhu kalliyum theerkkukavenam*	Seven floors and seven rooms should be made
Appozhutane chodikkunnallo ponmakkal	Then ask the children promptly
B: *Enthinanamme ezhu thattum ezhu kalliyum?*	Why do you need seven floors and seven rooms, mother?
Natannu kalikkaan naatakashaala venamenikk	I want a room to walk around
M: *Irunnu kulikkan mastharana venamenikk*	I want a *mastharana* (washroom) to sit and take bath
Onnenikku prasavikkuvaanum	One is for me to deliver the baby
B: *Onnenikku ammikkayam marunnarakkaanum*	One is for me to prepare the medicine
Onnenikku kidannuranguvaanum	One is for me to sleep
M*: Onnenikku ponkunjinu thottil thookkanu*	One is to hang a cradle for my dear child
Onnenikk kunjivannaatheede matatu vekkanum	One is for me to keep the *matatu* given by the Vannan.

Discerningly, here, it can be seen that the dialogues delivered by Unicheriyamma in the story is split between the singers. The singers thus are not delivering the dialogues of a single character in a given context; but rather they give 'voice' to the multiple characters in the narrative. The physical voice of the singer - the utterances they make while singing through their sound - and the 'voice' of the characters they manifest through these

utterances is ambiguously divided between the dead and the living (see also Keane, 1997: 24). In fact, it is this ambiguity that exists between the singer and the content they are singing that connect the world of *Theyyams* to the ritual context and the larger social matrix in which this particular form of worship is embedded. Here, the process of '*thotti edukkal*' (as elucidated in the previous chapter) goes beyond a process of making the *Theyyam* appear on the performer and in the larger ritual space; it attains a multi-layered meaning issuing off the way the *Thottam* singers belonging to a particular caste manifest their social identity through the singing activity.

The Thottam of Maakkam Outside the Ritual

As already emphasised, the *Maakkam Thottam* is known for its length, its extensive and intense descriptions of a local legend, and the historical reflections that the song brings about through its narrative world. The tragic life story of Maakkam and her children is all pervasive throughout the region of north Malabar as a manifestation of motherhood, female suffering and sacrifice. This section of our chapter analyses the multiplicity of meanings and significance that this particular *Thottam* song imparts outside its rendering context (a procedure of enumeration which is consistent with that followed in the previous chapter). I have primarily relied upon the textual version of the *Thottam* song collected in the 2nd volume of the work '*Kerala Bhasha Ganangal*' by Chirakkal T. Balakrishnan Nair and published by Kerala Sahitya Academy in 1979.[34]

Structure of the song

Unlike the other *Thottam* songs which have different sections, the *Thottam* of *Maakkam* does not have many individual sections, and the few parts that this particular song has is quite exclusive to it. A significant part of the song contains the story of Maakkam which is unfolded chronologically. The nature of dynamics of this narrative world will be explored in detail in the coming segments. Here, I will be focusing on the overarching structure of the song as presented in its textualized version.

[34] Many of the footnotes that follow, describing the meanings of certain words and usages in the song, is a direct translation of the footnotes given in the volume.

Of course, like most *Thottams*, the song of *Maakkam* does not directly begin with the legend, but with a set of introductory lines, the significance of which is manifested at the level of the ritual than at the level of the narrative. This portion, as we have seen in the previous chapter, is known as '*Polippu*', which includes the introductory lines of veneration. These lines of '*Polippu*' in the *Maakkam Thottam* go as follows:

Polika[35] *polika, Bhagavathy polika*	May the Bhagavathy prosper
Deepam polika, Bhagavathiye polika	May the lamp prosper, may Bhagavathy prosper,
Vecheriyunna nanthar vilakkum polika	May the burning *nanthar* lamp[36] prosper
Ittaradhicha poovodu pushpam polika	May the offered flowers prosper
Naadu polika bhavathiye, swaroopam polika	May the land prosper, Bhagavathy and the Swaroopam prosper
Natodi vaazhum janma bhoomiyum polika	May the native land ruled by the chieftain prosper
Etavavaazhum karthakkanmaarum polika	May the rulers of *Etava*[37] prosper
Kunjimangalam sthanatharavadum polika	May the Kunjimangalam *tharavadu* prosper
Kadangottu veedum padiyum polika	May the house and steps of Kadangottu prosper
Pettoramma Unicheriyayum polika	May Unicheriya, the mother who gave birth prosper
Angalamaaru panthiruvarum polika	May the twelve brothers prosper
Mukkakkooottil kutti nambarum polika	May Kutti Nambar from Mukkakkootu[38] prosper
Katangottu kunjimaakkavum polika	May the Kadangottu Maakkam prosper
Thaayaveettukarum puthiyaveettukarum polika	May the relatives' houses prosper
Alletathaivarum puthiyetathaivarum polika	May the people of Alletuth and Puthiyetuth[39] prosper
Poyanatu swaroopakkarum polika	May the people from Poyanadu[40] swaroopam prosper
Kolathirumudi mannanum polika	May the king Kolathiri prosper

[35] In the previous chapter, we had noted the significance of the word '*Polika* 'in *Thottam* songs. The word can be roughly translated as 'May it prosper'.

[36] '*Nanthar vilikk*' refers to the lamp of prosperity. In the introductory lines of many *Thottam* song, the *nanthar vilakku* is venerated.

[37] The rulers of the small regions.

[38] The family/house name of Kutti Nambar who got married to Maakkam.

[39] The half portion of the current Neeleswaram in Kasargodu district. Five houses in those areas were quite powerful.

[40] The region lying in the east side of Kannur was known as Poyanadu or '*Randu thara*'. Four Nambiar *tharavadu* were powerful in the region - Aayillyathu, Arayathu, Kandothu and Palliyathu.

Valavatathu perunkottayum polika May the fort in Valapattanam[41] prosper
Valer perunkalari, kalariyal bhavathy polika May *Valer perunkalari*[42] prosper.

These beginning lines are obviously meant to formally create an auspicious atmosphere for the successful completion of the *Theyyam* ritual. It can be seen that, through these lines three different worlds are brought together on the same plane; that is to say, they venerate the ritual space in which the *Theyyam* is going to happen, the main characters of the legend, and the sociohistorical scenario in which the events mentioned in the legend had occurred. These introductory lines thus connect the past with the present, manifesting an appropriate atmosphere for the unfolding of the legend. The lines addressed to the burning lamp and the flowers is the veneration and acknowledgement of the 'present', indeed, of the very time and space in which the *Theyyam* is going to be performed. The *Theyyam* ritual space cannot avoid the presence of a burning lamp and the offering of flowers; and, in fact, these two 'objects' announce the liveliness of the ritual.

From this beginning, the rest of the lines bring all the factors that are part of the legend – such as the characters, the historical background etc. - to the ritual space of rendering. The introductory lines, however, are not indicating the connection between the different characters or specifying how the historical context becomes significant in the legend. Instead, they are just foregrounding some fundamental cues which are crucial to the narrative world of the song. In fact, as we also stressed in the previous chapter, these introductory lines are not taking the 'present' to the past; rather, they are about bringing the past to the present by facilitating the entry of the characters and the historical scenario into the current context of the ritual. Apart from connecting the past with the present, they are also building an inevitable connection between the rendering world of the song (in the context of the ritual) and the textual world of the song. In fact, they mark the entry of the autonomous textual world of the song to its rendering context as instantiated

[41] The fort in Valapattanam, Kannur district. The fort is no longer there, though some of its remnants have been found.
[42] The famous martial arts centre situated towards the southern side of Valapattanam fort and Kalarivathukkal Sree Badrakali, the goddess who is worshipped there.

(or necessitated by the ritual). These introductory lines, therefore, make it the responsibility of the singers to establish a connection between these two worlds. They are not constitutive at the level of the narrative in which the legend is unveiled, but they become instrumental in the rendering context of the ritual in connecting the two worlds that the song embodies within itself.

Soon after the introductory lines, the *Maakkam Thottam* directly enters into the narrative by unfolding the legend chronologically, beginning with Unicheriya's prayer for a girl child:

Kelkkavenam Bhagavathee ningale thrichevidale	Kindly listen Bhagavathy,
Ellella nalla illam vaazhuvan santhathiyundallo	Every *illam* (household) has a progeny to reign
Enteyeeyoru kunjimangalam tharavadu vaazhuvan	To reign my Kunjimangalam *tharavadu*
Pennennoru santhathi moksham enikk varamillalo	I am not yet bestowed with a girl child.

It can be seen that there is no direct and obvious connection between the introductory lines and the following unfolding of the legend, especially in terms of the content and construction. The introductory lines present the perspective or voice of the singers, as it is their role to bring forth the world of the song in the rendering context of the ritual. However, when it comes to the narrative world per se, it is not the voice (the physical one that is) of the singers which is heard and communicated; it is, rather, the narrative world which is manifested from the perspective of different characters in the legend. Thus, at the level of the text, the sudden shift from '*Polippu*' to the narration of the legend is also marked by a sharp distinction between the changing perspectives. In fact, this change indicates the co-existence of two modalities - of the singers and the song - within the text.

In the song, the legend is unfolded chronologically, leading from one event to another till Maakkam's death. In the documentation of the song, as presented in the '*Kerala Bhasha Ganangal*' volume, the narrative is divided into different sections with respect to the event that a group of lines describes. For instance, the first section is named as '*Unicheriyayude vazhipaatu*', that is, 'Unicheriya's offering', elaborating on the praying

of Unicheriya in front of the god. In fact, the whole narrative of the legend is divided into 59 sections, and ends with the transformation of Maakkam and her children to *Theyyam*. The names given to each section is quite self-explanatory in that they directly indicate what they are about. This segmentation is significant only at the level of the text, as during the activity of the singing the whole song unfolds in a single stretch without separately indicating these different sections. Thus, it can be said that the segmentation of the narrative is informed by the content of the legend and is carried out for the convenience of the singers. The ways in which this narrative is manifested will be explained in the following sub-section. We may note, however, that the last section of this narrative is titled '*Kadangottu Maakkabhagavathy*', which contains just two lines to the effect that, after their death, Maakkam and her children became *Theyyam*. These lines are as follows:

> *Kadangotte kunjimaakkavum ponmakkalumo* The little Maakkam of Kadangottu and her dear children
> *Perumaalan bhagavthiyinkal seshikkappettallo* After that became the Bhagavathy.[43]

It is a statement which concludes the legend of Maakkam. Even though the lines are considered as part of the legend, they are attempting, at the level of text, to build the bridge between the autonomous world of the song and its rendering context (which is the ritual). We can even say that the transformation (or transcendence) of Maakkam and her children from living persons to godliness is not only a part of the legend, but also that, in the context of the singing, it is this transformation that is intended to be made manifest. The section which follows this, '*Aashissu*', which means prayer or blessing, actually completes this bridging:

> *Vennachanthum deepathakkolum kayyelpore* People, who hold *vennachanthu* and *deepakkolu*[44]
> *Innu njangal chollil kuravaalayi vannu poyenkilo* If there happened to be any mistakes in the words we delivered today
> *Naale ningal chollin niravaalaayi yogam varatte* Let them be rectified in your renderings, tomorrow.

[43] It is believed that after her death, Maakkam became a Bhagavathy that is, a goddess.
[44] '*Vennachanthu*' is a paste involving the mixture of various colours, which is used by the Theyyam performers to colour their faces. '*Deepakkolu*' refers to the thick stick doused in fire and wielded by the performers.

As the latter title of the section suggests, it is the blessing which the singers in the rendering context of the ritual give to the other singers who are going to perform in the future or in the next seasonal rendering of the song. These lines, in fact, materialise a historical and communal bond which the category of *Thottam* singers come to share with each other. The 'other singers/performers' referred in this section need not necessarily be different individuals, as there is always the possibility that the same singers continue to render the songs in the upcoming contexts as well. In that sense, it is a blessing or hope that the singers place on themselves to rectify any mistakes in the singing that could accrue. Here, these lines, which are part of the song, is detached from the narrative of the legend, and it actually signals towards the world of the song in its rendering context of the ritual primarily. Thus, we may say that, as far as the structure of the song in its textual embodiment is concerned - as also the meanings that it throws up at this level - the song begins with establishing a bond between the textual world of the song and its the rendering context (which is the *Theyyam* ritual) through *Polippu*; then moves exclusively to the narrative of the legend; and, finally, the bond which is established in the beginning is reconfigured through *Aashissu*. The song is not suddenly exhibiting its narrative world, but rather the process of this unfolding is quite systematic. Similarly, the conclusion of the narrative and the reconfiguration of the song to its actual singing context is also a continuous process in which the song slowly moves out of its narrative world to that of the rendering at the level of ritual itself. The song, as textualized, also strives to keep alive its rendering in the actual context of the ritual.

In fact, in the actual context of the ritual, this systematic unfolding is instantiated through building a concrete connection between the song and the shifting ritual context. The *Thottam* song, which is itself a part of the assemblage of *Theyyam*, can together be seen as forming an ecology of its own during the time of enactment. Even though the song is arranged in different sections within its textualized form (each having discrete content and composition) in the realm of its actual enactment in the context of the ritual, the song flows like a single composite creation, without directly referring to the segmentation of the song in its textualized form. The internal structuring of the song, accordingly, is actualised in the ritual context not through projecting this distinction, but rather by presenting them as a single unified composition.

The legend of Maakkam within the song

In the song, the narration of the story begins from the events that supposedly took place before the birth of the central character Maakkam; in other words, by describing the longing of Unicheriya for a girl child to rule and preserve the *tharavadu*. In fact, the song is a chronological biography of the central character Maakkam, which is presented from the third-person point of view. Like many other *Thottam* songs, one of the central features of the narrative world of the song is recurring situations of conflicts, which pushes the story forward. As we have been saying, the song, although talking about the events that happened in the past, does not always present the events in the past tense. The verses of the song are constructed in such a way that the events mentioned in the narrative are not presented as completed, but are often captured and rendered in their continuity and progression.

The sense of 'continuation' associated with each action in the song is worth highlighting. It seems like the verses of the song are trying to capture the multiple events mentioned in the narrative in its continuity – almost as if the event is occurring there and then - rather than as a kind of reporting an event that has already occurred. For instance, let us take a portion from the song, which corresponds to the situation in which Unicheriya is going to occupy the *eettillam* that has been built for her delivery:

Appozhutane nenacharallo unicheriyamma	Thus thinks Unicheriyamma
Eniikkennum chollitheerthoreettillathilo	In the *eettillam* built for me
Kaalan sani saasthavuvannu kayarum munne	Before the evil spirts come and reside
Enikkupoyi eettillathil kayaruka venam	I want to occupy *eettillam*
Etathekkaymmmalum valathekkaymmalum ariyum poovum	Holding rice and flower in left and right hand
Eettillamorezhatam valamvechu ammayo	Mother after circling the *eettillam* seven times
Eettillathinte numbil vann nilkkunnallo	Comes and stands in front of *eettillam*
Valathe kayyil pitichulloraritum poovum	Rice and flower held in the right hand
Adithya bhagavanittu kai thozhutho	Submitting in front of the sun and prayed

Etathekkayyil pitichulloraritum poovum	The rice and flower in the left hand
Adithya bhagavanittu kai thozhutho	Submitting in front of the sun and prayed
Eettillame ponkunjiyenn ninachu ammayo	Thinking that the *eettillam* is her child
Eettillathil charecheriye katannu ammayo	Mother entered the *eettillam* slowly.

Here, it can clearly be seen that the event of Unicheriyamma entering the *eettillam* is described in its fullness and continuity, as if giving a live description of an activity happening at the time of singing. We may further look at the last portion of the song to make it clearer:

Panthrandangalamaar kadangottachanmaaro	Twelve brothers, the *kadangottachanmar*
Paranju paraju arishamkondu thaanthan maranno	Lost their sense after getting angry at each other
Thammathamma kotuvaal veeshi murinjo	They stabbed each other using their sword
Choravaarnnu naavu kadichu chathu veehzunno	They bled and fell on the floor
Kunjimangalam tharavadu aavedatho	Meanwhile in Kunjimangalam *tharavadu*
Nattuchakkallo purakku theepidichu kathiyatho	Everything is getting burnt in the sunny afternoon
Ellam erinju karinju vechamaramaayitheernnalo	Everything is burnt into ashes
Veerachamundere kottilasthalam matram	But the sacred room of Veerachamundi
Venthathumilla, veenathumilla nashichathumilla	Hasn't fallen down, burnt and destroyed
Naathoonmarellam nattapranthu kittichathupokunno	The sisters-in-law are dying of hysteria.

Thus, in this light too, whenever someone encounters the song through singing (or even reading and listening), it appears almost as if they are witnessing the events that are happening. Clearly, the narrative world does not often evoke 'pastness' through the presentation of events as it is completed, but rather attaches a perpetual 'presentness' to the narrated events by capturing them in motion. This particular feature of the *Thottam* of *Maakkam* is intricately connected to the performative context that the song enters into. In fact, the seasonal rendering of the song is meant to 'recreate' and 'retell' the life story

of Maakkam in the particular ritual context. Accordingly, during the ritual rendering of the song, both the process of narration and the embedded presentation of narrated events are in a continuous forward movement. We can even say that the event of narration (in the context of the ritual) and the narrated event are embroiled in moving forward through time, albeit expressing various flows of temporality.

Even more poignantly, the sense of progression attached to the particular verse/verses is also presented though particular usages of the verb form that comes at the end of most of the renditions in the song which describes a particular situation or set of actions (although, notably, this not in all the lines). I will try and explain this through a set of lines from the song (although this pattern is quite discernible in the lines given immediately above as well). The lines that I cite below narrate the preparations of Maakkam's brothers before they go for the battle:

Patinjattakam manthrashalayil <u>kadannuchenno</u>	<u>Entering</u> to the sacred room in the west side
Kettithookkiya ennappatam <u>etukkunnallo</u>	<u>Taking</u> the oil pot which was hanged
Cherichatheennoru kinnamneraye <u>ennayeduthallo</u>	<u>Taking</u> a bowl of oil from it
Kuttikale iruvareyum kulurkke <u>ennatheppicho</u>	The children are <u>being oiled</u>
Kunjimangalathe manikkulathil kulippan <u>poyo</u>	<u>Went</u> to the pond in kunjimangalam to take bath.

In the above-mentioned lines, it can be noted that the verbs which come towards the end of the verses are culminating in a common way with an */o/* sound, and they signify the movement or progression of that particular action. Throughout the song, it can be seen that this particular verb formation often indicates the actions or events as on-going or happening in the 'present'. This particular usage of the verb form, however, not only presents a single action in its continuity, it also leads one action to another forming a narrational continuity between different actions. The interconnection between multiple actions is thus established, not necessarily through a semantic relationship between them; in other words, they are single events of action which imparts its own meaning even if they stand alone. This particular usage of the verb form in the song anchors the flow of multiple actions by weaving them together in the larger framework of the narrative.

Such a verb ending of verses, in fact, is significant in the singing as well. As we had mentioned both in the previous chapter and an earlier part of this chapter, while singing the *Thottam,* the singers elongate the vowel sound that comes towards the end of each line. Since the *Thottam* is known to be passed on from one generation to the next orally, this particular way of ending the verse should be seen as a convenient way by which the singers negotiated with their singing rather than a purposeful way of arranging the verses themselves. This is also precisely the reason why not all the verses end in this similar way. All the same, this specific way of ending the verse is quite flexible and somewhat loosely framed; in fact, in the rendering context, the singers make use of this flexibility by changing the vowel sound without changing the meaning of the song. For example, the particular line '*Kuttikale iruvareyum kulurkke ennatheppicho*' can be sung as changing the last word '*ennatheppicho*' to '*ennatheppichu*'; and this particular change neither eliminates the vowel sound nor it changes the meaning.

Narrating the speech events: the techniques of language

In the *Thottam* song of *Maakkam*, particularly, the chronological unfolding of the narrative world predominantly happens through the reporting of multiple short and long conversations between different characters. The speech events, which are often directly quoted in the song, are neither fixed to nor stay stagnant in any given situation, rather these 'tellings' are events in themselves which pushes the narrative forward. Thus, the presence of situational reporting of dialogues makes conversational interactions within the song a cardinal factor in unveiling the nuances of the narrative. In the *Maakkam Thottam*, broadly, there are two ways in which 'speech events' are embedded: one is through a direct reporting of the speech, and the other is through the presentation of dialogues without any prior references or introduction. Before proceeding to grasp these ways in which speeches are reported in the song, let me quickly introduce some key terms which will be helpful in comprehending the analysis which follows. The song is invariably narrated by a narrator who is not directly involved in the story, but a third person who reports the speeches of the speakers in the story. This distinction between the narrator and the speaker is significant in understanding the dynamics of the song both in its textualized form and as enacted. In the context of the enactment particularly, as we have seen, the role of the narrator - as the one who is narrating the story - is split between

the singers who are assigned to sing the song in the given ritual context. Moreover, the speech events which are directly reported follow a certain pattern using the metalinguistic properties of the language. Indeed, commenting on how this works within the same language, the American linguist John A. Lucy has significantly observed:

> But when a language is used to refer to and predicate about itself, that is, when language functions reflexively as its own metalanguage, then certain forms in the language are doing metalinguistic duty. Essentially, two distinct functional modes are encompassed within a single linear stretch of speech. In such cases, where metalanguage and object language are implemented out of one and the same language, there arises the possibility of confusion in determining what portion of the utterance are serving as metalanguage (i.e., functioning metalinguistically by referring to and predicating about language) and which portions are serving as object language (i.e., functioning as object [or context] to be referred to or predicated about). Such confusions can be (and routinely is) avoided by using special metalinguistic signals to indicate that portions of the utterance are serving as object language. Every language provides forms and characteristic arrangements of forms that can be used in this way and such uses constitute a large part of the formal evidence for the existence of hierarchically structured functional levels of language (Lucy, 1993: 94).

In the *Thottam* song of *Maakkam*, specifically, the direct reporting of the speech events follow a certain pattern which is instrumental in anchoring these speech events within the context of utterance. One of the most common usage deployed throughout the song indicating the reporting of a speech is the phrase '*parayunnallo*' (saying) or '*chodikkunnallo*' (asking), often with a prefix '*appolutane/appozhutane*' which means immediately. For example, '*appolutane parayunnallo/paranjaarllo*', which literally means 'then immediately says':

> *Appolutane parayunnallo kunjimaakkamo* Then Kunjimaakkam is saying
> *Enikkennum paranju chollikuritheerthulla eettillathilo* In this *eettillam* which is built for me
> *Kaalan gulikan sanisaathaavu vannu kayarum munne* Before the evil spirits start residing
> *Anakk poyikkarakayarenam eettillathilo* I want to go and occupy the *eettillam*.

Here, it is a directly quoted report of speech which indicates that the action of speaking is not yet completed, but is happening. The form *'appolutane parayunnallo*' suggests the possibility of a speech action which is about to happen in the next moment, and is not a reporting of the speech which has already occurred, as far as the narrative world of the

song is concerned. Had it been '*appolutane paranju*' – literally, 'then said immediately' - it would be a clear instance of reporting of a speech event that had already occurred. But the usage of verb as '*parayunnallo*' (saying or says) signals the attempt to capture the speech event in its continuity.

This usage is present in almost all contexts when there is a reporting of particular speech events. Syntactically, this utterance is followed by mentioning the name of the actor whose words are going to be quoted. This particular form which appears often comes in the beginning of the quoted dialogue, and is not 'informative' as it does not mention anything about the nature or texture of the quoted speech except the identity of the speaker, although it signals the speech delivered by that speaker. Another example is given below:

Appolutane choidikkunnallo pettoramma	Then the mother is asking immediately
Innenth parnju mole ninte changathichimaar	What did your friends say today?

Herein, following the same syntax, the first line signals towards a speech action which is qualitatively different from the very act of saying. However, the organisation of the sentence follows the same structure as it also mentions the person who is asking the upcoming question. Based on the observations of the influential Roland Jakobson (1957), Lucy explicitly comments that forms for reporting speech such as verbs of speaking (for example, words in the English language such as say, tell, ask, etc.) and 'quotatives' are among the most important metalinguistic forms used to describe or report such individual utterances (see Lucy, 1993: 96).

The common factor associated with both these forms are that they give more importance to the spoken words, and not to the narrator who is quoting or reporting the speech. The role of the narrator in these instances is simply to introduce the speech act by qualitatively differentiating it from the narrations which followed till then. In fact, the narrator attributes the responsibility of the speech to the speaker herself/himself by incorporating direct speech within the text. Therefore, at the level of text at least, the narrator is not the authority of what is being said or asked:

Eettillame ponkunjiyenn ninachu ammayo	Thinking that the *eettillam* is her child
Eettillathil charecheriye katannu ammayo	Mother entered the *eettillam* slowly
Irunnukulikkum mastharana kandu ammayo	Mother saw the room for taking bath
Eettillathinte panikurinjeriyathu kanunneram	While seeing the perfection of eettillam
Kittunnallo katuthayoru kotunombaram	She senses intense pain
Appolutane parayunnallo Unicheriyamma	Then says Unicheriyamma immediately
Nammakkazhakiya petteena thedi kond varenm	Go and bring the suitable midwife for us.

In the above lines, the usage of '*appolutane parayunnallo*' suddenly shifts the characteristic of the narrative from the description of the situation to that of a speech event. Quite clearly, language is here reflexive as it is used to refer to and predicate about itself, and not to specifically assert anything about the content of the spoken words that follows.

Indeed, while looking at the song in its textualized form (although the point could be extended to its rendering context as within the ritual), one should be attentive towards the fact that the song itself is a form of speech, which grants it distinctive qualities. The song, as a specialised form of speech, is composed of the play of multiple voices, necessitating that the distinctive presence of these voices is made clearer in the rendition (and enactment). In fact, the presence of these voices within the text clearly shows how the song is 'performative' not only in its enactment as part of the ritual, but also in its textualized form. In his phenomenal work on Dostoevsky's novel, the famous literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) introduced the concept of 'polyphony', which precisely refers to the presence of multiple voices within a single narrative. He referred to the play of voices within a single narrative where the characters speak for themselves and also against each other. In the *Thottam* song of *Maakkam*, even though the presence of multiple voices is visible in the textualized form, in the realm of the performance this might not be very self-evident as these 'voices' are actualised through the physical voice of the singers through the activity of singing. Closely observed and unpacked, though,

the distinctive presence of the voices could be discerned both in the performative context of the ritual as well as the song in its textualized form.

Another significant feature of this type of language use is the prefix '*appolutane*' attached to the verbs which means 'then immediately'. The literal meaning of this word gives a sense of an immediacy or urgency of the action that follows in and through the narration. Importantly, however, in the context of the song, this sense of urgency as evoked through this usage does not always have contextual significance (as the situation of the utterance need not necessarily suggest an exigency). Rather, it should be understood as having a neutral function of adding to the overall pace of the narrative by establishing a continuity between the preceding lines and also plays the role of providing an emphatic base to the following speech event. Thus, the notion of 'immediacy' is not the demand of the narrative context, but should be seen as executing the function of connecting qualitatively different segments of the narrative text.

Significantly, the metalinguistic properties of language, as mentioned through the above examples, is employed in a quite different way at some other points in the narrative. Here, the speech act indeed is reported, but within the framework of the speech it further becomes an object of itself. Thus:

> *<u>Appolutane parayunnallo</u> changathichimaaro* Then the friends are immediately saying
> *<u>Kelppathundo</u> neeyumente ponnu kunjimaakke* Are you listening my dear Maakkam
> *Kumbha maasam kazhiyunnoru meena masam varunallo* After the end of Kumbham month comes the month of Meenam
> *Meenamasamallo pooram nonpu nokkendath kunjimaakke* The Pooram festival should be celebrated in Meenam
> *Njangalellam kodippooram nolmb nokkunnu maakke* We all are observing Pooram fasting, Maakkam.

Here, too, the phrase '*appolutane parayunnallo*' is referring to the speech act which follows (as we recalled earlier). But, when we look at the first word of the quoted speech, it can be seen that the reflexive capacity of the language has a second layer within the speech act. The speech begins with a further entry point into the speech itself: '*<u>Kelppathundo</u> neeyumente ponnu kunjimaakke*' (Are you listening my dear Maakkam?).

The question being posed within the speech refers back to itself by indicating its intention, in particular, the nature of the utterances that is going to be made as well to whom it is addressed. Again, even as the entry of a speech event is marked by a 'neutral' phrase which indicates nothing other than presenting that particular speech event, there is something being added to this basic level, a further level of objectification, as it were. This second level of objectification comes within the speech itself, where the speech reflexes upon itself by unveiling its own characteristics at the beginning, which otherwise would have been understood or have emerged by the end of that particular speech. In such cases, specifically, the speech is thematically anchored in the specific quality of the speech, and not just the speaker.

Indeed, one of the common features of this latter anchoring is that invariably this introductory phrase only takes the 'responsibility' of a particular dialogue which immediately follows it. Let me illustrate:

Appolutane parayunnallo achanmaaro[45]	Thus say the brothers' immediately
Ne najangale ariyerinju ethirekkanda	You shouldn't welcome us back
kaalu kazhukan vellamitha ente angalamaare	My brothers, here is water to clean your legs
Ninteythoru kindiyil vellavum venda njangalkko	We don't want your water
Kayyum kazhuki kanji kutikkente angalamaare	Wash your hand and eat food my brothers
Ninteythoru kanjiyum venda njangalkko	We don't want the food you have made
Nee vecha kanji ninte rand makkalkkum kodutho	Give the food you have made to your own children.

This is obviously a conversation happening between Maakkam and her brothers after they have heard the allegations that their wives had cooked up against Maakkam. Herein, except the first dialogue uttered by the brothers, none of the others have been reported individually and separately. Rather, the phrase '*appolutane parayunnallo*', as it appears in the beginning, seems to be encapsulating the speech event in its wholeness even

[45] The Kadangottu Nambiars, the brothers' of Maakkam, had been given the title '*Kadangottu Achanmar*' by Kolathiri after they had won the battle.

though it is directly indicating the speech uttered by a single speaker. Thus, the entire speech event is penetrated into the text as having an existence of its own.

Of course, apart from these speech events which have an entry point into the overall narrative, there are numerous other speech events in the song text which lack such an entry point. In fact, they are loosely hanging within the framework of the text, without having any explicit footing other than their contextual necessity (somewhat similar to the instances mentioned above). Given below are the lines which mentions about Maakkam meeting Kurikkalachan (Guru, the teacher) after she has realised that she has not given her *gurudakshina* (the gift offered by pupil to their teacher, after they finish their education). She runs behind Kurikkalachan to give her gift:

Aramaniyum thrikkalchilambum kulukkikkonde	By sounding her waistlet and anklet
Gurukkalachante vayye thane payunnallo	She runs behind kurikkalachan
Pramaniyum thrikkachelambinte ocha kettitto	Hearing the sound of waistlet and anklet
Pinthirinju nokkunnallo kurukkalachano	Kurikkalachan looks back
Natunattuchakk nalla thee parakkum veyilinode	In this intense sunny afternoon
Enthinu makale paanju vannathente kunjimaakke	Why have you come running, dear child Maakkam"
Njaanethum thannillalo ente kurukkalachanu	I haven't given anything to my kurikkalachan
Neeyallathe aaranenikku maakke thannathe	Who else have gifted me other than you, Maakkam.

This speech event (the conversational exchanges happening between Maakkam and her teacher) is seen as emerging within a given situation, and the whole speech event is not anchored anywhere; rather they are hanging loosely within a given context of the narrative. They appear suddenly without any particular introductory phrases that lodge them in the context. The penetration of the speech event in the narrative thus is not emphasised through an immediate reporting. Besides, the unveiling of the semantic meaning of these particular utterances, including the act of identifying them as 'speech events', happens only after engaging with them completely. Even though, they do not have any visible and decipherable footing prior to their entry, these 'hanging' speech

events should be seen in connection with the larger framework of the *Thottam* song, which in itself is a third-person reporting of a multitude of events.

The song of *Maakkam*, as already specified, is a veneration of the life of an upper caste Nambiar woman as well as the celebration of the lifestyle, customs and traditions followed by the upper caste families in the region of north Malabar. What makes this *Thottam* significant and popular, apart from these sociological facts, is the emotionally driven themes that the song is addressing. The *Thottam* song of *Maakkam* is unarguably a part of the larger repository of heroic songs which venerated the life and experiences of the socially privileged heroines and heroes. It is precisely such a historical tendency which has fuelled the production and popularity of the song. The extensive use of reported speech - and also the ways in which the speech events are reported within the song - needs to be understood in relation to these sociological and historical stimuli. In fact, one significant feature of the speech events reported throughout the song is that in all of them (with the exception of a few, such as the small portions representing the dialogue of Eeyavanatan with the birds or the brief exchange of conversation between the Vaniyan and Maakkam) the speaker is a member of the Kadangodu *tharavadu*; it is the conversation between them, their internal agonies etc. which are directly reported in the song. Evidently, it is these situational conversations between these characters which pushes the narrative forward. Accordingly, the social position of the speakers, the way in which their words are reported, and their cardinal role in pushing the narrative forward become important to be explored, as they establish a dynamic interrelationship between the context of reporting and the reported context. Again, I take recourse to a Russian linguist to underscore the point, namely, Valentin Volosinov (1973) who particularly stressed that the dynamic interrelationship between the reported speech and the reporting context reflects the dynamism of social interaction in verbal ideological communication between people.

The direct reporting of the speech events in the song explicitly indicates the distance between the narrator and the speakers. Even if one were to assume that the content of the reported speech is the result of the 'imaginative power' of the creator(s) who composed the song, there is yet a conscious choice of separating the narrator from the

speakers that must be addressed. The creator(s) of the song, as it were, do not have direct access to the world of the words uttered by the speakers; they can neither interpret nor channelise the speeches, but are only allowed to make certain neutral comments on the speech act such as the common nature of the speech event (whether it is a question, saying etc.), the name of the speaker, to whom it is addressed, and so on. Moreover, the involvement of the narrator in the speech event is restricted, since what the speech even follows is an autonomous realm of the speaker. The distancing between the creator and the speaker, as marked through the use of direct reported speech, is not just a separation happening between the individuals at the level of the text; rather, it is the materialisation of two different life worlds which are socially and culturally positioned hierarchically. Thus, the distinct and supple ways in which speech events are penetrated within the narrative has indeed social and historical significances. The use of direct reported speech, far from representing or reflecting a social hierarchy, itself manifests those social hierarchies.

Importantly, this distinction between the narrator and the speaker is also valid in the performative context, since in the actual course of the singing the singers are building a relationship with the narrator of the song and not quite with the speakers within the narrative. In fact, when the song is carried from one generation to another, it is not only the legend which is travelling through the generational span, but also the social setting which had galvanised the production of the song using specific linguistic grammars and literary techniques. The emphasis on the oral tradition of the song and the fixity it is supposedly known for substantiate this point. In fact, the specific notion of fixity attributed to the song as its unique quality often legitimises this distinction by prohibiting the possibility of any changes in the song text.

Realms of descriptiveness revisited

Remember, while talking about how the *mun thottakkaran* shortens the lines of the *Thottam*, Dineshan Peruvannan had likened the operation to taking a short-cut in the midst of heavy traffic, and that this is imperative given the elaborate descriptions within the song. Importantly, even though he was calling attention to the mutual negotiations that happen in the rendering context of the ritual, he was also gesturing towards the fact

that the song contains ‘descriptions’ which are quite insignificant to the narrative, and that avoiding them will not have any direct consequences for the overall content of the song. As such, he was also implicitly stating that there are descriptions within the song that are both significant and unavoidable. Now, it is within this economy of understanding that I will be engaging with the song text in order to explore the role and function of ‘descriptions’ within the narrative world of the song. Such an understanding, besides, is crucial, considering that the *Maakkam Thottam* is known for its lucid and vivid descriptions. Since this *Thottam* is perceived as a biographical retelling of the life of Maakkam from her birth to the tragic death, the narrative world of the song is attentive towards a multitude of events happening in the life story of its central character. Accordingly, in order to work towards a comprehensive understanding of what these descriptions signify, it becomes necessary to be attentive towards the common features and tendencies obtaining at the descriptive realm of the song.

Palpably, in the narrative world of the song, the descriptions are verbal representations of objects, situations etc. Whatever be the focus of the descriptions, they are situated within a context combining details of various degree, all participating in the schematic and chronological unfolding of the narrative. Let us once again quickly look at a section from the song. The following lines describe the dream that Unicheriyamma had on the day when she came back after getting a divine blessing:

Etham valicha neerale neeraattu kulikazhinj	After taking bath in the water from well
Athazhamund ananthashayanam ponkattinmel	While lying down on the bed after having dinner
Chanthamethum mayilaale sukhamurangumbol	And sleeping during the dusk
Pularaanezhara nazhika neramavumbol	When the dawn is about to break out
Kanunnallo avarum chila arakkinave	She is having a dream
Natuchuzhalanagappambine kandu kinavil	In the dream saw a snake wrapped around her waist
Mudichuzhale moorkkappambine kandu swapnathil	In the dream saw a cobra wrapped around her hair
Aariyathatha matiyil parannuvannu veezhakkando	Saw a parrot flying and sitting in her lap
Ponmakal vannu thanmatiyil kalikkakkando	Saw a kingfisher playing on her lap

Arakkannu chimmi arakkannu kutti thurakkakkando Saw a child blinking eyes
Iruviralale mulakkannu njekkippidikkakkando Saw the child pressing her nipple using fingers
Itamulathangi valamulapapalu kutikkakkando Saw the child drinking milk from the right breast by resting the hands on the left one
Kandakinavu oru vazhiyo mozhiyoyennariyuvan To see what is seen is dream or reality
Njettiyunarnnu poonilamuttathulanakunno She is suddenly waking up and walking in the courtyard.

Importantly, when we look at the 'significance' of this description within the overarching framework of the narrative world, it is quite obvious that it is neither openly predicting what is going to happen next nor pushing the narrative forward in terms of its chronological unveiling. Rather, the description is stuck and situated in a particular context, exploring the multiple possibilities emanating from that given situation. This description also has syntactically similar lines; that is to say, the lines mentioning about what Unicheriya saw in the dream, which adds to the 'richness' of the narrative. One more set of lines are taken from the text to make this clearer. These lines describe Maakkam coming along with her mother after plucking enough flowers to celebrate the Pooram festival:

Poopparichu kulangareyarike porunneram While coming through the pond side
Kulam chaadi kadakkunnallo kunjimaakkam Maakkam jumps and crosses the pond
kulakkadavil mandalam vechu unicheriyamma Unicheriyamma kept the *mandalam* near the pond
Ashtamangalyam ariniranazhikayum vechu Also kept *ashtamangalyam* and *nazhika* filled with rice
Bhadradeepam vechu avide nilayurappichallo She stood there keeping the *Bhadradeepam* as well
Munpilallo kotanthappoo vaarakkodukkunnnallo She gives the *kotanthappoo*
Ayippinna arivaareettum kodukkunnallo After that gives the rice
Onnam poovo kulakkatavil thanneyittu kollunnu *Onnampoovu* is placed on the step of pond
Randaampoovum kulakkadavil ittukollunno *Randampoovu* is also placed on the step of the pond
Moonnam poovum avitethanne ittukollunno *Moonnampoovu* is also placed there
Naalam pookai natayil ittukollunno *Naalampoovu* is placed in the courtyard

Anchampoovum kainatayil thane ittukollunno *Anchampoovu* is also placed in the courtyard
Aaram poo itamuttum vaathukkalittukollunno *Aarampoovu* is placed inside the home
Eezham poovum avitethanneyittu kollunno *Ezhampoovu* is also placed there.

Here too, the lines are describing a particular situation, by giving a 'pictorial' elaboration which enhances the 'aesthetic quality' of the narrative world. These 'descriptions' using the capacities of language provides a scenic element to the whole narrative of the song, adding more 'information' to a given situation and without particularly leading to any purposeful action as far as the narrative of the song is concerned. In fact, it is this 'more information' added to the narrative that the practitioners consider as 'insignificant'. As Dineshan Peruvannan had maintained, if the song can be rendered without losing its essence and ritual significance by eliminating some descriptions, it is quite obvious then that all the descriptions which are part of the narrative world of the song can attain different meanings within and outside its rendering context. Thus, the descriptions often make the narrative flamboyant and luxurious through delving into a particular event and elaborating even on the minute details of the event. They often do not push the narrative forward (in terms of the consequent presentation of events), rather they revolve and dwell on a particular event providing even the most 'insignificant' elaborations.

All the same, as far as the *Thottam* song of *Maakkam* is concerned, the rich realm of descriptiveness should also be seen as contributing to the creation of a historical social space by exploring the capacities of language. In fact, in an endnote to the novel *Maakkam Enna Pentheyym* (The Female *Theyyam Maakkam*), the Malayalam writer Ambikasuthan Mangad offers the following comment on the historical significances of the *Thottam*:

> A reader can only finish reading by getting amused about the extraordinary features of the system of *Marumakkathayam* that existed in northern part of Kerala around two and a half centuries ago and the many customs, practices, beliefs, festivals arts and games. The *Thottam* of *Maakkam* will grab the attention of any history student who is in the journey of inquiring about the dressing style, different food items, types of rice grains, trees, plants, flowers, weapons, utensils, ornaments etc. which existed during that time. One of the most attractive parts of the *Thottam* song is the description about the Pooram festival. The midwifery,

> the strange marriage custom observed in Nair households (it would be interesting to read the custom of girls getting married to a person who wins in the arrow contest with the marriage stories of Arjuna and Rama), the caste system and the different names of places in Kannur district, places of worship, rivers, hills, fields etc. are regenerated through this *Thottam* song (Mangad, 2020:100).

Quite discernibly, the writer here is indicating how the *Thottam* of *Maakkam* can be considered as a kind of archival material about the sociocultural setting of north Malabar. Even while adhering to this observation, there is one important question that needs to be pondered, namely, 'Whose customs, practices, rituals, and lifestyles are being narrated in the *Thottam* song as a whole?'

To be sure, the biographical recounting of Maakkam's life is actually offering an elaborate account of the customs, traditions and lifestyle of an upper caste family and the sociocultural background of north Malabar at large. In the narrative world of the song, therefore, the above cited description of the Pooram festival might sound as a 'luxury', but it is actually a representation of the ways in which the upper caste families in north Malabar celebrated the festival. In the *Thottam* song, the part describing the Pooram festival and rituals associated with it is described at some length. In fact, Pooram is just one of the examples picked from the song. There are many more elaborate narrations about different customs followed by the upper castes. It describes the lifestyle and comfortable surroundings that people of the upper caste enjoyed. In that sense, these descriptions are not just adding a layer of vanity to the narrative, but are often telling us about the 'luxurious' life that the socially privileged had and the functioning of the system of caste during that period. Thus, the descriptions embedded within the song is an attempt to 're-present' the reality of a particular historical juncture by fitting the 'selected sections' of that reality within the framework of the *Thottam* song as a whole. This selective description happens at two levels: one, as already mentioned, in terms of how these descriptions vividly present the life world of the upper castes (which is intricately connected with the motives and themes of the story that is being told), and the second is at the level of narrative where the descriptions are oriented and presented in such a way that they are contributing to the chronological unfolding of the story, and are not digressing from it. It is intrinsically on the basis of this 'additive' quality of the

descriptions that the singers make necessary adjustments within the rendering context of the actual ritual. But there is more.

In the process of forming a descriptive realm, the *Thottam* song of *Maakkam* explicitly explores the multiple potentials of the language and the vernacular knowledge system. Balakrishnan Nair (1979), in an endnote provided at the culmination of the presentation, explicitly says that the *Thottam* of *Maakkam* is not only significant in terms of its detailing of a historical context, but also in terms of language. The song narrates the story in the everyday language of north Malabar, and in a dialect peculiar to the region, using words and phrases which were widely deployed in the day-to-day conversations of the common people. The practitioners often say that singing the *Thottam* means telling a story; yes, it is indeed the narration of a story, but it also represents the simple and uncomplicated language used to narrate a story. Certainly, many words and usages as employed in the *Thottam*, which were a part of the knowledge system of the people during a particular period of time, are not anymore in use in north Malabar. That is precisely why Mangad (2020) says that the *Thottam* of *Maakkam* also reminds us of the many words that we have lost over a period of time.

Indeed, the multiple ways in which the vernacular knowledge system is manifested in the *Thottam* song is worth mentioning. Apart from the use of words which are peculiar to the region of north Malabar, the arrangement of the whole song, in terms of its semantic structure, is a manifestation of the ways in which people make sense of their surroundings. In fact, the very genre of the *Thottam* song and singing, as we mentioned in the previous chapter, is itself a manifestation of how people belonging to certain social positions make use of their sociocultural and linguistic resources. Dwelling into the semantics of each song, thus, exposes how meanings are created and arranged within the narrative world. The *Thottam* song of *Maakkam*, especially the presentation of its narrative world, shows that the meanings it imparts and the social world it is embedded are contingent. This contingency is expressed through all the elements that make the formation of its narrative world possible. Let us see further how this is explicated within and through the narrative world with some examples.

The last portion of the song, which is considerably long, is the description of the journey that Maakkam and her children had to undertake with her brothers. This comprises the journey from the Kunjimangalam *tharavadu* to 'Kottayam', the place in Kannur district where Maakkam and children were brutally murdered. These long lines literally recount the different places and worship sites that Maakkam visited in the course of her journey. The description of these various places and sites of worship shows how the song has incorporated the landscape of the region within the narrative. The places are neither randomly picked nor fictionalised; rather, they are actual places which are geographically connected. At the level of the narrative, the long description certainly indicates the hard and painful journey Maakkam and her children were forced to undertake. This thematical significance of the journey is manifested through connecting it with the existing landscape of the region. Even more resolutely, the use of literary devices, such as similes and metaphors, are an important form of elucidation, one that is informed by the social surrounding from which the songs have emerged. For instance, the following lines depict how the Mankuzhavan (Kusavan, the caste group whose traditional occupation is pottery) is searching for soil that would help Maakkam to make the idol of Kaman:

Mankuzhavan mannu thedi povunnallo	The Kusavan is going in search of soil
Keeri nalla marunnu thedi pokumpole	Like a mongoose goes in search of a good tree
Panni nalla nelappana thedi pokumpole	Like a pig goes in search of a good palm tree
Pambu nalla pulam thedeett pokumpole	Like a snake goes in search of a good field
Nalla nalla mannu thedi pokunnallo	He goes in search of good soil.

Clearly, the search of Kusavan to find the appropriate soil is compared with how different animals go in search of a comfortable and suitable place. The comparison happening here is strongly rooted in the daily life of the common masses. It is their observation of the environment around them, which has penetrated into the narrative world of the *Thottam* song. This use of simple and ordinary language enables a much easier access to the textual qualities of the song. One might find it difficult to decipher the meaning of certain words and usages that are currently not in use, but while looking at the overall meaning that the text throws up, it is quite tangible and decipherable. In that sense the song is open and worldly.

In sum, the textual and performative features of the song, as outlined in the above pages through its various sections and sub-sections, demonstrate the different capacities which the song is capable of exerting in both these worlds. Even though it is possible to analyse these two realms as having distinctive features, the study also showcases the active movement of the song between these two realms. Importantly yet, even while establishing a reciprocal relationship between them, the song indeed retains certain capacities which are not necessarily being materialised in this mutual transaction. In fact, the linguistic properties and language techniques and their implications are not necessarily visible in the enactment of the song, although it is quite true that the culturally conditioned ritual context enables the song to make use of the possibilities of the performative context to combine the linguistic and musical features of the song so as to bring about desired effects in the given context. The historical and social importance of the song thus cannot only be understood as recounting a past; equally crucial is to approach the song as informing about the past and present through the way in which it is composed and structured. In a word: the expressivity of the song is materialised not only in performance, but also in the underlying linguistic components of the song.

Moving to the song of Kathivanoor Veeran

Undeniably, much of the present chapter has been devoted to looking long and hard at one important *Thottam* song – the *Maakam Thottam* – so as to elaborate on its linguistic and performative features, both in its ritual context and outside of it. However, in order to further capture the dynamic nature of the *Thottam* song in motion, it may be useful to take on board one more song that belongs to the same tradition. I have chosen the *Thottam* of *Kathivanoor Veeran* for this purpose, although I will not be exploring the song in the same detail. My effort will be to elucidate some peculiar features of the latter *Thottam*, which can broadly be juxtaposed againt the song of *Maakkam*, so as to elaborate on how the songs in their textualized and performative incarnations unfold themselves by making use of the capacities inherent to them. The combined reading of these two songs, I think, is crucial for understanding how various *Thottam* songs, while being part of a common tradition, manifests themselves quite distinctively.

Like the *Thottam* song of *Maakkam*, the *Thottam* of *Kathivanoor Veeran* is also known for its length and paramount significance in the ritual, and is quite pervasive across the region. Sung and performed by the practitioners of the Vannan caste, the song of *Kathivanoor Veeran* is often tagged as one about the most popular and celebrated heroes of north Malabar. The *Thottam* is known not only for its ritual significance, but also perceived as having a crucial historical significance, especially in outlining the customs, culture and lifestyles of the people both in north Malabar and Kodagu. Mathew (2016) has observed that most *Thottam* songs, including the *Kathivanoor Veeran Thottam,* are a repository of the economic and social transactions that existed between different regions, and are often confined to oral literature and folklore. The *Thottam* of *Kathivanoor Veeran* narrates the story of Manthappan, a Thiyya youth who travelled from Kannur district to Kodagu and his return journey to Kannur as a *Theyyam*.[46]

Unfolding the legend

Kumarachan and Chakki, the Thiyya couple, were very distressed as even after many years of their marriage, they were not blessed with a baby. They prayed in front of Chuzhali Bhagavathy,[47] and with her blessing they have a baby boy, Manthappan. Born in Mangadu near Thaliparamba in Kannur district, Manthappan grew up receiving all the love and pampering from his doting parents. He excelled in education, as well as in armament. However, the pampered child Manthappan was more interested in playing with his friends using the bow and arrow than going for any job. Seeing his son always playing around with his friends without doing any job, Kumarachan got very angry. However, Manthappan refused to obey his father, and told him on his face that he was not ready to do any job. Hearing the response of Manthappan, Kumarachan got angry and told his wife Chakki that hereafter their son should not be given anything to eat from the home.

[46] The legend of *Kathivanoor Veeran* is a detailed description of the various places that Manthappan visits as part of his journey. However, while narrating the story in the sub-section that follows, I have not included the names of the places that he visited. Lissy Mathew (2016) has studied the journey of Manthappan in some detail, by exploring the complete route from Mangadu to Kodagu and from Kodagu to Aameri as mentioned in the *Thottam* song. In putting together the legend, I have also drawn on this work.

[47] Chuzhali Bhagavathy is the goddess who influences Kathivanoor Veeran a lot. She is the tutelary deity of the Chuzhali *swaroopam*.

Without knowing his father's decision, the next day also Manthappan came home during the lunch time. Even after coming to know about the father's decision from his mother, Manthappan urged his mother for lunch. Seeing the plight of her son, Chakki gave him rice and milk. Suddenly, Kumarachan entered the home angrily, having watched this, and broke Manthappan's bow and arrow into pieces. The archer Manthappan, who considered his broken arrow as equivalent to his death, left the home forever saying that he would not return home ever.

Manthappan went to his friends', who were planning to go to Kodagu for trading purposes.[48] They understood that Manthappan had come after fighting with his parents. They consoled him, saying that they can help solve the issue at home. But Manthappan was not ready for any compromise. After getting to know about his friends' journey, Manthappan also decided to go with them. After taking his luggage, Manthappan reached his friends. However, the latter were not ready to take Manthappan along, since he had fought with his parents. They thought of a way to deceive Manthappan. Sitting under a tree before their journey to Kodagu, the friends' thought of having a small party. During the celebration, they provided abundant amount of arrack and food to Manthappan. Having had all the food and drink, Manthappan passed out under the tree itself. Making use of that opportunity, his friends left to Kodagu with their oxen. Manthappan woke up the next day, realising that, like his parents, his friends too had deceived him. Manthappan, who was adamant about not going back home, decided to travel to Kodagu on his own. Following the footsteps of the oxen, he started his journey. He passed through many different places and reached the plantation in Kurumathur village where he saw his friends. However, they did not see Manthappan. The next day morning, the friends resumed their journey with their oxen, and Manthappan also followed them. After passing many places, Manthappan could not see the footprints of the oxen. Even though Manthappan met his friends at Vannayikkatavu, he was not ready to go with them. His friends invited him to have food with them, but he refused their

[48] Kodagu, also known as Coorg, is a district in Karnataka. The journey of Manthappan and his friends to Kodagu indicates the commercial relationship that existed between north Malabar and Kodagu.

offer and ate alone. Next day morning, along with his friends he continued his journey to Kodagu.

Once he reached his uncle's house, Kathivanooramma could not recognise him.[49] He introduced himself, and by that time his uncle had also reached. They offered him rice and milk, although Manthappan did not forget his friends. He provided some grass and fire to his friends. Manthappan started to live with his uncle at Kathivanoor. ostensibly a place in Kodagu. His uncle gave half a portion of his land to Manthappan. After having some land of his own, Manthappan started to work hard on the land and cultivated fruits and vegetables. One day, Kathivanooramma advised Manthappan to also invest in oil production using *ellu* (sesame seeds). Listening to her advice, Manthappan started to produce oil and received money by selling it. One day, while he was coming back after selling the oil, he met his friends on the way and they told him to gather some weapons as the Kodagar (people of Kodagu) were planning for a battle.

Alongside, during one of his journeys, Manthappan met Velarkotta Chemmarathi, who was taking bath in Velarkkottu river.[50] He asked her for some water. She replied that he would have to come to her home for the water. While satiating his thirst, Manthappan expressed his wish to marry her. Later, one day, Kathivanooramma asked Manthappan if he had any girl in his mind with whom he wanted to get married. He told her about Velarkotta Chemmarathi. Even though his uncle and aunt did not like the match, they did not want to say anything against Manthappan's wish, and so they agreed to the marriage. Manthappan got married to Chemmarathi, and after the marriage he started living at her home. As per Chemmarathi's wish, Manthappan resumed his oil trading. One day, when he was returning home after selling oil, he could not reach home as it had got very late. That night, he stayed in a lodge without eating anything. The next day, when he reached home, Chemmarathi got angry at Manthappan, and she accused him saying that he had slept with another woman the previous night. Even though Manthappan explained his situation, she did not believe him. Manthappan, who was very

[49] Kathivanooramma is Manthappan's aunt, that is, his uncle's wife. In the legend largely, there is no mention of her name other than referring to her as Kathivanooramma, that is, the mother in Kathivanoor.
[50] Velarkotta is the place of Chemmarathi, with whom Manthappan is married, as we shall soon see.

hungry, asked her to give him milk and rice. Without any interest, she prepared some food and served to Manthappan. In the rice, however, he found some hair and small stones, and also his rice dumpling broke into half. Broken food is a threat to life, so perceived Manthappan. But Chemmarathi, who was angry with her husband, was dismissive and told Manthappan that she does not care even if he loses his life. While he was having food, he heard the war cry of his friends, who had supposedly formed an army against the Kodagu army. He stopped eating saying that an honourable man cannot eat food if he hears the war cry. Manthappan took his weapons, and when he was about to leave the house, his head hit on the beam of the front door. Also, a red chameleon crossed his path. He asked Chemmarathi about what these acts can mean, to which she vainly replied that he is certain to face death and that his body will be cut into pieces. Without wasting much time, Manthappan left for the battle.

Manthappan and his band of men fought bravely against the Kodagu army. However, he loses his ring finger along with the ring in the battle. The brave warrior that he is, Manthappan was not ready to face his wife with this disfigurement. He returns to the battlefield knowing that he would be killed by the enemies. The latter, who had been hiding in the forest, pounced on Manthappan and killed him. They cut his body into sixty-four pieces, and threw them in various directions. A heartbroken Chemmarathi along with Manthappan's uncle come to the battlefield in search of his body. Manthappan's ring finger had fallen on the banana plant in the vicinity. They gathered the body parts that had been thrown around and prepared the funeral pyre. Once the funeral pyre started burning, Chemmarathi diverted everyone's attention by pointing toward the sky to see the blinking star in daylight. When everyone was looking at the sky, Chemmarathi jumped into the pyre and united with her husband in death.

After the funeral, everyone went to Vantharmudippuzha to take a dip and cleanse themselves. They are astonished seeing Manthappan and Chemmarathi taking a bath upstream in the same river. When Manthappan's nephew (the son of his uncle) Annukkan goes to check, they notice that the stone and grass are wet, but do not find Manthappan and Chemmarathi. Very soon, the banana plant on which Manthappan's ring finger had fallen started to quiver. When Annukkan proceeded to touch it, he is

possessed by Manthappan's spirit, and exclaims loudly: 'Don't think I am dead, uncle. I do not need any further funeral rituals'. He urges them to worship him as a *Theyyam* and even identifies who should be the *kolakkaran*. Accordingly, Vasuvarakanalati became the *kolakkaran* and Annukkan the '*komaram*' (or oracle). Once the spirit of Manthappan as *theyyam* went and stood in front of his uncle, the latter in salutation calls him 'Kathivanoor Veeran'. Indeed, this is how the *Theyyam* which is performed in the memory of Manthappan got the name '*Kathivanoor Veeran*'.

Further on, the story is that one day, when four *Thandayan* were going towards the southside of the Kathivanoor home, they heard the '*Uchathottam*' of Kathivanoor Veeran.[51] They are convinced that if such a strong and mighty *theyyam* existed, then it should be brought to the Aameri *tharavadu* and that it should be renamed as 'Aameri Veeran' (the hero of Aameri).[52] Thus, Kathivanoor Veeran travelled back to Malabar along with the four *thandayan*.

The Thottam song of Kathivanoor Veeran: structure and event

The ritual event of *Kathivanoor Veeran*, which generally lasts for three days (although the one that I attended was concluded in two days), is known for the long and lasting presence of *Thottam* songs through all the days of the event. Indeed, as far as *Kathivanoor Veeran Theyyam* is concerned, the *Thottam* is not a segment happening at a particular stage of the *Theyyam* ritual event, but makes itself present throughout the ritual, each time unfolding the story of Kathivanoor Veeran in different ways. The *Thottam* has many components exclusive to it, each of which are to be delivered in the ritual space in different occasions as the event unfolds. The presence of multiple self-organised sections of the song is pivotal in unfolding the narrative and establishing a relationship between the text and context of the ritual. In fact, there is no formal ending to the *Thottam* song that separates it from the following dance performance and enactment of rites; rather, from the beginning of the ritual to its end, the song makes its presence in frequent intervals constantly bringing together the narrative and the ritual in

[51] '*Thandayan*' is the titular name given to a privileged and notable Thiyya person in a village. Thurston (1909) describes 'Thandan' as the hereditary headman of a Thiyya *tara* or habitat.
[52] Aameri is a place in Kannur district. One of the four *thandayan* was from the Aameri *tharavadu*.

a loop. Consequently here, the *Thottam* song does not only come before the *Theyyam* performance, it is also pervasive throughout the ritual from beginning to end. Let us first have a look at how these different sections are organised within the song and get to be incorporated into the larger ritual.

The *Thottam* song of *Kathivanoor Veeran* begins with *varavili* and *stuti*, the portions which are common segments in most of the *Thottam* songs.[53] However, after these portions, the narrative of the song does not quite unfold in a chronological order like in many other *Thottam* songs; rather, it is presented through a kind of 'flashback' technique, through which the return journey of the Kathivanoor Veeran *Theyyam* from Kodagu to Aameri in Kannur district is narrated. As such, this particular section that comes after *varavili* and *stuti* is known as '*Puthuchuram Keekkal*', which roughly means the 'the act of making someone climb down the mountain pass'.[54] As the designation suggests, this portion narrates the return journey of Manthappan as the *Kathivanoor Veeran theyyam* after he had been killed in the battle. Importantly, it is after this narrating about the return journey of Manthappan that the chronological unfolding of his life story begins. The segments (or sections) which come after this are known as '*Pathiyam*' and '*Pettum Pirappum*'. The former, that is, '*pathiyam*' is comparatively a short portion which tells the whole life story of Kathivanoor Veeran in a condensed form. The latter - '*pettum pirappum*' - contains the lines which talk about the birth of Manthappan and the ferven prayers that his parents had made for a child. Kannan (2011) has observed that there are some similarities in the *pettum pirappum* of *Kathivanoor Veeran* and of *Maakkam* and the *Kudiveeran Theyyam* (the latter commemorating a warrior god). At any rate, with reference to the *Thottam* we are detailing here, the *pettum pirappum* ends with the birth of Manthappan.

The main portion of the *Thottam* which is a detailed description of the whole life story of Kathivanoor Veeran comes after the *pettum pirappum*, and is referred to as the '*Valiya thottam*', that is, the long *Thottam*. As should be discernible, this is the longest portion

[53] A detailed analysis of the general pattern of the song structure has been given in the previous chapter.
[54] The people who travelled from Kannur to Kodagu had to cross mountain passes. Thus, in the context of '*puthuchuram keekkal*', the return journey of Kathivanoor Veeran which involves traversing these mountain passes is being described.

in the *thottam* of *Kathivanoor Veeran*, which begins with his birth and ends with the transformation of Manthappan to Kathivanoor Veeran. Importantly, the *valiya thottam* does not talk about what happens to Manthappan after he becomes Kathivanoor Veeran, for this latter part of the legend has already been presented in the earlier section known as '*puthuchuram keekkal*'. Indeed, it is particularly interesting to note how the song is gaining its narrative coherence through the linear arrangements of parts, while yet narrating the story in a nonlinear manner. These self-organised components, even while being delivered one after another in a linear progression facilitating the song to sequentially unfold itself, imply that the movement of the narrative within the song does not follow a chronological telling of the legend. Thus, it can be seen that even when the song moves forward in time, the narrative world embedded within the song is not quite moving forward in the same fashion. The culmination of the *valiya thottam* marks the end of the *Thottam* recital on the previous day. It is followed by a '*Payattu*', which is the demonstration of the warrior status and martial arts calibre of Manthappan and accordingly showcasing his extraordinary potential as a fighter. The *kolakkaran*, by flashing certain weapons, performs the *payattu*, following which he goes back to the *aniyara* to adorn the full costume of the *Kathivanoor Veeran Theyyam*.

It is to be noted that the *Thottam* recital on the previous day is carried out by the assigned singers. The singing group consisted of about five people, which also included the percussionists. The *kolakkaran*, who is going to be Kathivanoor Veeran, stands in the midst of the singers performing minor dance steps and rites. When the *kolakkaran* goes to the *aniyara* after *payattu*, the *Thottam* singing is temporarily paused and it is resumed on the next day once the *kolakkaran* is fully adorned with the costume of Kathivanoor Veeran.[55] On the next day, the rest of the sections are delivered by the *kolakkaran* himself, since these lines have to do with the legend of Manthappan after he became the *Theyyam*. Vannan Krishnan, whom we have mentioned in the previous chapter, further clarified:

[55] Even though the rest of the song is delivered on the next day, when the performer is wearing the costume of the *Theyyam*, the singers stand in front of the *aniyara*, rendering certain sections of the song. Sung in this particular context, it is known as '*Aniyara thottam*'. Vannan Krishnan, one of my key informants, points out that that the lines of the *aniyara thottam* are taken from the main body of the *Thottam* itself which particularly venerate the deity.

> On the previous day, through the singing we narrate the whole story of Manthappan till his death. The next day, the *Thottam* song tells the story of Manthappan after he became the *Theyyam*. Thus, these portions are sung by the *theyyam* himself. The previous day, the *kolakkaran* is not the *Theyyam*; instead, he is in that process of becoming. But, on the next day we see Kathivanoor Veeran who himself is telling his story (Interview conducted on 15 March 2020 at Thrikkaripur, Kasargod).

Clearly, here the delivery of the song is not being understood as a precondition for the invocation of Kathivanoor Veeran; rather it tells the story of the hero after he has become the *Theyyam*. In fact, the portions of the song sung on this day are not recited by the singers, as Kathivanoor Veeran himself is present in the ritual context to tell his life story.

Hence, the sections of the song sung on the next day are seen as the self-narration of the story by the hero himself. The first portion sung on this day is known as '*Chollivili*' (or '*Chollistuti*'). *Chollivili* means 'to call upon by reciting', and this section is sung after the initial dance performance and before the '*Vazhinata Parayal*'. In fact, on the day of the *Theyyam* performance, after completing some rites, the *Theyyam* Kathivanoor Veeran stands on the *peetam* placed in the courtyard. During this time, a person belonging to the Thiyya community sings the '*Chollivili*' in order to make the *Theyyam* climb down from the pedestal that he is standing on. Once the singing reaches the portion in which the *Theyyam* is brought back to earth, the *Theyyam* climbs down from the *peetam*. Lissy Mathew (2016), who as we saw earlier has published a work on Kathivanoor Veeran, specifically mentions about the language of *Chollivili* as follows:

> Compared to the *Thottam* song, the language of *Chollivili* gives more importance to Sanskrit and is very different from the local language. Also, it is evident that this portion is created by people who have had access to formal education. The *Thottam* is sung by Vannan caste, whereas *Chollivili* is sung by a person belonging to Thiyya caste. This difference seen in the language use should be seen as the social privilege and Sanskrit education of the Thiyya caste of north Malabar as compared to other castes in other areas of Kerala (Mathew 2016: 269).

Accordingly, even though the *Chollivili* is a part of the *Thottam* song, it is different from other sections in terms of its language, the singer rendering it, and the contextual significance that it has.

After the *Chollivili* comes the portion known as '*Vazhinata Parayal*'. The content of this portion is exactly the same as that of the *Valiya Thottam* which was sung on the previous day by the singers. However, the tune in which it is delivered and the contextual significance of it is different from that of the *Valiya Thottam*. Vannan Krishnan, who is known for singing the *Thottam* song of *Kathivanoor Veeran*, frames this distinction as follows:

> *Vazhinata* is the same as the *Valiya Thottam* sung on the previous day by the singers. However, there are two major differences. One is that, on the next day, it is delivered by the *kolakkaran* as Kathivanoor Veeran himself. It is like he is narrating his own life after becoming *Theyyam*. Another distinction is that we sing the *Valiya Thottam* in a particular tune and rhythm, whereas on the next day the *kolakkaran* delivers it in a prose form, and not singing per se. When the *kolakkaran* delivers it on the next day, he is not simply saying it, but instead he is communicating his life story to the people who have gathered. Also, the people can ask questions and doubts to him during this *Vazhinata*. It could be about his life story itself or about anything in general. The *Theyyam* is responsible to answer all their queries (as above).

It can be seen that, when the *Valiya thottam* becomes '*Vazhinata Parayal*' on the next day, its nature, significance and the delivery style changes to a great extent. The *Vazhinata* is also known for the active interaction between the *Theyyam* and the devotees, even as he is narrating his own life story. Obviously, the singers and the *kolakkaran* are supposed to know the *Valiya thottam* in its entirety, as both are responsible for delivering it on different occasions during the ritual. Even if the delivered content is the same on both the days, they are not quite understood as the 'same', for their contextual significance is different. Thus, the *Valiya thottam* and *Vazhinata*, even while having same content, are drastically different from each other based on various contextual factors. The same portion of the song attains a different significance based on the person who is delivering the song at the moment.

After these renditions come the sections (or segments) known as '*Sathyavaakku*', '*Thattunila Vazhangal*' and '*Changathikale Ayappikkal*'. Again, all these sections, which are part of the *Thottam* song of *Kathivanoor Veeran* is delivered on second day by the *kolakkaran* himself. Let us quickly look at each of them and see how they are significant in the ritual. '*Sathyavaakku*' literally means the words of truth, and calls attention to the conversation that Kathivanoor Veeran *theyyam* is having with the oracle.

In this conversation, Kathivanoor Veeran explains his whole life story from birth to death and the major *Palliyara* where he is worshipped in Kodagu and Kerala.[56] This particular portion is delivered after Manthappan has been murdered in the battle. After *Sathyavaakku* comes '*Thattunila Vazhangal*', which also narrates the whole life story of Kathivanoor Veeran. The last portion of the *Thottam* song is '*Changathikale Ayappikkal*', meaning bidding farewell to the friends. Kathivanoor Veeran is known for the unconditional loyalty and concern that he had towards his friends, even though at many occasions they had deceived him. Thus, the last portion of the song is a dedication to his friends. With this recital, the *Thottam* singing comes to an end. In the context of this enumeration, it can clearly be seen that, except for *Chollivili*/*Chollistuti*, all the other parts of the song refer repeatedly to the life of Manthappan after he had become a *Theyyam*.

Of text and context: voices, continuity and authority

Evidently, the way in which the *Thottam* of *Kathivanoor Veeran* is structured and enacted invokes some further concerns regarding the organisation of the song as a whole. One important factor to be noted in this *Thottam* is the way in which the authority of delivering the song is distributed among different participants in the actual world of its rendition or enactment. In *Maakkam*, we have seen that largely the delivering of the song was the sole responsibility of the two singers – the '*mun thottakkaran*' and '*bai thottakkaran*' - throughout the ritual. However, when it comes to *Kathivanoor Veeran*, there are multiple participants involved in the singing performance. What does this changing authority of singing imply in the context of the latter?

Pertinently, the significant factor that facilitates this change of positions is the arrangement of the narrative itself. As already seen, when the song travels from one day to another, it cannot merely be perceived as a passive movement; rather, the movement of the song must be approached as actualising the multiple relationships signified in its rendition and enactment. If, on the first day, the life story of Manthappan is narrated from the point of view of a third person and as a kind of reporting of the events that had

[56] '*Palliyara*' is the sacred place in which the *Theyyam* is worshipped.

happened, on the next day the song is unfolded from the point of view of Kathivanoor Veeran himself as the self-narration of his own life story. For example, let us look at the way in which the portion known as '*Thattunila Vazhangal*' begins:

> *Pirannu njaan mangattu valarnninnu njaan Kathivanoor*
> I was born in Mangattu and brought up in Kathivanoor

Alternatively, the section of '*Puthuchuram Keekkal*' presents the narrative from the third person point of view (as we have seen in the *Thottam* of *Maakkam* as well):

> *Ennum than varika venamallo kathivanoor veeran daive*
> You should come always, the god Kathivanoor Veeran

Moreover, even as the whole *Thottam* song is the reporting of past events, the different point of views through which the song is presented alters the meanings that the song brings about in the ritual context. Sreejith Peruvannan, who is known for performing *Kathivanoor Veeran*, is categorical:

> On the last day, you are listening to and watching the god *Kathivanoor Veeran* himself. After becoming the *Theyyam*, he is narrating his life story to the devotees. That is why the *Thottam* is now being sung by the *kolakkaran* himself, except the *Chollistuti*. The life of Manthappan after becoming the *Theyyam* is being given importance, whereas on the previous day the life of Manthappan as a human being was being recited. It is through this recital that the *Theyyam* has arrived. So, on the next day, the human Manthappan is not there, but only the spirited presence of *Kathivanoor Veeran*. Thus, on this day, it is the god himself who is singing and conversing with the devotees.

Indeed, the pragmatic quality of the language and the rendition pushes the song to move from one context to another; more emphatically, the context of the reporting of events to the context of the direct presentation of the events itself. Thus, these two sections of the song, even while being the part of a single song, are actualising the pragmatic qualities of the language in different ways by mediating between two different contexts. At one level, it is the relationship between the world of the living and the world of ancestors; but, on another level, it is between the two different lives of a hero, both as a human being and as a spirited *Theyyam*. Importantly, the anthropologist Webb Keane, while talking about the significance of authority in the ritual speech, makes the following telling comment:

> The living speaker partially enters the world of ancestors, while at the same time the words of the ancestors enter into the activities of the living. This ambiguity

> of voice exposes speech events to slippage, the possibility that either the uniqueness of the speaker or the relatively empty ancestral frame will expel each other. In Derrida's terms, the quality of iterability haunts particular speakers' assertion of agency. By the same token, their assertion of agency threatens to undermine the authority they seek through the use of iterable ancestral forms (Keane, 1997: 134).

Extending the point, we can further note that the authority to sing the song is distributed among different participants. In fact, the nature and significance of the delivery of the song by the *kolakkaran* needs to be noted here in some detail. There is a qualitative difference in the song and the singing when it is delivered by the *kolakkaran*. When the latter is delivering the song, he is not identified as the singer, but as the *Theyyam* himself who is recounting the life of Kathivanoor Veeran. In fact, what happens is that the living person, the *kolakkaran* partially enters the world of ancestors, while at the same time the words of the ancestors enter into the activities of the living (as in Keane above). Singularly, the singing of the song by the *kolakkaran* as *Kathivanoor Veeran Theyyam* establishes a direct connection between the world of *Theyyams* and the world of the living.

We have already seen that the *Thottam* of *Kathivanoor Veeran* enters and engages with the context of ritual through multiple voices. Here, 'voice' should not only be considered as a passive medium through which meanings are communicated; rather, the voice is actively produced by different bodies in a given cultural and performative context so as to bring about multiple layers of meaning. Significantly, while commenting on the concept of 'voicing', Weidman (2014) has pointedly observed that the assumed linking of voice with an identity (or a single person) overlooks the fact that speakers may have many different kinds of relationships to their own voice or words and that a single 'voice' may in fact be collectively produced. Clearly, in the performative context of *Kathivanoor Veeran*, the play of voices goes beyond the individual identity of the singer, and connects with the larger values embedded in the social and cultural milieu of the region. The textualized version of the song - and I realise that I have not presented this in the detail that I have here with the *Thottam* of *Maakkam* - demonstrates the presence of multiple voices by employing the techniques of language. The shifting points of view, the use of different dialects, the variations in the formation of verses etc. suggest the

ways in which multiple voices are embedded and actualised within the textualized form of the song. At any rate, the presence of multiple voices is further materially manifested in the context of the performance through three different participants, say, in the section known as '*puthuchuram keekkal*', namely, the singers, the performer and a person belonging to the Thiyya caste. Furthermore, it is to be remembered that, during the delivery of the section called '*Vazhinata*', the people gathered in the ritual space are permitted to converse with the *kolakkaran*, thus giving rise to an exclusive and distinct speech event and augmenting the play of multiple voices within the ritual context. In fact, this particular speech event as evolved within the given context of ritual builds an intimate relationship between the *kolakkaran* (as *Kathivanoor Veeran*) and the people gathered in the ritual space. This speech event, as characterised by a reciprocity between the people and the *kolakkaran*, is not only ensuring the direct participation of the gathering in the ritual; it is also commanding a sense of authenticity and credibility to the identity of the *kolakkaran* in the given context.

Even more suggestively, the changing authority of the song should be seen as contributing to the ritual continuity of the song itself. In fact, this was clearly pointed out by Vannan Krishnan, who maintained:

> In *Kathivanoor Veeran*, it is important that the singers and the *kolakkaran* should have a good grasp of the *Thottam* song. Because, on the day of *Theyyam*, the *kolakkaran* has to deliver a large portion of the *Thottam* song apart from performing the dance. Especially when he is delivering the *Vazhinata*, the people gathered around him might ask some questions and the *Theyyam* has to reply to those questions in between. So, when he is answering the questions, he will stop delivering the *Vazhinata* and reply to the devotees. But once he is done with it, the *kolakkaran* should begin from where he has stopped. The continuity should be there (From the Interview, as stated above).

Evidently, then, although the sections and the people who are delivering the song change, the key is the idea of keeping the continuity of the song.

In fact, as far as *Thottam* songs in general are concerned, maintaining the continuity of the song is pivotal. In the *Maakkam Thottam*, we have seen how the singing maintains and establishes the continuity of the song through building a relationship with the context of practice. It is imperative to note that the notion of continuity here is not associated

either with unchecked singing or with the involvement of a single vocalist; rather, the 'continuity' has to do with the mutual interaction between the song and the context. The change in the singers, the pause, the difference in singing rhythms etc. have to be understood as facilitating the manifestation of this continuity. More emphatically, the continuity of the *Theyyam* ritual assemblage itself is actualised through the multiple situations of song delivery and the changing authority of songs in the given ritual context. In *Maakkam,* as we saw, the singing was exclusively carried out by the singers themselves and the *kolakkaran* was hardly involved in reciting the song. However, in the *Thottam* of *Kathivanoor Veeran,* the song made its entry in the ritual space in multiple ways - through the singers, *kolakkaran* and the *komaram* (oracle).

Moreover, one of the factors that grants a unique position to the *Thottam* song is the given time and duration of the singing in the larger framework of the ritual. The songs are largely understood as sung before the commencement of the *Theyyam* dance performance, thereby establishing a narrative base to the overall ritual assemblage. This established demarcation between singing and the ritual dance, especially in terms of the specific time allocated to each other, can be observed in most of the *Theyyam* performances. However, in the context of *Kathivanoor Veeran*, this demarcation is not very visible, as the song is infused into the ritual space till the very end of the ritual. Thus, the division between the song and other parts of the ritual, especially the *Theyyam* dance, as two mutually exclusive compartments is not valid in the case of the *Kathivanoor Veeran Thottam*. In fact, this pervasiveness of the song is an inevitable factor in maintaining the congruence between the text and context. I will move now into some final thoughts on the basis of the present chapter.

The Thottam Songs in Summation: Text, Context and Textualization

The analysis of the two *Thottam* songs, as carried out in this chapter (albeit skewed in terms of the detailing towards one), was meant to explore them in some fullness and in motion, as having a life of its own. Indeed, one of the convictions with which I attempted the elaboration was the need to understand them in their entirety, rather than giving prominence to any single aspect of the song. The senior folklorist and anthropological

theorist, Richard Bauman (1986) insists on this comprehensive understanding of oral tradition by insisting on the significance of both narrated event and narrative event:

> The narrated event, as one dimension of a story's meaning, evoked by formal verbal means in the narrative text, is in this respect emergent in performance, whatever the external status of the narrated event may be, whether it in some sense 'actually occurred' or is narratively constructed by participants out of cultural knowledge of how events are - or are not, or may be - constituted in social life. Thus, we can comprehend narrated event as well as narrative event within our overall concern with the interplay between the given available resources and patterns of narrative performance and outcomes of that performance (Bauman, 1986: 6).

Accordingly, a verbal act of composition (including songs) needs to be understood as a cohesive entity which incorporates both the narrated and the narrative event. Indeed, while understanding this composed (and composite) existence of songs, the notion of context becomes crucial. By and large, as far as *Thottam* songs are concerned, there are three contexts which need to be considered: one is the context of the reported speech, that is, the narrative context in which a particular event is taking place; two, the historical reporting context, that is, the historical context in which the entire reporting had taken place; and, the third one is the 'seasonal' reporting context, that is, the rendering of the song in the ritual context. Considering these three contexts is important for understanding the tradition of the *Thottam* song and its singing. A trained ethnomusicologist Tylor Bickford (2007), while compiling the perspectives of different scholars in linguistic anthropology, urges for the need to approach verbal art as 'discourse'. As he points out, wading through different scholars (and I shall quote at some length):

> By the same move - asserting the relevance of linguistic forms in song - this article contributes to an approach to verbal art that has been fruitfully developed by linguistically inclined anthropologists and folklorists. Urban argues that the material substance of 'actually occurring instances of discourse' (1991: 1) constitutes the principal site of 'culture, as a collection or history of publicly accessible sign vehicles' (ibid.: 19). … As Woodbury (1985) demonstrates that the structure of discourse is pervasively involved with patterns of syntax and phonology, as Jakobson (1987) argues for understanding grammar and poetics as related and interacting functions in verbal art, I develop *the claim that singing is structured by the interrelations of different levels of discourse*. By asserting the relevance of language sounds to singing, I make a claim about the phenomenology of song: the linguistic system of sound and meaning mediate the

> sensory and semiotic modes of expressivity in singing (Bickford, 2007: 441, emphasis added).

Now, while the scholarship has been quite alert to the historical and sociological significance of the *Theyyam* ritual (including the *Thottam* and its content), the predominant tendency has been to approach the stories underlying the ritual and its songs as reflecting and representing the cultural milieu of the region. My attempt however, in keeping with the suggestions underscored immediately above, has been to capture the organisation of the song both in its textualized and performative context; and, in the process, approach the world of the *Thottam* not as a passive medium of representation, but as capable of building multiple networks of relationship in the different 'lives' they embody – as song, as ritual, as text and as performance, a peculiar linguistic structure and a form of narrativization enacted in a context, with a dramaturgy and cultural significance of its own. Our foregoing analysis was primarily meant to contextualize the *Thottam* in all its particularity so as to further embody the framework of understanding and orders of delineation outlined in the previous chapters. In concluding the present chapter, all the same, I think it is also important to address the processes of textualization intrinsic to the oral tradition as a whole, if not in its completeness at least in the context of our detailed diagnosis of the *Thottam* songs.

Quite foundationally, passed on through the generations largely orally, the *Thottam* songs are also a part of the tradition which gets enacted in the active context of ritual and its practice. It is therefore important to ask: What happens to the songs of an oral tradition when they are textualized? At a certain primary level of engagement, the documentation of an oral tradition is carried out with the tag of the preservation of orality and even oral culture. To be sure, attempts have been made to document these songs, if not all of them, in various modes and channels. The live telecasting of the *Thottam* singing performances in local television shows, for instance, as also the plethora of books on the *Theyyam* ritual and compilations of folksongs and performances, are some of the important ways in which these songs are being textualized. The 'introductions' of many of the published works on the *Theyyam* ritual expressly state their intention as one of staging an informative function, through which a wider audience will get to know about the

historical, cultural and social significance of this particular ritual art form (including the *Thottam*).

Importantly, yet, in their textualized versions, even though the songs get to be framed and remain somewhat frozen in a particular time and space, the visuality of the textualized form comes to attach a set of distinctive qualities to the song. Considering that I have relied a lot on the textual documentation of the *Thottam* songs – of course, often juxtaposed against their actual rendition and/or enactment in the space of the ritual – it may be important to offer a further comment on the *Thottam* in its printed versions and the texts that so accrue. Interestingly, there are opposing views about this whole agenda of textualization among the *Thottam* practitioners. For Vannan Krishnan, the recording or live telecasting of the song is important in letting the people of other regions to know about the song and the ritual at large. However, on the other hand, Krishan Peruvannan is of the opinion that these songs have a divinity associated with them, and accordingly they should be preserved through the oral tradition singularly and not be documented in any other form. Clearly, even though there are contrasting opinions about the modalities of textualization of *Thottam* songs, it is a fact that effective attempts have been made to 'preserve' the song in print form. Such a textualization, ostensibly, preserves the physical presence of a verbal text in its sequential form in a more or less permanent way that could be reproduced exactly over and over again. The result is a song that is seemingly text-bound, and in sharp contrast with the essentially evanescent oral performance of a song which has gone once its singing has ended (see Atkinson, 2004: 458).

All the same, even though the modalities of textualization can attach a level of fixity and physical permanency to the songs, the processes of their enactment can add to their significance (and not quite only at the level of the ritual, incidentally). These possibilities should be seen as going beyond the staid dimensions of any (or all) preservation project; in particular, as our foregoing pages has sought to encapsulate, the sheer poetic and visual quality of the song in its textualized form. I realise, of course, that being attentive to the visuality of the song which are strictly perceived through sound and performance can undermine the potential of the song to be read as graphical text which has its own

linguistic qualities and attributes (and, to be sure, the weight of our analysis has fallen on the latter, while also depicting shades of the former). Importantly, Richard Shusterman (1982), an American philosopher of aesthetics and performance, has radically stressed the dimensions of a visual aesthetics of the text. He pointedly says that considering poetry merely as sound and sense, and not sight (or visuality) is a reductive perception of the aesthetic quality of the text (see Shusterman, 1982: 88).

Doubtless, the textualization of the song prioritises the act of reading over hearing or listening (or even seeing). Consequently, most techniques of textualization are meant to present the song in such a way that it becomes convenient for the reader to make sense of the song through the activity of reading. One of the common factors associated with the printed version of the songs - particularly focusing on the songs that I have studied here - is their segmentation into different sections. It is evident that the songs have different sections which are important in its enactment context, primarily in the space of the *Theyyam* ritual. However, when the songs are being textualized, the narrative of the song is divided into different sections based on the major events in the legend. The bold titles given to these sections communicate the content that each contains, which enables the reader to comprehend the song in its entirety. Besides, even within these segmented versions, the voices of different characters are made visible by putting them in quotes. The techniques of visual presentation of the print text, such as gaps between sections, the insertion of footnotes, the foregrounding of subsections etc. attach meanings and aesthetic qualities to the text which might not be very visible in their actual context enactment and/or performance.

However, and this is important, the obvious absence of physical sound in the song text keeps the hereditary singers and the ritual context at a distance from the textualized form of the song. Obviously, the textualization of these songs, which is made possible with the help of the practitioners, is not carried out for the singers, as for them learning the song primarily happens through memorisation and by making their own ‘manuscripts’ of the song for their purposes. Most of the practitioners who I met during the fieldwork said that they have their own manuscripts of songs, which they use while memorising the songs orally. These manuscripts, Dineshan Peruvannan even asserted, have to be carried

over to the next generation of practitioners. In fact, as he put it, they constitute supplementary material which can be used while memorising the songs orally. Indeed, if these ‘manuscripts’ are created by the practitioners themselves with the intention of carrying forward to the next generation, the textualization of the song using the possibilities of print media is being carried out with the intention of making the songs accessible to a wider audience.

This takes us back to a part of the main argument underlying our study, one which I have outlined in the previous chapters through the concept of ‘assemblage’. While presenting the notion of ritual assemblage, I had elaborated on the relationship between different parts, the interaction of which makes the emergence of the ritual assemblage possible. Our two extended chapters have been an attempt to explore the dynamics of this assemblage in and through the *Thottam* song(s), which, while being a part of the overall *Theyyam* assemblage, comes to possess and articulate a life of its own. Indeed, the permeating presence and character of the *Thottam* in all it narrative flow and contexts of enactment quite clearly demonstrate the potential of the song to be a part of different modalities of existence, each exhibiting its own capacities.

Chapter 5

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Projecting Ahead into New Lives of the *Thottam*: By Way of Conclusion

In many ways, my foregoing chapters speak for themselves, and I have no explicit intentions here to recapitulate this ground. However, in this brief concluding chapter, I want to project ahead from within the structure of the preoccupations recorded by the movement of my study. Particularly, I would like to make some observations about the shaping of *Thottam* songs with the advent of media and technology into the ritual space. Doubtless, the primary objective of our study has been to look at how *Thottam* songs are getting manifested in their different loci of existence, across various performative and textualized registers. The idea of a ritual assemblage provided a theoretical framework for our engagement with the 'many lives' of *Thottam* songs, even as we in the grip of this framework traversed the various ways in which the songs themselves get manifested in their performative and documented contexts. Indeed, the idea of 'assemblage' becomes pivotal to understand how a particular part of a complex whole can also be a part of other wholes, and in the process allow for various meanings and experiences to emerge.

As I just mentioned, in the context of the *Thottam* songs in particular, their performative and documented contexts were the obvious loci of existence and manifestation. But in this concluding chapter I want to indicate towards something more and somewhat different, namely, the specific ways in which technology and media have come to mediate the ritual space of the song and the singing and their implications. Of course, the documentation of oral cultures of song in the print form is certainly not a new or novel trend. Expectedly, however, the ritual space of *Thottam* singing has in recent times overseen the influx of audio-visual media and other technological resources into it, in the process widening the reception and consumption of this tradition of songs. In fact, in the context of this technological mediation, I would like to project ahead - chiefly as lines of

my own future work – into two orders of questions (or concerns): one having to do with the amplification of sound in the ritual space, principally by using microphones and loudspeakers, and the second to do with the reproduction and circulation of the *Thottam* songs through various media such as television and internet. The order of my projections here are still tentative, and yet sufficiently indicative of a growing interest with exploring the interrelationship between ritual, sound and technology.

Amplified Sound and the Ritual

The two major substantive chapters of my dissertation - Chapters 3 and 4 in particular – have attempted a fairly comprehensive understanding of the ways in which the songs are manifested in their convergent contexts, both inside and outside their ritual space as it were. Without doubt, the entry of technology and mass media into the spaces of 'religious' practice have brought about very significant changes in the way in which these spaces are configured and re-presented. Quite apart their documentation in the print medium, the use of recording devices and sound reproduction technologies have also become a viable medium through which the *Thottam* songs are being reproduced and circulated. The technological intervention has transformed the ways in which the ritual practices and the belief systems associated with them are being perceived by the people. In fact, commenting on the relationship between religion and media, the religious studies scholar Birgit Meyer has specifically observed that the terms and contours of the intervention of media goes beyond the simple intention of being openly accessible to one and all:

> Recent anthropological research on Islamic, Pentecostal, Judaist, Buddhist, Hinduist or spirit possession movements shows that incorporating modern mass media into the sphere of religion entails new possibilities for broadcasting a religious message among a broader audience and for assuming a public role. However, modern audio-visual mass media offer not only possibilities to spread out that may resonate remarkably well with religious ideas of reaching out into the world, but also reconfigure religious ideas and practices by situating them in the context of the era of mechanical and electronic reproducibility (Meyer, 2006: 432).

Undoubtedly, as rightly pointed out, the use of modern mass media in the religious spaces has not only widened the possibilities of public access to these events and practices, it has also changed the way religious practices and ideas themselves have been perceived

by the people. Indeed, in the case of the *Thottam* songs, as indeed the *Theyyam* ritual as a whole, the introduction of mass media and technologies has impacted the ways in which the notions of ritual efficacy and performativity are perceived by people across the spectrum. As we have seen through the sequence of our chapters, a key role of the *Thottam* song and its singing is to bring about an efficacious ritual atmosphere. Rendered by the hereditary practitioners, these songs are known for creating a connection with the ethereal world of *Theyyams* and bringing the power of the gods into the ritual space. Thus, the very voice and sound of the *Thottam* singers is an inevitable ingredient contributing to the establishment of a suitable ritual atmosphere. The voice of the singers, coupled with the loud sound of instruments, create a sacred ritual space, which gradually morphs into an efficacious atmosphere for the further events that take place in the *Theyyam* ritual. Evidently, the aural proportions of the song and the singing, as rendered in the given context, serve as a medium through which the entire ritual event becomes effective and consequential.

Obviously, the recent introduction of microphones and amplifiers in the ritual spaces of the *Thottam* singing has contributed new dimensions to the very notion of sound and aurality and their relation to ritual practices as a whole. The microphones, to be sure, are being introduced into the singing space because of two major reasons, namely, to make the sound of the singers reach more people who are not even physically present in the ritual space, and, secondly, the introduction of microphones also makes it convenient for the *Thottam* practitioners to sing without exerting much physical energy. Even though the practitioners find the presence of microphones and loudspeakers useful while singing, they have their own reservations. For instance, when pressed about the use of microphones in the ritual space, Vannan Krishan was both lucid and categorical:

> Microphones are a new entry to the ritual space. In my older days there were no microphone and loudspeakers. These days, you can see *Thottam* singers using microphones widely. One good part about them is that we do not have to exert much physical energy while singing. Especially for songs which lasts for many hours, it would be difficult to maintain the voice till the end. People do need to hear what we are singing. And, if there is a microphone, we can sing without damaging our voice. But singers like 'us'- the older ones - are pretty new to this equipment. Thus, even these days when I sing, I sing as if there is no microphone in front of me - by exerting all my energy. I am not doing that intentionally, but it comes naturally. Also, the microphones are really helpful so that people

> standing far away can also listen to the singing. The loudspeakers kept at the junctions will let people know where the singing has reached even before they arrive at the ritual space. Thus, it is all for the good only. However, it is not possible that all the portions of the songs should be amplified. There will be some portions which only should be heard in the ritual space. In such cases, it should not be done through microphone (Interview conducted on 16 March 2020, at Thrikkaripur, Kasargod).

Quite conclusively, then, the use of devices like the microphone is practically useful in forging attention upon the singing amidst the gathering. In fact, we can even say that the sound of the singing brings different bodies together so as to converge into a single ritual space. The establishing of a ritual atmosphere is indeed intricately connected to the voice of the singers, the content of the song and its reception. Importantly, the increasing use of microphones and amplifiers is also further emphasising on the importance of the human voice of the singers in creating an efficacious ritual atmosphere. Thus, in the case of the *Thottam* singing, this 'atmosphere' as created through the songs is not only important to the singers alone; it is also important to the listeners who are gathered and even to the people who are not proximally (or even physically) present in the ritual space. As postulated, the practitioners themselves identify the entry of microphones in the spaces of *Thottam* singing as a new phenomenon. The use of such devices makes the sound reach and 'affect' more people, thus bringing them closer to the divine world that the *Theyyam* offers.

Nowadays, it can be observed that the loudspeakers are positioned on the pathways leading to the ritual space - outside the premises of the *Kavu*, at nearby junctions, and so on – thereby enabling the sound of the singers to reach more people even if they are not physically present in the ritual space. In fact, most of the *Thottam* singing is carried out with the help of these devices, all with the intention of making it audible to a wider audience. This has to be seen in conjunction with the importance of the production and reception of sound in the context of the *Theyyam* ritual. In fact, the mere recital of the songs is not enough; rather, the singing and the sound of the singers should reach to the people at large, thus making them also an integral part of the manifestation of the ritual. Through the loudspeakers positioned at many junctures on the way to a particular ritual space, the sound of the singers is capable of subsuming all the other sounds, creating an

exclusive atmosphere for the overall event of the *Theyyam* ritual. Thus, apart from the larger historical and cultural popularity of the *Theyyam* ritual, the amplified sound also contributes to widening the canvases of the ritual by making it more 'public' and open.

All the same, it is to be noted that, even as the practitioners are less bothered about the presence of microphones and loudspeakers in the ritual space, the recording of the singing and the circulation of the songs through various platforms is perceived with much suspicion and friction. Indeed, where the amplification of sound using microphones is seen as a tool to increase the participation of the people in the ritual, the circulation of recorded singing is often perceived by the singers themselves as a mechanical activity which lacks piety and sacredness. In this light, we shall now quickly look at the ways in which the songs are being incorporated into the mass media and the implication of their circulation.

The *Thottam* Songs Amidst New Registers of Circulation

Apart from the use of amplifiers and microphones, the ritual space of the *Theyyam* has also been witness to the growing presence of live recording and circulation of the ritual activities through television channels and the internet. In fact, the *Thottam* songs are now part of the larger projects of documentation of oral cultures, and as such further subject to the influence of technologies in making these songs available to a wider audience. This shift of the songs and the order of their adaptive capacity to different media needs to be taken seriously, especially while engaging with the ideas of authenticity and efficacy and so on. In fact, as we have seen in our foregoing chapters, the notion of efficacy attached to the songs is invariably connected to the voice of the singers – indeed, the capability of their voice to make the god appear on the ritual space. In fact, it is through the sound of the singers that the devotees are connected to the *Theyyam,* even as this very aurality further invokes the major themes behind the ritual. The embodied voice thus becomes the fundamental criteria for establishing a connection with the divine. However, the introduction of mass media and associated technologies has majorly impacted the ways in which we can understand the ritual and the belief system associated with it. The local television channels and the use of mobile phones and other recording devices have already opened up multiple possibilities for the songs

to be part of contexts totally outside the realm of the ritual. Thus, the songs are no longer fixed in a particular time and space and only accessible to a section of people who are physically present in the ritual space. They seem to circulate everywhere.

The ethnomusicologist Regula Qureshi (1995), in her study of the use of sound recording and reproduction in the case of *qawwali*, makes an interesting point about the impact of sound recording when it comes to the 'religious' music. She has pertinently observed:

> Sound recording freezes a musical performance into a reproducible object physically separable from those who produce it, thereby removing it from its original context and making its communicative potential universally accessible through playback and broadcasting technology. As such, the entire process of music production is subject to industrial relations of production in which a producer with capital and technology converts music into a marketable product to be sold for profit. A song is fragmented through the production process, removing its original creator from its user, the consumer, and thus depersonalizing it. Mass manufacture results in a loss, or at least a control of diversity and an adaptation of the physical characteristics of the music to the parameters of the manufacturing process, along with a standardization of demand in response to a standardized offering. Ultimately, the market becomes the locus of patronage, which makes the consumer the ultimate determinant of production (Qureshi, 1995: 140-141).

Qureshi is here focusing particularly on the cassette industry and the recordings of *Qawwali*, which are part and parcel of the larger music industry. Of course, in the case of *Thottam* songs, as of the present, it has not yet reached to such an extent where we have the mass circulation of CDs of their recorded versions. The *Thottam* singers are still not ready to circulate their recorded voice as detached from the ritual context, as they consider their sound as significant only when it is sung as a part of the ritual. All the same, Qureshi's specific allusion to the 'depersonalization' of the sound from the 'original creator' is worth pondering upon, for it is here that the idea of 'authenticity' becomes important. The technological reproduction of sound has often been seen as detaching the singers from their voice, and consequently as a mere reproduction of sound lacking the essence of divinity. Indeed, when it comes to the intervention of the audio-visual media in the realm of ritual songs per se and the specific contexts in which they are manifested, the voice of the singer(s) is separated from them and what is available is the 'reproduction' of these voices. In familiar critical theory terms, the reproduction causes the loss of 'aura' associated with the tradition of songs.

In fact, the friction between the hereditary practitioners and the reproduction of the songs through various technological devices is still somewhat an open field. It becomes very visible in terms of their different approaches towards the use of microphones to amplify the sound and the recording of the sound itself. Undoubtedly, the former (that is, the use of microphones to amplify the sound) has not created the flutter that the latter has with the possibility of the technological reproduction of the sound through recording and telecasting. At any rate, the primary basis of the friction is the 'depersonalization' of the sound, with the detachment of the sound from the singers seen to be contributing to a distortion of the authenticity of the ritual. However, far from taking sides on this contentious cultural topic, I am interested to see how the very materiality of the songs is changing with the reproduction and circulation? In a word: What happens to the songs when they are being recorded and circulated using the resources of audio-visual technology?

To be sure, the presence of recording devices such as cameras, mobile phones etc. in the ritual space enhances the effect of singing by using the possibilities of visual technologies. Thus, apart from the use of microphones and amplifiers, the live recording and telecasting of the *Thottam* songs is also gaining more popularity in the recent years. The thriving 'YouTube' communities and internet websites on the *Theyyam* ritual has indeed played a significant role in making the tradition of *Thottam* songs popular outside their ritual contexts. Importantly however, whether it is in the ritual context or in their new loci of existence, one of the significant intentions of the songs is to create affect or efficacy in the respective contexts. The songs are either presented in full length or are cut short with the help of technologies and presented in the backdrop of the images of *Theyyam*. In these recordings, accordingly, it is important to see how the notion of efficacy is being created using the techniques of the visual media. The close-up coverage of the singers and the musical instruments, parallelly capturing other activities taking place in the ritual space while the singing is taking place, the cancellation of external noises to enhance the clarity etc. are some of the techniques deployed while the singing activity is being circulated on television and internet platforms. In fact, the cancellation of external sound while recording the *Thottam* singing has helped in presenting the sound

of the singers with more clarity and less external intervention. The absence of external noise, besides, has sharpened the quality of the sound, thus making the whole singing activity more appealing by focusing exclusively on the voice of the singers.

Apart from this, the techniques of audio-visual media, especially the changing camera angles and wider coverage of the whole ritual space incorporating the multiple activities simultaneously happening therein, have contributed to heightening the aesthetic qualities of the singing activity in general. The 'effect' of singing and the song is thus presented as more intricately connected to the multiple activities taking place at the space of the ritual. For example, the various visuals of *Thottam* singing not only captures the singing activity, but also simultaneously depict the reactions of the audience, the preparations (say) for the *Theyyam* dance that obtain in other corners of the ritual space and the like. Undeniably, the sudden or gradual shift of the camera angle from a close-up coverage of a singer to a wider canvas containing the panoramic view of the ritual space is common in many of these recordings. The overall aesthetic experience of the singing is clearly manipulated using the technological resources of television and other media. Of course, such a modality of recording using the audio-visual techniques is primarily intended for a wider audience who are not physically present in the ritual space. For the viewers who are sitting in their private spaces and watching these recordings of the singing, they are free to pause, increase the volume and 'choose' the portions of the singing which they want to witness and hear. Consequently, unlike the viewers present in the physical ritual space, the faraway 'viewers' have the options to decide the ways in which they want to approach the singing.

Apart from these live recordings, it can also be seen that fragmented portions' of *Thottam* songs are being used to create specific video content, geared at popularising the *Theyyam* ritual in the social media. Indeed, the variety of ways in which the songs are being integrated into the mass 'new' media - either as a full documentation of the whole singing activity or as fragmented portions of the songs coupled with 'suitable' images - is not only making the songs available to a wider audience, but also presenting the songs in such a way that their efficacy and performativity are gaining different meanings and resonances. Through this mediated circulation of the sound, the human voice of the

singers is presented with more clarity, thereby that enhancing the 'effect' these recordings can have on the people. Invariably, the aim is to present the whole singing activity as a spectacle - something that people can 'enjoy' and 'appreciate'. It can be seen that, in such situations, even the notion of divinity which is considered as 'inherent' to the tradition of *Thottam* songs is being understood in relation to the appealing nature of these new versions of the songs. While, on the one hand, the recorded sound does contribute towards invoking the emotions of piety and divinity on the part of the viewer – with the people associating the audio-visual recording of the *Thottam* singing to the memory of attending the *Theyyam* ritual - on the other hand, the very manner of presentation of these songs as a creative object to be appreciated aesthetically invokes a different kind of feelings for the viewers.

On the 'publicity' of the ritual sound: a further note

The pervasiveness of technology and media has indeed changed the ways in which we can engage, perceive and respond to the ritual activities that abound. In the case of the *Thottam* songs as well, this is all too evident. All the same, it has to be noted that, even though there has been a significant intervention of these contemporary tools in the context of the *Theyyam* ritual, their mediation with the *Thottam* singing has not been as pervasive as with the *Theyyam* dance performance. This can be attributed, arguably, to the seemingly lesser 'musicality' of the *Thottam* songs, as also to the culturally constructed notion of the 'sacred and traditional sound' that can possibly get distorted with the intervention of technology.

From the limited fieldwork that I have conducted among the *Thottam* practitioners, it was quite evident that they would not want these recordings to be used for their further reference. In fact, they do not even consider these recordings as having any pragmatic significance for them (say, in terms of using it as a reference point to improve or improvise their singing). Rather, at least for some of them, these live recording of the singing and the unchecked involvement of mobile phones and cameras in a way contribute to eliminating the essence of the ritual. Obviously, there is a generational component here, which needs to be explored in some fuller detail. Moreover, the sense of dissatisfaction or even discontent about the technology and wider circulation of the

singing is strongly embedded in the ideas of authenticity and divinity of the ritual. This is precisely why the use of microphones is perceived with less suspicion whereas the reproduction and circulation of the sound is still considered as threatening the tradition of songs. The dynamics of this suspicion notwithstanding, the influx of media and technology into the ritual spaces of *Theyyam* worship is a growing tendency. Once the *Theyyam* season begins in north Malabar, the social media platforms and local television channels start uploading the audio-visual recordings of the ritual, including the singing performance. As we have been saying, this profusion contributes to making the ritual available for a larger audience and presenting the sonic and visual content of the ritual as a kind of spectacle. Importantly, while observing the use of sound amplifying technologies in the Namboodiri ritual called '*Agni*' in Kerala, Finnian Gerety (2017) perceives media and technology as occupying a liminal space, flowing freely inside and outside, bridging divides and effacing boundaries. He further emphasizes the role of media in making a 'private' event a 'public' one, and the process of how the local ritual becomes a spectacle of global reach (see Gerety, 2017: 13). Needless to say, the intervention of contemporary media has contributed to taking the songs and the sound of the singers outside of its performative realm, and manipulated them in such a way that it caters to a wider audience who are not part of the physical ritual space. Indeed, apart from these audio-visual recordings, the elements of certain *Thottam* songs are also being incorporated into different modes of cultural and political expressions. In such situations, the idea of 'resistance' that the songs have often been attributed play a significant role. For instance, the lines taken from the *Thottam* song of *Pottan Theyyam* which overtly criticises the system of caste has been used in many public performances and cultural festivals in order to demonstrate dissent and record a form of protest (incidentally, we noted this in passing in Ch. 2 above).

All the same, in all these engagements of the songs with technology and media, one common factor that can be observed is the entry of these songs to a wider public realm where they are perceived and approached by various groups of people. It is a fact that, over the past few years, the popularity of the *Theyyam* ritual has been suddenly increased in the region of north Malabar. Many *kavus* and temples have resumed conducting *Theyyam* performances again after many years of break and discontinuity. Osella and

Osella (2003), in the context of *Kuthiyottam*, a ritual sacrifice prevalent is southern Kerala, have observed that the migration of Keralites to the Gulf countries has indeed contributed to the commodification of the ritual, while also creating much tension about the authenticity of the ritual performances. They pointedly note that since the lower caste sponsors of the ritual did not have either symbolic or practical capital necessary to conduct traditional rituals, this accelerated the process of new styles and innovations (Osella and Osella, 2013: 109). Importantly, in the case of the *Theyyam* ritual, these innovations (especially in terms of the use of audio-visual technologies) need to be seen as eventually aiding to popularise the particular ritual form by gathering the attention of people from different regions.

All in all, even though there is discontent about the presence of technology in the ritual space, one of the reasons why this intervention is being entertained in the ritual space is because building a larger public to view, participate and appreciate the ritual has become a kind of cultural necessity. Thus, whether it is the loudspeakers or the recordings, the new versions of *Thottam* songs are gradually eliminating the physical boundaries set by the human sound, and entering into broader canvases in which the songs are not merely seen as having ritual significances, but also as a work of art which needs to be aesthetically appreciated. Indeed, this 'life' of *Thottam* songs will need to be explored in some detail, while also being read along with the lines that I have attempted to explore in the current research.

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Experience, Meaning and Ritual: The Many Lives of Thottam Songs in North Malabar, Kerala

by Haritha K.

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