

**RITUALS AND SOCIETY: AN
ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY ON THE
KALIYATTAM IN NORTH MALABAR**

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BY
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A. Published in the following publications:

1. Representing Feminine Divinity: A Visual Ethnography of Theyyam in North Malabar, *Society and Culture in South Asia*, Sage Journal, **6(1), 2020**: 165–173. ISSN 2393-8617. DOI: 10.1177/2393861719892445.
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“a religion is: a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of actuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.”

Clifford Geertz. The Interpretation of Cultures. Religion as a Cultural System. 1973:90.

“we may entertain as at least a possibility the theory that any religion is an important or even essential part of the social machinery, as are morality and law, part of the complex system by which human beings are enabled to live together in an orderly arrangement of social relations. From this point of view, we deal not with the origins but with the social function of religions, i.e. the contribution that they make to the formation and maintenance of a social order.”

A. R. Radcliffe-Brown. Structure and Function in Primitive Society. Religion and Society. 1952: 154.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Study of religion always had a special place in anthropology from its emerging days as a discipline and it continues in contemporary research too. Researchers from various sub-areas have produced numerous works by specializing in various aspects coming under the umbrella term of ‘religion’, like religious rituals, magic and witchcraft, belief system etc. Though the studies are many, this does not reduce the scope of further inquiry for the reason that there exist a large number of religions and manifold belief systems and practices which are ever growing and people finding more engagement with religion. Studying religion as a social institution can be considered a good way to understand the structure and organization of society of which religion is a part. Methodologies of anthropology provide the best way to do this and in the present study, an effort is being made to understand the working of religion in a society through the study of an elaborate religious ritual of *kaliyattam* in southern Indian state of Kerala.

Anthropology of Religion

The objective of the inquiry towards religious belief systems in anthropology has taken a wide range of paths so far, and this section of the present work discusses some of such approaches which are relevant for understanding the religious ritual of *kaliyattam* and its function in society. The earlier enthusiasts who based their paradigm in anthropology were interested in defining ‘religion,’ whatever approach they made for the same. Forerunner in the search was E.B. Tylor who defined religion as the ‘belief in spiritual beings’ (1881) and he termed it as ‘animism’. Following it was Marett’s proposal of ‘animatism’, based on the concept of ‘*mana*’ (1909). Frazer (1890) and Weber (1904) widened the spectrum, mostly based on secondary material available at that time, and explore religious practices and customs like magic. Durkheim’s (1915) in-depth analysis of the totemic concept of Australian Aboriginal communities opened a new perspective in the study in which the main objective was to understand the function of religion in society, and for him religious activities develop a ‘collective effervescence’ which produces solidarity in society.

A serious drawback of not having direct observation and first-hand data for the first-generation scholars was overcome by their successors. Malinowski (1925, 1935, and

1944) did analysis relying on first-hand data he himself has collected from the Trobriand island people to find the function of religion in a broad functionalist approach. What he found from the study was the importance of magic and ritual in reducing anxiety, or in finding explanation for phenomena which are in a way unanswerable with one's own empirical knowledge. The society is trying to find some practical solutions for problems which are not in their control, a psychological satisfaction to the needs. When Malinowski put his emphasis on individuals, it was the social group which was important for Radcliffe-Brown in elucidating structural significance of religion in society. Radcliffe-Brown (1922, 1952) emphasizes the importance of religion in affirming the 'order in social relation' by saying that the religion acts as 'an essential part of social machinery', similar to morality and law and it does not matter how far a religion is erroneous or absurd; it played an essential role in human civilization. He proposes his theory on the social function of religion that 'religion is everywhere an expression in one form or another of a sense of dependence on a power outside ourselves, a power which we may speak of as a spiritual or moral power' (Radcliffe-Brown 1952:157). The author again connects the significance of family and lineage in religion by exploring the importance of ancestor worship as a prime form of religious activities. The idea of ancestor-worship, in turn, leads to the significance of kinship and descent aspects in the study of social function of religion. In a nutshell, what Radcliffe-Brown tries to theorize is the significant connection between religion and social structure and for understanding it one should study a religion 'in action' that is the ritual, which is the occasion in which people express their emotional sentiments and 'a sense of dependence' towards the overall functioning of the society as a whole. When some researchers focused the broad system of religion and belief systems existing in society, few other scholars gave importance to the study of rituals or specific acts associated with the belief system. However, much before, William Robertson-Smith (1889), with his studies on Semitic ritual practices observed how communion produces communication between people and god through the study of sacrifice. Hubert and Mauss (1898) also concentrated on the aspect of sacrifice, to understand 'how people sacralise things.'

The second quarter of the twentieth century witnessed a series of literature coming out from the studies done in the African region by Western scholars. Evans-Pritchard (1937, 1956) tried to incorporate the importance of broader structural forms of social organization and how economic, historical, and environmental factors are reflected in the

belief system of Nuer and stated that religion is a 'symbolic representation of the social order.' Gluckman's (1963) studies among African communities resulted in the elaboration of concepts of social solidarity originally developed by Durkheim. His suggestion is that a society expresses the tensions and conflicts existing inside it through rituals and the ritual works in reducing the structural tensions through 'rituals of rebellions' and finally affirming the unity in the system.

As religious rituals and performances involve various verbal spells and nonverbal acts, analysis of rituals need to focus on the meaning of it. Leach (1976) and Bloch (1989) adopts structural analysis in understanding the meaning of verbal and nonverbal communicative actions associated with rituals.

Victor Turner (1957, 1967, 1969 and 1982), and Douglas (1968, 1973) were focussing their attention on the interpretive and symbolic paradigms in the study of rituals. Turner, by working on Durkheim's concept of 'solidarity' and Gluckman's proposal of 'conflicts' came up with the idea that rituals are the occasions in which the structural relations are altered. He modified van Gennep's three stage model of 'rites of passage' (Van Gennep 1960) into two stage model of 'communitas' and 'liminality' to explain the concept of structure and anti-structure and suggested the dynamic nature of social structure.

Turner's works dealing with the religion of African communities could give insight into the present study. According to Turner (1957), the conflicts and order existing in society and the role rituals plays in relation to it are important. The symbolism dominant in the rituals also helps in understanding the structure of the society which practices rituals with high degree of symbolism (Turner 1967). Turner (1969) also deals with the relation between rituals and status of individuals in society. Another important element that comes under the scope of present study is Turner's work on performance aspect of ritual (Turner 1982).

Geertz's (1973, 1976) interpretive studies together with Turner's (1967) became one of the chief methods of inquiry in the anthropological studies on religion and ritual for several decades and their methods provide a good model in understanding the meaning of religious rituals which are highly packed with various symbols. Geertz has also proposed a definition for religion based on his studies, in his essay 'Religion as a cultural system' (Geertz 1973: 90). Geertz here emphasizes on what religion does, and

this is helpful in the present study as it tries to understand the overall function of ritual in society. 'The religion of Java,' (Geertz 1976) apparently one of the most important works of Geertz clearly portrays his method with elaborate descriptions of various rituals. This study consists of various rituals in relation with their symbolic meaning and the people participating in it. Through the elaborate detailing and analysis Geertz tries to find out the roles rituals plays in society towards its integration.

Catharine Bell (1997) made a careful analysis of the anthropological tradition in the study of religious rituals and identified the general characteristics of rituals and developed a systematic classification of rituals. Bell found six characteristics of rituals and states that every ritual shows these general characteristics. The six characteristics according to Bell are, Formalism- an emphasis on specific rules and codes, Traditionalism- a consistency to the older practices, Invariance- the precise repetition and physical control, Rule-governance- the specific rules and traditions associated with rituals, Sacred symbolism- wide range of symbols associated with the system, and finally Performance- the way of acting out of carrying out of rites. This typology based on characteristics of ritual would help a researcher who is trying to explore a religious ritual in its entirety.

Brian Morris has made a number of works on the anthropological studies on religion and at least two of them are significant in the present study. His works, *Anthropological studies of religion: An introductory text* (1987) and *Religion and anthropology: A critical introduction* (2006) are the two which requires special mention. When the former deals with the major theoretical approaches towards religion, the latter is important for the discussions on various religions around the world. His discussion on Hinduism (Morris 2006: 112-145) could be considered as a brief introduction to the religion in India while dealing with the case of *kaliyattam*. Another important work that has equal importance as that of Morris (1987) in dealing with the fundamental concepts and theories in anthropology of religion is the one authored by Fiona Bowie (2006). These works, among others provides a strong background in the present study.

Anthropology and Rituals

Ritual forms a significant part of human activities and we encounter with various types of rituals in several instances in life. Scholars identify and typologically arrange systematically repeating human activities as rituals and make groupings such as political,

religious, secular, and so on (Bell 1997). In whatever group it may fall a ritual usually consists of an act verbal or non-verbal which make some sense to the audience or participants in the particular event where the ritual act is being made. Coming to religious rituals, scholars have made a series of accounts on the definition, meaning and the function by specializing in the rites, acts or performance associated with religious activities.

According to John Beattie (1966) a ritual is something which is expressive and symbolic in nature and it contrasts with activities in science with its irrational procedures. Catherine Bell identifies ritual as an 'action' and in religious systems, it is contrasted with beliefs, symbols, and myths which are the conceptual aspects (Bell 1992). Most of the definitions of religious rituals portray the symbolic and communicative nature of such acts. For example, Gordon George (1956: 117) defines ritual as a 'form of communication with profound social consequences,' and for him, a ritual is just a symbol. Jennings (1982) also supports the idea of symbolic nature of ritual and proposes that it is a way of transmitting and gaining knowledge through a display of performance involving various participants and observers. David Cheal (1992) emphasizes on the communicative aspect that produces a sense of unity among the participants.

The conflicting accounts of scholars on the primacy of religious ritual and belief were a major theme in the earlier days of the studies. When people like Tylor and Frazer proposed that it is the belief that is the base of the religious system, others like Robertson-Smith argued for the primacy of rituals over belief. Though these opposing arguments are difficult to find a clear answer, it is interesting to note the comment of E. Shils (1968: 736) that 'belief could exist without rituals; ritual, however, could not exist without belief,' which clarifies the relative position of belief and rituals or in other words the conceptual aspect versus act.

Durkheim (1915) suggests that religion consists of both beliefs and rites which represent the sacred and the action aspects of religion. He notes that the 'ritual as the means by which collective beliefs and ideals are simultaneously generated, expressed, and affirmed as real by the community' (as quoted in Bell 1992: 20). Radcliffe-Brown (1952) proposes the idea of certain sentiments that exists in the minds of people and religious rites are the symbolic expression of such sentiments and through participation and sharing people produce some kind of togetherness. Here Radcliffe-Brown states that the 'action or need of action' as the base of religion where belief comes only after such

expressive action –the ritual. Rather than focusing on what is a religious ritual (the definition), for most of the scholars preferentially focused on what it does (the function). Most of the earlier works that followed the functionalist paradigm had tried to find out the purpose -what a ritual is for the people and how it works. Earlier notable works on sacrificial rituals (Robertson Smith 1889; Hubert and Mauss 1898; Freud 1913) suggested that it is an avenue where people make contact with gods. Sociological tradition in the study of religion pioneered by Durkheim, Weber etc. produced accounts of the role of rituals in creating unity and solidarity among the people through the collective performance of religious rituals.

Theme of the present research

This study focuses on the religious performance called *kaliyattam* and its main ritual of theyyam which is observed by people belonging to Hindu religious fold in northern Kerala. According to the belief systems, the ritual consists of descending of a deity to the devotees as god itself through the performers, the propitiation of the deity. The theyyam, which are the gods for the people, generally have stories behind them which explains the life of a person (either male or female) who is none other than a common individual but possessing some special character and due to some specific incidents ascend into divine status after death. There are several groups of theyyam based on the life they lived as a human. Some theyyam are war heroes, some are downtrodden who are murdered by masters, and others may be innocent people who are happened to be victimized by powerful authorities in the society. The pantheon is broad and there are several theyyam who have completely mythical backgrounds and many having stories that are connected to the Vedic Hinduism. Theyyam has special significance in the society for the matters which it portrays and symbolizes. The caste system in the region can be correlated to the ritual based on the ritual duties hereditarily ascribed on each of them. Such duties often reflect the social and economic history of each of the castes. As all the performing communities fall under the untouchable strata of the caste system and a majority of the cults has myths, folktales and stories of victimization by the furious behaviour of upper caste authorities, a voice of protest and resistance is a common theme of theyyam. Based on these premises the present study tries to explore into the depths of social statics and dynamics by tracing though the ritual of *kaliyattam* and the themes of theyyam, in relation to the political, economic and cultural aspects of people's life across time.

***Kaliyattam* and theyyam**

While discussing about the culture of such castes as Thiyya, Vannan, and Malayan of Malabar Thurston describes about *kaliyattam* in various contexts. According to him,

‘The washermen (Vannan) are the high priests of this (devil-charming) superstition, and with chants, ringing cymbals, magic figures, and waving lights, they drive out evil spirits from their votaries of this caste (Tiyan) at certain epochs in their married lives. One ceremony in particular, called *teyyattam*, a corrupt form of Deva and *attam*, that is, playing at gods –takes place occasionally in the fifth month of pregnancy. A leafy arbour is constructed, and in front of it is place a terrible figure of Chamundi, the queen of demons, made of rice flour, turmeric powder, and charcoal powder. A part of not less than eighteen washermen is organized to represent the demons of furies Kuttichattan (a mischievous imp), and many other. On being invoked, these demons bound on to the stage in pairs, dance, caper, jump, roar, fight, and drench each other with saffron (turmeric) water. Their capers and exertions gradually work up their excitement, until they are veritably possessed of the devil. At this juncture, fowls and animals are sometimes thrown to them, to appease their fury. These they attack with their teeth, and kill and tear as a tiger does its prey. After about twenty minutes the convulsions cease, the demon or spirit declares its pleasure, and, much fatigued, retires to give place to others.’ (Thurston 2013. vol 7: 36-116)

This elaborate description of Thurston gives a basic idea about the whole event of *kaliyattam* and the deities. It is clear from this description that various castes in the region were practitioners of this religious activity. The belief in supernatural beings and the nature of worship as explained by Thurston have not undergone much changes in the present days also. At the same time, Thurston, among other foreign narrators are now a days being criticized for the high ethnocentrism in their narrations. The theyyam were considered as evil spirits and practices as barbaric by the early writers.

An eminent folklorist Payyanad considers theyyam as a religion of the native people of northern Kerala which he explains as,

‘Teyyam is the sum total of the belief system, the mythology and religious factors regarding the local Gods and Goddesses. There are more than 300 Gods/ Goddesses with their own mythology that narrates how a particular deity

originated, its journey from place to place and how it got the right to have ritual performances in different shrines... mythology as well as belief system are latent in the minds of the people which are expressed through the ritual performances of the local God/ Goddess.’ (Payyanad 2001: 11)

For Tarabout (2005: 187), Teyyam (or Theyyam) is a ritual. According to the author,

‘Teyyam (‘deity’) is a village, family or caste cult celebrating localized deities. It is also called *teyyattam* (‘dance of the deity’) or *kaliyattam* (‘play-dance’), as well as other names. As part of the ceremonies, the god or goddess is incorporated temporarily in a male specialist who is said to be possessed and who speaks as the deity itself.’ (Tarabout 2005: 187)

Wayne Ashley (1979: 100) discusses theyyam in terms of ‘a highly structured ritual folk performance’ called *teyyam kettu*, meaning ‘to prepare the god.’ According to Ashley, theyyam which is also known by names like *teyyattam*, *tereyattam*, is a ‘colloquial expression which means gods and generally refers to numerous spirits, ancient heroes, ancestors and various Puranic deities.’ Ashley also observes that that ‘teyyam kettu is not an isolated phenomenon but a complex which has continued to incorporate different deities, rituals, and symbols over the past several centuries.’

Kathleen Gough in her discussion about cults of Nayar (1958) also mention about theyyam. According to Gough, Nayars, who worship their lineage ancestors very commonly throughout Kerala worship certain alien ghosts too. She notes that,

‘Nayars believe that the spirits of persons of any caste who died prematurely from epidemic, accident, murder, or suicide can bring misfortune to the living. Such ghosts, which I call alien ghosts, haunt the neighborhood where they died and are particularly malevolent. The misfortunes they inflict include many kinds of sickness, madness, female barrenness, cattle deaths, house fires, or poltergeist activities.... In Kottayam, there is an elaborate cult of certain particularly important ghosts, which are called *teyyams* (a corruption of the Sanskrit word *deva* or ‘god’).’ Gough (1985: 463).

In the introduction to Dinesan’s book (2014) Rajan Gurukkal says that though one could count around five hundred theyyam in hundreds of shrines in North Malabar, structurally there are only five theyyam. They are *daivam* (god), *manushyan* (human),

bhootham (spirit), *janthu* (animal) and *maram* (tree). Again, in *daivam* there are two groups *naattudaivam* (*pachakkettu*) the village deities and *pauranikam* (*puranakkettu*) the gods from epics, and in both there are males and females. Similarly, there are male and female *bhootham* and the group of animals includes snakes too. All the theyyam are gods made in man by covering (imparting) the humane figure with *aniyalam* (makeup and paraphernalia) and imparts and raise divinity by the process of *thottam*. Gurukkal finds the base of theyyam in worshipping system of tribal people. According to him, the theyyam in the present form might have emerged during the time of *jati-janmi-naduvazhi* system or roughly the feudal time. The feudal lords and authorities structured the *thottam*, *aniyalam*, *kettiyadal* and *anushtaanareethi* in such a way that can go in tandem with their own needs. Gurukkal asserts that the present day theyyam is neither tribal nor folk; instead it is a classic ritual art (cf. Dinesan 2014: 12-13).

Review of literature

Though a preliminary survey of the literature related to theyyam results in a pile of works, contribution by professional anthropologists makes a small number. Researches based on folklorist approach emerged in the late seventies and eighties produced a good collection of data mostly by local experts in regional language. Such accounts majorly deal with the deity of ‘theyyam’ and its associated rituals and performances and generally gave little attention to the ritual of *kaliyattam*. M. P. Damodaran is an anthropologist from Kerala who tried to find out how the religious ritual theyyam (*teyyam* as the author uses) came to be used to reconstruct the history of North Malabar. According to the author, theyyam gives ‘a real portrait of socio-political and economic activity of North Malabar’ (Damodaran 2008: 283). He observes that the entire participants of the event could be classified based on the *varna* system and classifies entire participants into three groups of organizers, devoted spectators, and performers and explains the nature of caste in each of these groups. The author observes various realities in society, the caste discrimination, purity- pollution concepts, social hierarchy and views all forms of social evils portrayed in theyyam as an indicator of the social life existed in the olden days (Damodaran 2008: 287).

Dilip M. Menon (1993) defines theyyam as a folk dance and observes that one of the main characteristics of the stories behind theyyam is the conflict between lower and upper castes. The violence and the performance involve the protest by the suppressed against the oppressors. A *tharavadu* which is an extended lineage household of the upper

castes was the main centre of authority and he describes how the higher caste authorities having high power associated with *tharavadu* discriminated the lower caste people. The author also explains how such kind of caste conflicts came to an end in the thirties and forties, and moreover land reforms and other social movements reduced the economic, political and ritual power of the elite upper castes. According to Menon the rituals as a mode of protest by the lower castes against the upper caste became less significant with growing social status of the oppressed. The rituals then became used for facing daily hardship, reducing anxiety and to ward off diseases like small pox; and the performance became more artistic with increased aesthetic elements.

Komath (2013) in his study on socio-economic aspects of theyyam gives an auto-ethnographic account of theyyam. The author himself is a theyyam performer belonging to the Malayan community and has done several performances from his teenage years onwards. His work portrays how a family of theyyam performing community is being a part of the entire event as well as the society. This study is significant for its prime reason for being an auto-ethnography and also due to the detailed description of rituals and various non-ritualistic activities associated with the life of a theyyam performer. In his study, Komath observes the 'sociality of the ritual' and 'subjectivity of theyyam' and according to him, in the contemporary times, the theyyam 'dancer' is becoming 'artists' due to the process of transition in theyyam from a religious-ritual position to an entertainment oriented performing art. He says, 'theyyam as a form of worship has redefined itself to adopt the changing nature of time and space, which shifts its earlier identity as a static form of ritual into an object of marketable aesthetic performance' (Komath 2013: 281).

In the study by Pillai (1994) theyyam is analysed for its elements of drama and theatre. The author observes that though theyyam is a ritual, there is a good deal of theatrical elements embedded in it. By analysing several specific theyyam and characters portrayed in it, the author observes that the event obviously consists of theatrical and entertainment dimensions. According to Pillai, several of the expressions by theyyam have considerable similarities with the traditional Sanskrit theatre and various aspects of acting that dealt in the *Natyasastra*. The costumes, decoration materials, makeup, language and music clearly indicate that theyyam is more than mere ritual, the author argues. According to him, 'the character is imposed on 'the actor' in theatre, while 'God' is imposed on the performer in theyyam' (Pillai 1994: 104).

Bruce M. Sullivan (1997) while studying the performances of various kinds of says that care should be taken to clearly distinguish ritual and non-ritualistic performances. In Kerala, there are several events which are conducted in the temple premises and often the difference between them are so narrow that it is difficult for one who does not belong to the region and aware of the cultural practices to define whether it is a ritual or an entertainment performance. Again, considerable religious elements will be associated with performances which are non-ritualistic. Kutiyattam (also spelled as Koodiyattam), Kathakali, Nangyarkuthu etc. are some such performances which are mostly over emphasized for its religiosity due to their close association with temple spaces and settings. Sullivan makes such a study of the very old Sanskrit drama Kutiyattam, in which he observes the high level of religious elements in the performance even to an extent that the performer reaches a status of an incarnation of god and the audience becomes the devotees worshipping the god descended in front of them through the performer. Mundoli Narayanan (2006) criticizes the over ritualization of the traditional drama of Kutiyattam. According to him, the western researchers are often confused with the rites associated with Indian performing arts which are in close association with temples. In India, any form of artistic abilities is considered as divine and people impart the presence of godly elements in arts, considering art as a boon of god. In addition, use of sacred lamps and prayers were done as a part of performance are misinterpreted as the entire performance is some kind of religious ritual activity. The observation of Sullivan and the counter argument by Narayanan in case of Kutiyattam is very important when conducting a study on rituals like theyyam which has considerable elements of drama in it even though it is considered as a religious ritual primarily.

There are instances when theyyam is studied in the context of theatre. Wayne Ashley and Regina Holloman (1982) describes one such case in which the story of one of the most important and popular theyyam the Muchilottu Bhagavathi is made into a drama by a theatre group in northern Kerala. This drama had the same plot of the story as followed by the theyyam, but the drama drew immense criticism over the way by which it portrayed the young beautiful lady protagonist who later rose to the divine status. This incident of conflict between Vaniya caste people (the main believers and conductors of the particular theyyam of Muchilottu Bhagavathi) and the creators of the drama are analysed by authors with the help of efficacy/ entertainment scheme developed by Schechner (1974). The authors extend their analysis on the performance of theyyam

outside the religious shrine like that in tourist festivals, political campaigns and meetings especially by the Communist Party in the region. The essay makes a statement that “there is no sharp line dividing genres of performances which are efficacious from those which are entertaining and, in some instances, there is disagreement over what is permissible to transfer from one genre to another. Fluctuation and overlapping describe the performative field which exists in Kerala today (Ashley and Holloman 1982: 72). This particular work was done in the early eighties and there are drastic changes happened over the decades on the matter concerned. There are heated debates happening among every section of society, the conductors, spectators, devotees, and performers about the possible changes that can be applied in theyyam. The society is roughly divided into two in which one group strongly stand to keep theyyam as pure ritual and against any performances outside the shrine premises and deviation from the traditional customs and norms whereas the second group welcomes the change and look forward to performing theyyam outside the traditional space and time. This is exactly the debate coming under the dyad of efficacy versus entertainment scheme developed by Schechner (1974) in the study of rituals. Brian Singleton (2001) describes another instance of use of theyyam in theatre where he discusses the work of drama artist K. N. Panikkar and his drama “*Teyyateyyam*” which portrays the story of a theyyam performer.

There are a set of works done on theyyam performing communities which are basically ethnographic accounts of the caste people. Y.V. Kannan himself was a theyyam performer belonging to the Vannan community and his works on the rituals of theyyam covers each and every aspect of theyyam ritual in general and about the contribution of Vannan community in particular (2007, 2011). The works deals with such aspects as the social and cultural aspects of the community, various theyyam performed by them and its associated rituals. Moreover, it touches upon aspects like makeup, decoration, music, songs of theyyam, and also the history of theyyam. These works are important for its authenticity of description by one belonging to the performing community, which gives an emic perspective about the ritual. There is also an account of the influence and significance of theyyam in the society and the changing nature of the events in the contemporary times. Malayan is another important theyyam performing community and Philomina (2012) had made a detailed account of this community which covers the social and cultural life of Malayan theyyam performers. It discusses such aspects as the artistic and material culture of the community. In addition to specialisation in theyyam ritual

Malayan is also famous for their activities related to magic, sorcery, and traditional medicine. The theyyam of Malayan draws special attention for their aesthetics in performance. Many a times people place Malayan as the best musicians and artists in the whole group of theyyam performers. There is similar work of ethnographic nature on other major theyyam performing communities like Munnoottan (Sathyanarayanan 2012) and Koppalar (Rajan 2014) which covers the social and cultural aspects at the same time giving considerable emphasize on their theyyam and culture associated with it.

Significance of the Study

So far numerous studies have been done on the performing ritual of *kaliyattam* in northern Kerala and such studies spread over several disciplines like folklore, theatre and performing arts, history, literature etc. Such studies have covered several aspects from the songs, drama of the performance, caste and social relations, economic aspects, and also its relations with other disciplines through comparative studies. Several scholars have done works which are exploratory and descriptive that analyses the event in detail. It should be noted that though scholars of various specialization approached *kaliyattam* in general and theyyam in particular in various ways, studies from anthropological perspective are very less and studies done by professionally trained anthropologists using anthropological approaches and methods are even less which makes this present study significant.

After a survey of various available secondary sources related to *kaliyattam* and theyyam what is understandable in the insufficiency of in-depth anthropological studies. Among all these mentioned works very few can be considered as ‘anthropological’ produced by specialised anthropologists. Though this is the case, many of the works contains ethnographies on the ritual as well as regarding various participating castes.

The present study is concentrated in the two districts of northern Kerala, namely Kannur and Kasaragod where *kaliyattam* and its main ritual of theyyam dance is practiced. The unique social and cultural scenario of these North Malabar districts when compared to other parts of the state is also significant here. The research gives an in-depth insight into the religious belief system, nature of rituals existing in the region and the intercommunication between the belief systems, rituals and the society. Though there is a wealth of literature available in text as well as visual documents, contribution by systematic studies are very less and works based on anthropological perspective which

is of utmost importance in case of events like this having crucial socio-cultural, economic and political implications is even lesser in number. In this particular juncture, a systematic and detailed ethnographic research work which covers the whole universe around *kaliyattam* to understand its significance, structure, and meaning and how it works in the society is very significant.

Statement of the Problem

The present work is an attempt to understand the role of rituals in society. The detailed study of rituals of specific communities and the analysis of the ritual and participation and interdependence of various communities in this ritual from an anthropological perspective is the core concern of this work. The function and meaning of the elaborate ritual performed by various communities which falls in the lower strata of the Hindu caste hierarchy and their distinctiveness as a folk religious type of belief system will be subjected to research. Though the preliminary emphasis is on the ritual aspect of *kaliyattam*, aesthetic elements of music, painting, myths and associated oral literature which takes a purely religious ritual into a work of art are also important. Moreover, in recent times, there exists a persisting debate over the ‘ritual’ versus ‘art’ character of theyyam, and the distinct notions in which one group considering *kaliyattam* as pure religious ceremony which should be performed by following all traditional norms and customs in the prescribed space and time and the other group trying to take theyyam out of the customary space and time to an ‘audience’ by exploiting the artistic and theatrical elements of theyyam. In this context, it is very important to scrutinize the event using anthropological perspective for a better understanding of how ‘rituals’ functions in society.

Research Objectives

The present study entails a detailed ethnographic understanding of the role of rituals in society focusing mainly on *kaliyattam* in North Malabar. The research addresses three main objectives. The study firstly tries to understand the entire belief system associated with *kaliyattam* ritual and the theyyam deities. An exploration of the social organization and institutions like economy, power, and caste system are dealt with in detail. Here, the ritual performance is seen as encompassing a set of techniques to affect the identity of participants – away from individuality, and by communal demarcation of a symbolic territorial model in space or time.

Secondly, the research tries to understand the complete process of organization and conduction of *kaliyattam* as a religious ceremony. A special emphasis is given to the status and roles of main ritual participants in this context. Thirdly, the study tries to understand various social and cultural aspects associated with *kaliyattam* and the changes undergone by the ritual. An understanding of communicative and non-religious dimensions of the ritual in the present context is also emphasized in this study. Thus, it aims to see the form of *kaliyattam* also as autonomous, as relatively independent of meaning, and probes the way in which the elements of ritual get integrated into both religious and secular settings.

Through these objectives, the study tries to reveal the role of *kaliyattam* as a religious ritual and as a secular symbol of various socio-cultural dimensions in the society selected for the study. The change in meaning, structure and function of the ritual are explored when it is shifted from the traditional symbolic territories of designated ‘sacred spaces,’ and is brought into the public space.

Theoretical framework and guiding principles

The overall study is divided into four stages which cover aspects from identification of the ritual to the analysis of the functioning of ritual. In the first step of the research, the ritual of *kaliyattam* and its associated rites and acts are identified. For this, the five characteristics of rituals according to C. Bell (1997) will be used. On the identification of characteristics of the rituals and associated acts, the meaning of various symbols and the acts of the ritual are analysed based on symbolic and interpretive paradigm. This includes the myths associated with each of the performing cults, verses, spells, and liturgies associated with each theyyam and general rules and codes in carrying out the ritual.

After interpreting the meaning of the ritual, the study looks at a broader context of the social organization level in which various caste groups and communities and their relationships are a part. Here, specialization of particular castes in matters of performance, conductance, and other related activities associated with the event are analysed. Investigations at the organizational level is in a diachronic manner to incorporate the inevitable changes happening to ritual. Last, but not the least, the study explores the overall functioning of religious rituals in a society and the process by which a people create and recreate a religious belief system for their own needs.

As the event is basically connected to religion, the study uses various theories of anthropological and sociological perspective on religion and rituals which are relevant in the context. Some of the important such perspectives are already discussed in the introductory parts of this chapter. As theyyam is deeply rooted in various myths and legends, analysis requires anthropological concepts on myths and due to high extend of symbolism embedded in the event theoretical framework of symbolic and interpretive anthropology is a major scheme throughout the study. Discussions on non-religious aspects of theyyam, the artistic and entertainment aspects and the concepts of aesthetics are supposed to have a backup of the entertainment-efficacy dyad scheme in the study of performing rituals.

Fieldwork and data collection

The research is mainly qualitative in nature. A detailed ethnographic survey is the backbone of the entire research and it is achieved through the use of various anthropological methods. The study is not restricted to any particular rite or ritual, rather the event as a whole, including all the religious rituals happening as well as non-religious activities around the core ritual will be taken into consideration.

The study is based on an in-depth field work based data collection with the used of various anthropological methods, tool and techniques. During the fieldwork the study has adopted such methods as observation, interviewing and case study for primary data collection. Participant as well as non-participant observation were done especially while dealing with the ritual. Interviews of structured and semi-structured types were of most usefulness throughout the fieldwork. In addition, unstructured interviews and conversations were also did for extended periods of time with the informants. Case studies are used while dealing with specific events like *kaliyattam* in specific shrines or in case of themes like animal sacrificial rituals or feasts. Life history method was the key one for the data collection from ritual performers. In the case of secondary data collection literature surveys are done.

The fieldwork has also made use of a number of tools and techniques for data collection. Notes are prepared during interviews, discussions and observations. The conversations are recorded in audio format. The ritual being a highly performative one, visual documentation was very much important. The rituals are recorded in video and an

extensive collection of photographs were also made during fieldwork. These documents were used extensively while writing the ethnography.

The field work was done in two stage, which began with a preliminary fieldwork for gathering basic information regarding the topic under investigation. This pilot study was conducted after a seven-month study of secondary materials available in the forms of text, video and photographs on the topic and a detailed reading of anthropological theory as well as similar anthropological works which are necessary in guiding the study forward was made. The pilot study was done for two months, February 2016 to March 2016. During this time, the researcher has travelled across the two northern districts of Kannur and Kasaragod to observe the rituals and other activities to be studied. In both the districts, the researcher was able to attend several *kaliyattam* in varying scales in diverse shrines. During this time the researcher got introduced to a total new cultural experience involving the special religious activities as well as characteristic life style and culture of people in the region.

Good extent of time was spent in the field to meet people who are engaged in the ritual like theyyam performers, conductors, shrine owners, local experts and enthusiasts, devotees, and academic researchers. The extensive conversations with such people and direct observation of the rituals helped in getting a clear picture on the whole event, religious system and general life and culture of the people in the region.

Based on the contacts built with the people and understanding of the region, it had become necessary to select a more specific geographical region for easy fieldwork and also had to select a specific number of theyyam, performing communities and shrines of representative nature for practical reasons of completing the work in time. Payyannur, a revenue taluk in Kannur district is taken as the specific study area with its characteristic specialty in relation with the ritual. Payyannur has apparently the highest concentration of shrines of theyyam worship and the people in here follows a ritual tradition which is highly representative of the whole belief and practice. The town of Payyannur and the neighbouring villages showcases a plethora of dynamics in *kaliyattam* and theyyam.

The second phase of fieldwork started in the month of December 2016 and ended by September 2017. During this time necessary data required for the study are collected using various anthropological techniques. Contact with more informants is made and visited several shrines during the *kaliyattam* event.

At the field a total of about forty two shrines are visited to attend *kaliyattam* and observed more than hundred different theyyam. It was very common to witness one particular theyyam several times at different shrines. Theyyam like Vishnumoorthi, Rakthachamundi etc. are very common and could see them in many of the shrines. Different types of shrines visited include those with ownership of public, community and *tharavadu* or family. When some events are small scale with one or two theyyam, others were very elaborate with thirty or so different theyyam performing in the single event.

The study has also relied upon secondary resources to a limited extent. By collecting information from sources other than the primary one of direct interviews and participant as well as non-participant observation, like previously documented narrations and cyberspace which acts as an arena of people's discourses and participation, maximum inclusiveness is made. Individual as well as group accounts on the myths, rituals, practices, changes, or any aspect for that matter which are connected to this religious system is gathered and documented for the anthropological analysis that is what the researcher aiming in this study.

A note of nature of data and information gathering

The prime sources of information were obviously those people who are directly connected with the event. This includes theyyam performers (*koladhari*), priests and oracles, assisting groups in rituals, shrine authorities, and devotees. Direct interviewing of the individuals was the main mode of data collection from these groups of informants and parallel to this, whenever these conversations were happening at a *kaliyattam* space, close observation was also done, assisted by the informants.

From each of these groups, matters related to their roles in the event, their life, the community to which they belong, and also information on the interrelationship between communities are collected. For example, while conversing with a *koladhari* belonging to Vannan community, details on aspects like the theyyam he performs, various theyyam of Vannan community, on his group, his life history, social life among other communities/ castes etc. are collected. Similarly, from a priest (*anthithiriyar*) or from an oracle (*velichappadu*) his role in ritual is explored. Similarly, that of understanding the duty, role, status, and individual accounts of *kaliyattam*, theyyam and the overall religious system is arrived at. A key factor that was always related with all the informants were

the community affiliation, which is synonymous with the role assigned to them traditionally as well as their traditional occupation.

A second level of information to be gathered was on the shrines and its management. As each type of shrines has their own type of administrative body. It was from them the major information was collected. For example, from shrines like Madayikkavu, the shrine management committee is first contacted and basic information are collected. Usually these people who are engaged in the administrative matters have more authority. These administrators advise the ritual specialists in the shrine who have in-depth knowledge in various aspects of the shrine and the ritual to provide necessary information. Regarding community shrines and *tharavadu* shrines, in the former the committee members are contacted first and in the later elderly people in the family are met. In each case there are few knowledgeable persons in giving valuable information.

It was a very common experience that whenever the researcher meets shrine owners or management committee members, they used to give booklets that they published during the *kaliyattam* festival. They say that “*all the necessary information you needed are there in this.*” It was a fact that the basic and detailed matters regarding a shrine were there in such booklets called as ‘*smaranika*’ (souvenir) they publish as a part of *kaliyattam*. This includes the history and myths associated with the shrine and its theyyam, the details of rituals, key personalities associated with the shrine etc. In the case of *tharavadu* shrines details of the *tharavadu* also will be there. The authors of the content in such *smaranika* are of two categories, local experts and shrine committee and family members and experts who are scholars and academics who hail from the region with a good knowledge about the shrine and theyyam. The accounts of all such contributors are authentic and taken as important information in the present study. Wherever such documents are relied, all the information was cross checked with informants directly through discussion. Audio and video recordings, photographs etc. are made and these are used as major reference while discussing the whole event.

The extent to which people are becoming a part of this ritual event is so large and diverse. Internet facilities and social media platforms in it made people’s participation and association in the event much inclusive and wider. The websites, blogs, groups and pages in social media and personal accounts circulate a wealth of information regarding the whole system. This space offers a common platform for the engagement of people regardless of their place of living in a region where a considerable number of populations

forms a diasporic community. People share photographs, videos, audios, and text on theyyam, shrines, and related aspects in the social media platform in cyberspace. The contributors of the content are mostly young theyyam performers, local experts in the field, theyyam enthusiasts, and even researchers.

In the present study such cyberspace is used for its diversity and vastness of information it produces. This space and the people engaged in it itself formed a community from which several valuable data are gathered. At many instance discussions happened in the groups, on various related matters are followed carefully (e.g. on the use of theyyam in non-ritual aspects) and opinions of individuals are noted. As the number of individuals in these information platforms were in hundreds, having different backgrounds, the opinions they gave are diverse and were crucial in this study. Whenever required this space offered a chance to throw questions regarding any doubts or a matter to be enquired and the group members gave their individual answers. In this way social media platforms in cyberspace acted as a group of informants of diverse representativeness and as a good source of information.

It cannot be taken as a complete virtual world in which the researcher has no direct contact with the group members as informants, rather the researcher had direct contact with many of them personally. The discussions those happened in the cyberspace are occurred in real time too, between individuals who were meeting directly and the researcher was also a part of that, continuing the discussion in real time.

Seminars, conferences and workshops related to theyyam are also attended to get new perspectives on the system. A couple of notable such events were, a two-day seminar organized by folklore and cultural organizations in Payyannur happened during 22nd and 23rd of July 2017. In this seminar, several theyyam performers participated and presented their accounts in addition to research papers presented by scholars in theyyam. Screening of documentaries, discussions, etc. were conducted during the event all related to various aspects of theyyam. A second such gathering was a workshop, a '*theyyam padana kalari*', happened at Madayi organized chiefly by elderly theyyam performers. In this occasion, veteran theyyam performers took interactive classes to theyyam performers, a majority of them younger generation performers. The researcher attended this event as an observer among all theyyam performers to learn about the details of how theyyam performers study and circulate knowledge among themselves. The *thottam* of theyyam, music, makeup, *vaachal* etc. were the main themes of the event.

Both the above-mentioned meeting and other smaller one day gathering of cultural organizations on various matters like felicitation of veteran performers, commemoration gatherings of diseased performers, book release events of theyyam related publications etc. were also occasions where people who are connected to theyyam in various ways gathered and shared information. Attendance in such meeting gave a good opportunity in getting more detailed knowledge about the whole system. Discussions with other researcher, and authors on theyyam, who are dealing with diverse specializations resulted in getting an understanding on how academic and literary community deals with theyyam. Several of the key aspects as observations found in such discussions are also incorporated in the ethnography. Books and articles are referred to get information which is common to theyyam like information on myth, on ornaments, costumes, *thottam* etc. which are already documented and are mostly static. All such matters were cross checked directly in the field by conversing with informants and through observation.

Limitations and scope for further studies

In the present work the limitations could be seen in two aspects, both regarding the data as well as the theoretical analysis. Related to the various participating communities, not all of them are taken into detailed ethnographic study, rather the major focus was given to those which have more direct role in the ritual. If a complete consideration of all the communities in the study area had been considered the study would have become more complex and this complexity will reflect in the theoretical analysis too. This limitation can be overcome while doing further research on the topic in future.

The study does not focus on each and every aspects of the ritual to the bottom but specifically deals with those aspects which are relevant based on the objectives. Thus, one cannot find a detailing of the oral literature in the ethnography part, say for example, but only the discussion on it. In this way, this study emphasizes on a wider inclusiveness which is more apt while dealing with social relations between different groups rather than merely on the 'role' of specific groups of people or a particular ritual act.

Comparative analysis is a key part of anthropological research and related to this, the present study focussed more on the case of the ritual in North Malabar only. Similar rituals and belief systems can be seen in the neighbouring regions of central and southern parts of Kerala and south Canara of Karnataka state. Same is the case with certain rituals among Hindu population in the states of Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, and even

Assam. A comparative analysis which require an ethnographic study of those cases are actually beyond the scope of this research though it would have strengthened the validity of the findings.

Regarding the theory, the field of Anthropology of Religion is so enormous and so is the theories, concepts and paradigms. Consideration of multiple theories irrespective of the context and theme could have led to unwanted complexities. The present research has adopted very few, specific to the requirements to deal with necessary aspects and context. Nonetheless, considering the scope for elaborative studies in the future, the present study could act as a very thorough foundation.

Organization of the thesis

The thesis is organized into seven chapters beginning with an introduction to the studies on religion and society, progressing through the profile, core findings and analyses and ending with a summary and conclusion. In the first chapter an introductory note on anthropological approach to religious rituals is given. This is followed by a discussion on the particular ritual *kaliyattam*. A brief framework has been prepared to deal with the objectives of the study, with the methods and major techniques in the data collection process. A note was necessary about the fieldwork and data collection carried out because of the characteristic specialities and features of the problem being studied. A supportive note also has been given regarding the nature of the data which is used in the core chapters.

The second chapter deals with the profile of the area and context. This chapter actually has two subsections, the first one consists of a discussion about the general profile of the geographical setting and the people under study. In the social organizational aspects, the caste system in prevalence required special attention as it plays a pivotal role in the whole religious event. Closely associated with the caste system is its economic aspects, the occupational and other specializations in roles each community plays. This is also made into a discussion here. The second part of the chapter specifically focuses on the religious spaces, that is the shrines where the rituals are happening. What makes it important to give a special attention on this is the fact that there exists a plethora of different types of shrines based on the ownership to castes, communities and also the deities being worshipped in each. Thus, the first two chapters gives an idea on the

problem, the method, the approach, the theme and the context in which the present study is done.

The subsequent four chapters can be considered as the core chapters as they deal with the main focal point of the study and its relevant observations, discussion and analyses. Each of these chapters are thematically categorized, as belief system, the performance of the ritual, socio-cultural implications and lastly the socio-religious matters. On a closer look, the third chapter is dedicated to a discussion on the belief system of the religious phenomena associated with theyyam. A special focus on the narratives, as myths, legends, folktales related to various deities in the *kaliyattam* pantheon is portrayed here. By touching upon different types of the regional deities this section gives a detailed idea about what is ‘theyyam’ for the people in North Malabar.

The fourth chapter is an ethnographic study of the ritual of *kaliyattam* specifically. To get the maximum details the shrines are grouped into three types and among each ceremony happening are narrated in a detailed way. This includes such aspects as the nature of the costume, the songs, dance, and similar communicative elements of the ritual. Notes are also included on certain aspects like the feast and animal sacrifice which required special attention. The fifth chapter deals with a multitude of aspects which are related to the whole religious practice of *kaliyattam*. The key players of the ritual, the performers and their social life is discussed in the beginning. A performer’s life cycle, his achievements, payment system, etc. are the various themes in this chapter. Related to this, caste conflicts and certain practices which draws critical comments from society are also made into a note. This first section is followed by discussions on the implications of the religious practices in non-religious spheres of socio-cultural life of the people in the area. It covers matters like commercialization of rituals, the relationship between political parties and theyyam, influence of media including cyberspace and academic researches. This chapter also looks into a visible binary of belief versus entertainment in the social discourse.

Regarding the theme, the sixth chapter can be considered as an extension of the preceding one. This chapter, in a way, probes into the underlying dynamics the whole religious practices propagates in society. A much-debated dichotomy in anthropology of religion over the primacy of belief and ritual is contextualized in the first part. This is followed by an analysis of the communicative aspects of the ritual and meaning. The

relation between theyyam and Hinduism is also a major subtheme and is followed by the most key social factor of caste system.

The last chapter is the conclusion to the thesis. Beginning with a summary of the core chapters and its findings the first part deals with what this particular religious event of *kaliyattam* is for the people. An analytical discussion based on the major theoretical orientations and perspectives of anthropological approaches to the study of religion which are adopted in this research work is made. Observations are made in a comparative and analytical manner to find the essential role of rituals in the society, particularly the North Malabar.

Chapter Two

Land, Society and Cultural Context: North Malabar and its Sacred Places

To step forward to an analytical study of the rituals and practices of the people it is obvious to have factual information on the subject. Based on the various methods adopted in the data collection, a detailed ethnography is made which is presented in the following chapters. The present chapter discusses about the details of the topic, location and context where the study was carried out. Maximum effort is done in making the study inclusive so that it could represent the society characteristically. The inclusiveness is fundamentally on the community level or in other words on the basis of castes, which are actually a functional basic entity in the ritual event, based on their roles. The status and role of such representative units are observed in tandem with the belief system and performance of the role of each group in the ritual context. Rather than the present day political geographical limits, the olden day regional divisions were more based on the cultural parameters. This 'cultural parameters' obviously had connection to the political unit of that time, the princely states. The present study is done in a region which was once a part of the princely state of Kolathunadu. The particular belief systems and practices which are dealing in this study are observable in its high pitch in this particular area.

The geographic setting

Kerala is a state in the southwest coast of India, lying as a small strip of land entrapped between Arabian sea in the west and Western Ghats in the east. The region has a history spanning more than two millennia as evidenced by the megalithic remains. Earlier, a part of Tamilakom, the Dravidian autochthons of Kerala had well established trade relation between European, Mediterranean and Arab countries dating back almost to two thousand years. These contacts have led to the raise of considerable Muslim and Christian religions in the region. Small settlements of Jews were also developed during the olden days. Arrival of Brahmins from the north and the formation of their settlements (5th – 8th century A.D.) had a dramatic influence in the socio-cultural life of the people.¹

Colonialization in the sixteenth century and the subsequent political turbulences severely affected the land and its people. The local chiefdoms became less powerful both

in terms of political and economic sovereignty. After the independence in 1947, the region still remained divided into smaller states of Travancore, Kochi and Malabar. It was only on November 1st, 1956 the present-day political boundaries of Kerala developed after the reorganization of states in India based on linguistic basis. Though the major language is Malayalam a very small percentage of Keralites speak Kannada and Tamil, in the border regions.

The land which lie in the tropical region is endowed with great advantageous geographic and climatic conditions. The fertile soil, abundant water sources, the monsoon and the rich rainforests has nourished a distinctive life and culture among the inhabitants. With a relatively high population density, the state has a total population of around 34 million with a high sex ratio (1084 females per 1000 males) based on the 2011 census data. The state also shows high indices in human development generally and in particular regarding literacy. Kerala is one of the top states in India in terms of social welfare.

Regarding the religious composition also the state shows peculiarities unlike any states. According to 2011 census 54.73% of the population belongs to Hindu religion followed by considerable percentage of Muslims (26.56%) and Christians (18.38%). A small percentage of minority religions is also there like Sikh, Buddhist and Jain. Among its people 9.1% belongs to Scheduled Caste category and Scheduled Tribes constitute a small 1.5%.

Kannur and Kasaragod are the northern districts of Kerala. The name of the former is derived from a village named Kanathur in the same district while that of the later is derived from the name of a tree *kaasaraka* (*strychnos nus vomica*) which is abundant in the region. Most of the northern regions of Kasaragod was added to Kerala state from south Canara of Karnataka state during the reorganization of states. Kannur was a part of Malabar district of Madras state during British rule.

Kannur, about which we have more interest have a history going back to megalithic times which are proven by the remains of rock-cut caves, dolmens etc. Similar is the case with Kasaragod, both having a typical topography with abundant laterite rocks. Once a part of Chera kingdom during the initial centuries of present era, the region was also reigned by the local Kingdom of rulers named Kolathiri Rajas. The region has witnesses numerous movements and agitations against the British and have eventful stories related to nationalist Indian freedom movements and resistances and revolts against local chiefdoms and feudalism.

MAPS



Map 1: Map of Kerala state

(Courtesy: Maps of India <https://www.mapsofindia.com/maps/kerala/>)



Map 2: Kannur district

(courtesy Maps of India, <https://www.mapsofindia.com/maps/kerala/districts/kannur.htm>)

Kannur district has a population of about 2.5 million in which almost 60% following Hinduism followed by Muslim with a population of 29.43%. Christians, with a history of immigration from southern parts of Kerala to Malabar during the mid-20th century has a population of 10.41% in Kannur.

Once side-lined into the margins of socio-economic growth and development due to the remoteness from the political and economic capitals of Kerala which are concentrated in the southern and central parts, the present times is an era of emergence and development for Kannur and Kasaragod. The present study, as the key interest is on the religious ritual of *kaliyattam* looks into both the two districts but specially emphasizing on Kannur. The religious beliefs and practices do not follow changing contours of political boundaries and same is the case with the culture of the society in general. The cultural-geographical limits of the present study will be basing on the olden day kingdom of Kolathunadu, which could be identified with the North Malabar area in the present times.

The south west part of the Indian subcontinent has been known as Malabar from the medieval times. In the Kerala region the northern districts of the state are considered as the original Malabar including south Canara region of Karnataka. During the colonial times, under the British rule this region was a part of Madras Presidency as Malabar district. This consisted of the districts from Kannur in the extreme north to Palakkad including one coastal region of Thrissur district. The name Malabar means ‘hill-slope’ and it comes from the very geographical nature of the tilted land with hills on the eastern part and Arabian Sea on the west. In the local language ‘*mala*’ means hill and ‘*baram*’ is equivalent to ‘*varam*’ in local dialect which means slope and hence ‘Malabar’. During the British period, the capital of Malabar district was Calicut and in 1901 this district had an area of about fifteen thousand square kilometers with a population of about 2.8 million. After the independence there happened a reorganization of states based on language and in 1956, when the Kerala state formed, Kasaragod which was a part of Canara of Karnataka state was also added to Kerala. The erstwhile Malabar district got divided into three districts namely Kozhikode, Palakkad and Kannur in 1957. Later, two more districts were created from parts of Palakkad, Kozhikode and Kannur, namely Malappuram and Wayanad in 1969 and 1980 respectively. These districts of the present Kerala altogether form the Malabar in the olden times.

North Malabar

As it says, it is the northern region of Malabar and specifically it consists of parts of several districts in the present-day Kerala. The districts of Kasaragod and Kannur completely come under North Malabar². In addition to this, revenue taluks of Mananthavady of Wayanad district, Koyilandi and Vadakara of Kozhikode district and Mahe of the Union Territory of Puducherry together form the geo-cultural region of North Malabar. The geographical limit of this region has much significance. In the east and west, Western Ghats and Arabian Sea borders and in the south the river of Korappuzha (Kozhikode district). And similarly, in the north Manjeswaram river (Chandragiri River) acts as the boundary. In the olden days when the communication and transportation facilities were limited across all the four borders this isolated land gave rise to a peculiar culture of its own compared to the neighboring regions. That is, the North Malabar can be considered as a distinctive culture area.

North Malabar has a long history going back to two millennia and there are mentions about this region in the Tamil *Sangam* literature of South India. This land is

mentioned in a number of early Sanskrit texts like epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata.³ The region had connections to the old dynasties of Chera, Pandya and Cholas and even had contacts with the Canara region. The Mushika kingdom is the most significant one in its history being the first of its kind completely based in Kerala coast. Historical studies suggest that this dynasty was started by immigrants from northern part the subcontinent. Having an Aryan connection in origin and considerable influence of Jainism and Buddhism, this kingdom was more non-Dravidian in features compared to others in the region. The Sanskrit text named *Mushikavamsa* by the scholar Atula is the most important document on this dynasty. Compiled in the eleventh century this text mentions about the history of 118 kings. The king named Nannan was the most eminent ruler of this dynasty who reigned in the fifth century. At the hay days of this kingdom, it extended from Mangalore to Vadakara, that is the kingdom covered both Kannada and Tamil speaking communities (Menon 2008: 66-67). During the Sangam age, which extends to fifth century, the present-day Kerala was a part of Tamilakam and had a division of its territory into five parts based on the geographical features and topography⁴. The Malabar region consisted of parts of Kudanad and Karkanad and the whole of Puzhinad. The North Malabar almost completely comes under the last division of Puzhinad (Menon 2008: 65).

The chiefdom of Kolathunadu emerged from this Mushika kingdom in the later period (Menon 2008: 23). The centre of this chiefdom was at Chirakkal and the head of the state was called as Kolathiri or Kolathiri Raja and he is considered as the king of Kolathunadu. The chiefdom was also known by the name Kolath swaroopam, with an influence of Brahmin culture. Apart from the main lineage at Chirakkal there were a number of sub-chiefs in the neighboring regions. The chiefs at neighboring places like Nileswaram and the one at Arakkal are branches of the Chirakkal royal family.

The *tara* could be considered as the smallest unit in the political organization in Malabar. Ideally close to the feudal system each of the *tara* had a head from the major Nair family in the locality (Menon 2008: 216-224). Apart from the Nair chief, heads of major Thiyya families were part of it and also had participation of other communities who specialized in astrology, washing, gold smithy etc. The Nair headmen were the *karanavar* of the extended lineage family of *taravad* and those of the Thiyya are called as *thandan*, who also had a role of messenger. Each of such *tara* had an administration of its own and whenever necessary they communicate to the chief of next higher level of

territorial unit of *desam* (Thurston and Rangachari 2013. vol. 7: 42-50). At this level also, the top position with sovereignty of *koyma* was enjoyed by the head of Nair *taravad*.

Based on the early narratives, *desam* is the next higher-level unit of territoriality which is equivalent to village. These traditional villages had static social organization and were highly self-sufficient (Miller 1954: 412). Above the *desam* was *nadu* (chiefdom) which are formed by grouping a number of *desams* (villages). These chiefdoms were also stable units and were headed by Nair men who belonged to military class. Miller observes that the deities of village and *nadu* had much significance in the political power structure too. The power of the chiefs was connected to those of the gods and goddesses and festivals were conducted annually to appease these tutelary deities. Being the symbols of power occupation of one shrine of tutelary deity was considered as gaining control over the chiefdom or village during feuds (Miller 1954: 414). The present work will be dealing with the Thiruvarkkattu Bhagavathi at Madayi as the tutelary deity in Kolathunadu.

Religion and Caste system

Two key aspects which are relevant in the study of religion and society in Indian context are the caste system and the economic relation based on caste. Menon (2008: 83-96) gives a detailing about the religious system prevailed in the Malabar region. In the early days there was no specific well-developed religion in Kerala and mostly ancestor worship and totemic kind of practices were followed by the people. Worshipping of spirits which spread diseases, war deities, guardian spirits and demons formed the pantheon in the animistic type religion of the people. In addition, Menon also mentions about the nature of the worship and propitiations in which sacrificial rituals and dance formed significant part. Use of meat and country made liquor was also normal in such religious festivals. We can see that in the present time also several of these features and characteristics of the beliefs and practices continuing in North Malabar through *kaliyattam* rituals.

The major philosophical religions like Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism started its presence from fourth century B.C.E., in small scales. While the indigenous Dravidian religion was major one in the area, people in small numbers started following the philosophical religions too. A drastic change started to appear as the Hinduism headed by Brahmins started getting strength. After the Sangam era, which ended at around fifth century, Hinduism started acquiring more strength and by 8th century C.E. it reached a peak. The immigration of Brahmins was in groups and constituted new territories. Being

priests and religious experts, they started temples of Vedic gods like Vishnu and Siva, and also these acted as the centre of all political, economic and religious authority and power. Basing on the *chaturvarnya* (four-fold varna system) principles the new religion and their Brahmin heads were able to divide the society hierarchically, positing themselves at the top. The supremacy of the newcomers was not limited to religion. In political and economic spheres too they became dominant, by imposing their religious authority and supremacy over all ruling groups. With this came the purity and pollution norms and untouchability, unapproachability and unseeability⁵, all discriminating a large section of the society.

In the religious sphere also the new comers brought in changes. Apart from installing their own deities they were also successful in absorbing the local gods and goddesses. The case of Kottavai is an example for this. Once a local deity, this goddess had been absorbed to the Hindu pantheon as Durga, Kali and Bhagavathi. The Hinduism and the trend of Aryanisation also played a major role in the decay of Jainism and Buddhism.

The caste system has connections with the political authority, power, and economy and also to the religious system. Regarding the caste system of the North Malabar, it has nothing special regionally and is same all over Kerala. In the early centuries of the present era, caste-based division was not present in the region. Though there were occupational specializations and divisions no differentiation in social status existed. From the advent of the Brahmins from north India the caste system actually begun in this area and the hierarchical division of society in terms of caste became a fact⁶.

The medieval centuries were characterized by the presence of a feudal mode of economic system. The historical understanding of those days can be obtained from the accounts of travelers like Duarte Barbosa, Shaik Zainuddin etc. The folklore also possesses a rich information about the social life of the people. The *Vadakkanpattukal*, the Northern Ballads has a prime importance in this respect. The rulers of these areas were known as *Naduvazhi*, mostly belonging to powerful Nair families.

There are numerous studies which discusses about the caste system of Kerala in general and religious, economic, or political aspects in particular. For example, Rao (1985) explains about the caste system of Kerala by focusing on the hierarchies, pollution etc. C. J. Fuller's (1992) study dealt with the Nair similar to what Kathleen Gough (1958) did in her studies. While studying the agriculture backwardness of Malabar, Prakash

(1988) discusses about the caste system in the region and its typical features and structure.

‘The Nambudiri Brahmins, descendants of Aryan settlers of Malabar, were able to introduce a caste system in which they installed themselves as undisputed masters in the society. Castes were arranged in a hierarchical order from the highest and most sacred to the lowest and least worthy. Caste system also recognized caste pollution. Every man considered himself polluted by the touch of one of a lower caste, and there were castes low in social scale which mutually conveys pollution to each other. Again, there was a recognized scale of distance at which members of each of the polluting castes must stand from a man of higher caste or his house.’ (Prakash, 1988: 66)

Kathleen Gough had studied extensively about Nair of Kerala (Nayar as she uses) and according to her,

‘The Nayars are a high, matrilineal caste of landholders and salaried workers. Some four to seven matrilineal lineages of commoner Nayars traditionally occupied the high caste area of a village. They served a Nayar or Namboodiri Brahman village headman, and had authority over tenants, artisans, and serfs of lower castes... The more significant economic unit was a lineage segment (*taravad*), whose members jointly owned property including an ancestral house. The eldest man of this group was its legal guardian (*karanavan*).’ (Gough 1958: 446)

According to Miller,

‘The Indian caste system, as generally understood, is a system of relationships between stable groups which are largely interdependent, both economically and ritually, and which are arranged in a rigid and accepted order of ranking that is expressed in almost every phase of their interrelations.’ (Miller 1954: 410)

Miller was basing this idea to analyse the caste system in Malabar to see how the aspects of territorial segmentation is closely connected to the caste system. Based on this Miller finds that in the top sections of the caste hierarchy they have higher mobility and spatial range of inter-caste relations and both gets diminished down the strata. Miller has also explained about the caste system in terms of its importance of inter-caste relations and structure of hierarchy. He observes that,

‘The caste system of Malabar was a system of mutually interdependent relations between relatively stable groups, there being arranged in an accepted order of

ranking that governed and was expressed by almost all their interaction.’ (Miller 1954: 419)

The native people of the region were mainly consisted of the Hindu religious followers (those who originally practiced folk religion, which later incorporated to Hindu fold) and have a considerable percentage of Muslims also. The presence of Muslims is attributed to the contact with the Middle East through trade relations. The Arakkal family was one of the most prominent Muslim ruling families that existed in the North Malabar and it was formed when one king of Chirakkal royal lineage embraced Islam.

While discussing about the history of Kerala one could not neglect the text of ‘Keralolpathi’ which explains about a myth on the origin of this land. Menon (2008: 25) by quoting William Logan says that whatever said in this work is not at all factual, but was created by Brahmins for themselves to acquire power over this territory and its people. According to the text, Parasurama, one of the incarnations of Lord Vishnu reclaimed this land from sea and invited Brahmins and other ruling families to live here. The early history says that there were sixty-four Brahmin villages in this region, settled closed to different rivers. Out of these, two are in the North Malabar region namely Payyannur and Talipparamba, the later was known as Perinchelloor in the olden times. The coming of a second group of Brahmins in North Malabar is related to the ritual of ‘*hiranyagarbha*’ which was conducted by the then Kolathiri Raja named Udayavarman. In the ritual, which is intended to upgrade the status of a person to *kshatriya* required specialized Brahmins and in 1617 A.D. the Raja invited a large number (around 237 families) of Shivalli Brahmins to Kolathunadu and they were given with several temples and large area of land.

Castes system in Malabar

The hilly areas of Western Ghats were a considerably populated region from the ancient and early medieval times. The Sangam literature explains about different types of geographies or ecological terrains each of which connected to particular type of subsistence patterns that spread across the region from hill to the coast (Gurukkal, 2012: 36). The social organization among this people were mostly clan based. This small level socio-political organizations evolved into more complex form, passing through larger units with characteristics of chiefdom, called as *nadu* and to the final formation of even larger princely states.

The religious practices of the indigenous people were not as sophisticated as that of the Vedic Hinduism and can be considered as a kind of folk religious type with extensive animistic worship practices. In India, we can have a folk part of the Hinduism all over the country. Blackburn (1985) makes observations about this religious tradition which go together under the broad spectrum of Hinduism. For him,

‘The “folk” part of folk Hinduism depends primarily on two factors: local control and prominence among certain social groups. As to the first, in folk Hinduism participants and patrons tend to come from a geographically limited area and to be, in fact, the same group.... By contrast nonfolk festivals are usually controlled by a trust of far-flung, wealthy donors or by a governmental board that does not participate directly in the ceremonies. Folk Hinduism also has a distinct sociological dimension in that it tends to be found at the middle and low levels of the caste and class hierarchies. High status groups sometimes do patronize or participate in folk Hinduism, but this is atypical, and Brahmin participation is extremely rare.’ (Blackburn 1985: 257)

Regarding the caste composition, Thiyya is the most dominant caste in North Malabar in numerical strength and they are related to the Ezhava in central and southern parts of Kerala. This early settler is considered as native to the region because of their long history here. Thurston writes about this caste as, ‘the Tiyyans, and Izhavans or Iluvans, are the Malayalam toddy-drawing castes of Malabar, Cochin, and Travancore. The Tiyyans have been summed up as the middle class of the west coast, who cultivate the ground, take service as domestics, and follow trades and professions -anything but soldiering, of which they have utter abhorrence’ (Thurston and Rangachari 2013. vol. 7: 36-116).

As the author notes, the major economic activity of this caste is toddy-tapping and production of coconut produces. They were also engaged in agriculture activities mainly in dry lands, in garden farming, cash crop cultivation etc. Being a middle level group in social status and playing an intermediary role between the castes above and below them in hierarchy, they had a voice in social and political matters, though minimal and lesser to the Nair above them, but definitely higher than the untouchables below. Thiyya caste is apparently a chief one that made a substantial social progress over the course of time and climbed upwards considerably in the social strata, mainly in the twentieth century.

Similar to other castes in North Malabar, Thiyya community has also had internal divisions in kinship terms and they are considered as *ettillam*, based on eight major lineages⁷. Even today, elderly members of the community claim their lineage affiliation to these exogamous units and mention themselves as having had a 'gotra' structure.

Regarding the religious practices, Thurston notes that the Thiyya have small shrines in their courtyard where their sacred deities are worshipped. These deities may be Bhagavathi in general, demons or ancestor spirits specific to each family. Based on William Logan's accounts (1887) the Thiyya that they are 'devil-charming and devil driving' (Thurston 1987. vol.7: 320). Worship of Sakti, the female part of Shiva is the major one in Thiyya's religious activity. As Thurston notes, Shiva is considered as a vital energy of nature and is not exactly a Vedic deity. The people make worship with animal sacrifice, offerings of country made liquor and toddy, both related to their economic activity. These acts are essential parts in their religious matters and is a kind of animistic form of worship (Thurston 1987. vol.7: 101-102). Worshipping of ancestor and various spirits in the small shrines close to their households is a very common feature of Thiyya family. Based on their traditional occupation they have their specific role in festivals of village deities. They provide the toddy and country liquor mainly and fowls occasionally towards the rituals in such shrines.

Among the various castes associated with theyyam worship Vaniyan comes next to Thiyya regarding their roles. Vaniyan are traditional oil-pressing community in Malabar and are similar to those in neighbouring regions of Tamil Nadu and also to the Gandlas and the Ganigas in Telugu and Canara regions respectively in their status. Thurston notices several resemblances for Vaniyan in Malabar with that of Nair in their customs and habits though the latter is polluted by the Vaniyan (Thurston 1987. vol 7: 312-314).

Vannan are the main washermen community in Malabar region. Placed considerably lower in the caste hierarchy these untouchable communities serve other polluting castes in the village. For upper caste communities their service is necessary during the occasions of child birth and death, which are considered as polluting. The clothes washed by the Vannan called as *mattu* is an essential part in the purifying rituals associated with above mentioned incidents. Usually the women do these washing job and they also assisted child birth services as mid-wives. The Vannan men do several activities like exorcism, 'devil-dances' etc. This 'devil-dance' according to Thurston is same as *kaliyattam* and based on the written documents he says that the rituals of Vannan include

activities like *gurusi tarppanan* (giving to the guru) in which local deities are appeased in festivals during the summer months. In addition to these religious activities Vannan men are specialists in local medicine and all their services had clients even from castes above them in status (Thurston 1987. vol.7: 315-319).

By quoting the writings of colonial European officials and missionary, Thurston describes about various ritual activities performed by Vannan people in detail. The ritual of *gurusi tarpanan* is one such in which the priest in characteristic costume with red garland and vermillion marks on forehead sits on the courtyard of the shrines, does various rites and sacrifice large number of goats and fowls, runs the blood into large vessels with water and after reciting sacred verses turn the vessel upside down, pouring the bloody water on the floor. The Vannan men, dressed in bright red costumes performs dance by holding the sacred swords during the ceremony (Thurston 1987. vol.7: 319-320)

Thurston marks Velan as a caste of ‘devil-dancers’, sorcerers and quack doctors. This caste is connected to clay-pot making castes like the Kusavan and also related to washermen caste of Mannan in some parts of Malabar. The traditional occupation of this caste is washing and they provide the service of giving *maattu*, the freshly washed cloths for purifying ceremonies to higher castes like Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Nair, Kammala, and Izhuvans. Believed to be descendants of Siva, based on the myths on exorcism, they are specialized in such religious activities. They perform several magic and sorcery associated with devil driving, evil eye etc., and has a vast knowledge on local medicine. Following animist type of religious practice, they worship demonic deities like Chandan, Mundan, Kandakarnan, Karinkutti, and Chathan. The sacred places consist of crude stones placed at the tree bottoms, for each of the individual cults and worshipping is usually made with offerings of fowl, goat, plantain fruits, coconut, puffed rice and beaten rice. Similar to other castes of equivalent status worship of ancestor and Bhagavathi are common among Velan too (Thurston 1987. vol.7: 354-357).

In the olden day records the castes of artisan communities are named as Kammalar and according to Thurston they are a group of five communities together known as *ayen kudi* (five houses) specialized in different materials. These are Asari, Musari, Tattan, Karuman and Chembotti (wood carpenter, brazier, goldsmith, blacksmith and coppersmith respectively). It is common to avoid the fifth community in several occasions and the remaining four are grouped together by the name *nanku varna* (four

colors). In the present days, in religious matters and related activities this classification is predominantly used.

In the theyyam ritual and in other religious activities in North Malabar Malayan community has a great role, exorcism being the chief occupation of the men. This patrilineal caste consists of nine major lineages called *illam*. Thurston notes that the main ritual activity of this people is the sacrificial ceremonies of *uchaveli* to propitiate various deities like Bhadrakali and other demonic spirits. The olden day narratives also explain the nature of the rituals which consists mainly of sacrifice and the offerings of items like rice, coconut leaves, fowls etc., which enables the appeasement of fierce looking ritual specialists. Thurston's account on Malayan gives information regarding the way by which theyyam and other such rituals performed in the olden days (Thurston and Rangachari 2013. vol. 4: 436-439). The two photographs of Malayan theyyam performers during the ritual gives a clear picture on how the rituals were happening in the olden days.

Weaving and textile manufacture were associated with Shaliya community who were living in specific hamlets in the region. Making of umbrella with palm leaf and bamboo was another occupation specialization and the umbrella varies in its function. Each community had specific umbrellas (and also for women) based on their social status. A key specialty was the ritual significance of such umbrellas. The Kaniyan community engaged in the preparation of all these different types of umbrellas.

Beginning from the early decades of 20th century, Malabar witnessed a large-scale immigration of Christians (Syrian as well as Knanaya) from central and southern parts of Kerala. The frequency of migration reached its peak during the middle decades of the century. Mainly concentrating in the eastern hilly terrains of Malabar, these hardworking agriculturalist people totally changed the economy and geography of the region. This incident had a considerable impact on the entire demographic, economic and cultural system of the region.

Political economy

Even during the colonial time, the economic relations predominant was the traditional feudal one which was based on the caste system. Malabar had characteristic economic system similar to that of other parts of present Kerala consisting of different levels of land ownership, transaction, and labour. The three basic levels of agrarian relations are named as *janmam*, *kanam*, and *verumpattom*. The ownership of the land was with the

janmi (who holds the *janmam*) and the *kanakkaran* takes this land for lease by giving yearly payment (*kanam*) for a fixed period that may extend usually up to twelve years. The *kanakkaran* is actually an intermediary and he again gives this land to the *verumpattakkaran* for the fixed payment of *verumpattom*, usually for a period of one year (Panikkar 1978). This lowest level group was the actual labourers who cultivated in the land. The land holding *janmi* were from the uppermost strata in caste hierarchy. Both Brahmins and Nair and their respective households of *kovilakom* and *tharavad* was the locus of the wealth. The middle level *kanakkar* consisted of both Nair and lower caste Thiyya.

These economic systems were basically a form of absentee landlordism and the wealthy landlords who had vast area of land were known as *janmis*. The possession of land by an individual was known as *janmam* and the transfer was hereditary in nature.⁸ The ‘absence’ of the landlords was so real that a landlord had little or no idea about where his land is and who are cultivating on it. All the cultivation and farming were done by tenant serfs of lower caste under the supervision of intermediary people belonging to Nair subcastes.

According to Prakash,

‘In the feudal structure the *janmi* stood at the top while the agrestic serfs stood at the bottom of the hierarchy. Farming was undertaken either by the poor *Karan* or *Verumpattom* tenants or by a class of agrestic serfs known as Cherumar. A large proportion of the agricultural workers were, in the southern part of the district, until mid-1800s, slaves, subject to purchase, sale and transfer with or separate from the land they tilled. Though slavery was abolished in 1843 by the colonial rulers, the agrestic slave system continued in Malabar because of the feudal land ownership structure that existed’ (Prakash 1988: 57).

The *janmi* had absolute ownership over vast land and they had little interest in managing and farming in the land directly. The tenants who worked in the land gave *pattom* to these *janmi* in return for the land they use, as a leased property. The *pattom* was paid not as money rather as a share of the produce which was mostly paddy, and it was fixed based on the area of land one cultivates. In addition to the *janmi* who were higher caste male members in *tharavad*, native rulers (chiefs) and temples also had ownership over vast area of land. Also, agriculture was not considered as a good job and was completely reserved to the lower caste people. The people who were directly connected to land and farming was considered as worthless and lower in social status.

These groups form the highest level of polluting group according to the customs of Namboodiri Brahmins.

The *verumpattakkar* was treated as bonded labourers or slaves who had no property ownership, lived in the small plots of land close to the agriculture fields of their masters. This highly exploiting social relation (in terms of economic, political and religious) have contributed to the myths and other oral narratives developed among the lower caste people, which later became the foundations for the religious beliefs and practices of the people.

Miller (1954: 412) discusses the caste system, statuses and roles of various castes in society. According to him, the highest strata of *janmi* consisted of Namboothiri Brahmins, royal lineages and upper caste Nair who are not less than landlords. Usually in every village there were at least one such *janmi* who lived in the joint family (*tharavad* in case of Nair). The eldest male members of such families (*karanavar*) were the heads of the villages. Mainly Nair from royal lineages enacted this role more than the Namboothiri, whose major interest was associated with religious matters and temple. The Nair village heads were the power centres in legislative matters concerned with their own caste as well as those below them. Such village political bodies were occasionally assisted by the heads of the predominant Thiyya families, irrespective of the lower caste identity, rather with their dominance in terms of number as well as wealth in judicial matters within a village. Such Thiyya heads were authorities over their own people and also those in the lower strata (the untouchables) who were labourers to both upper caste *janmi* and middle level Thiyya.

The religious institutions also played a vital role in the political and economic system in Malabar. The temples which are the centres of sovereignty of Namboothiri Brahmins were one of the largest land holders in the region. The economic wealth was called as *Brahmaswam* and *Devaswam* (meaning the property of *Brahma* and *Deva*, the Gods). The upper caste Nair (and their subgroups) had administrative role which gave them much power over this wealth. There are also cases where temples acted as places of buying and exchange of labourers. Mentions about trading of agricultural labourers are depicted in the myths of shrines like Madayikkavu where people of Pulaya caste were sold and bought by the land-owning upper caste people for their agriculture related activities.⁹

The caste groups and associations and their interrelations have implications beyond economic relations through land and agriculture. Kurup had identified a typical

caste organization in his essay on anti-imperialist struggles in Malabar in political terms. According to Kurup:

‘In north Malabar there had been a network of ritualistic caste associations which had existed through centuries. Each caste had a common organization and their folk deities like Teyyam. The traditional ritualistic caste association like *Kazhakam*, *Muchilot* and *Kannangat* were integral parts of a feudal society. Such associations had virtually been controlled by dominant land-owning institutions like *tharavad* and rich matrilineal houses. As such these traditional associations strengthened feudal exploitation through their elders even in the colonial system.’ (Kurup 1988 b: 38).

Kurup observes that these ritualistic caste associations were much helpful in the growth of socialist struggles and movements happened in the North Malabar in the thirties and forties. People used to gather at common places, which are also places of ritual worshipping to discuss about the agitations. Kurup quotes E. M. S. Namboodiripad with his comments on how such associations helped in the socialist (later communist) movements even with the participation of major members in the so-called ritualistic caste associations. In the present days also the communist party in the region has high level of relations with these associations. Kayyur, Karivellur, Mattanur, Morazha, Tellicherry etc. are the places where the All-Malabar Karshaka Sangham and communist party organized various movements. In these peasant movements agricultural labourers stood against the highly exploiter feudal landlords (Kurup 1988 b: 38-39).

The hierarchy followed the same pattern in ritual matters and all the major worship and temple activities were done by the Namboothiri Brahmins. In the next level, Nair subcastes like Ambalavasis, Nambiar, Pothuval etc. had considerable roles. Further down the line, the lower caste Hindus and untouchables were kept away from the sacred space of temples and even from those close to temples based on purity-pollution concerns. This differentiation is most visible in terms of the concept of pollution. To each level, the lower lying castes were considered as polluting. The pollution was in terms not only by physical contact but also by sight. The untouchability and rules of distances were regulating the gap between different caste strata. Fixed rules were there for every caste regarding the minimum distance one need to keep with other caste people. Larger the difference between the caste statuses longer was the distance that needs to be kept (Miller 1954: 413). Violation of these resulted in varying level of punishments even death.

Social change

The twentieth century witnessed considerable changes in socio-political aspects and it had great impact on the caste based economic relations. The intermediary class of *kanakkar* substantially improved their economic status and hence their social status too. The new legislations in land reforms intensified these changes that resulted in the considerable loss of land holding to the *janmi* and a resultant gain of the intermediary *kanakkar* who became the new middle class. The lowest level agricultural labourers were not benefited from the land reforms much though they were the people actually had direct contact with the land as cultivators and labourers. That is, the land based economic reforms lowered the economic abilities of the top and lowest strata, while that of middle level increased.

As major social change started to occur in Malabar during the British colonial administration several factors contributed to the decline of the entire social system so far existed. The territorial boundaries diminished, political power of the chiefs declined, caste based economic relations reduced and the overall stable village system with characteristic high solidarity decreased (Miller 1954: 417-418). In the sphere of religion also changes were observable with lesser festivities in shrines of those families which were power centres previously. Irrespective of the political and economic aspects, the authority over religious matters remains intact. In this regard the study on the social change by Radhakrishnan (1983) is very significant. He made an attempt to understand the effects of the implementation of the Kerala Land Reforms (Amendment) Act of 1969 in the Kerala state. He makes observation on this aspect that,

‘[the Act] had led to loss of land by the group in which land was traditionally concentrated, namely the Namboothiris. Consequently, the Nambootiris have also lost their status, power and authority which they enjoyed in the village during the pre-reform period.

The gain of land by the groups which were traditionally dependent on the Nambootiris as cultivating tenants, viz. the Ambalavasis, Nayars, Maniyanis, Vaniyas and the Tiyyas, has brought about a marked improvement in their economic condition, and altered the traditional patron-client and reciprocal and redistributive relationships which characterized the pre-reform village economy and society. It has also transformed the pre-reform subservient socio-economic relations of these groups, towards the Nambootiris, into egalitarian relations. The

remaining four groups, viz. the Marvaris, artisans and service castes, Harijans and the Mappilas, have not benefited much from the redistribution of land, especially wet land' (Radhakrishnan 1983: A-143).

What is significant about this study in the present context is regarding the religious aspects and ritual relations. Radhakrishnan (1983: A-145) observes that the social reforms negatively impacted the ritual authority of Namboothiri caste. According to the author, the religious superiority enjoyed by them were basically due to their economic status only, as landlords. In the post-reform times such families, who lost their land became no more able to continue their religious activities in shrines, and even their life cycle ceremonies became less celebratory. Closing of temples permanently after failing to continue the rituals became a common scene and association of villagers (mainly upper caste Nair and middle level castes like Thiyya) started to revive these shrines with ritual activities. In those shrines where theyyam were celebrated with elaborate festivities only minimal rituals were performed because of the poor financial condition of the shrine owning families. In the whole theyyam cosmos the land reform has had considerable impact. In the pre-reform times, the Namboothiri showed their authority in various ways like the practice of taking permission to conduct theyyam and moreover they even interfered and disrupted the rituals without any cause whenever they want. But, in the post-reform times such authorities became diminished and a greater number of theyyam shrines also formed, mainly in the households of Thiyya communities (Radhakrishnan 1983: A-145). The Nair families still maintained considerable ritual dominance backed by their affluence in economy while lower caste people who perform theyyam at their shrine need to take permission from those Nair families to which they had economic relations in the olden times.

It is also to be noted that the progress achieved by communities like Thiyya was not so in the case of the castes in the lowest strata. The untouchable castes of Harijan were still devoid of any progress in their social status not only while comparing with the Namboothiri and Nair of upper strata, but also in comparison with the Thiyya, Vaniyan, and Maniyani in the middle strata. In the religious sphere also this discrimination continued by avoiding them in several religious rituals associated with theyyam festivals (Radhakrishnan, 1983: A-149).

Uniqueness in culture

Matrilineality, known as *marumakkathayam* was wide spread and unlike other parts of Kerala the Namboothiri Brahmins and Muslims also followed matrilineality in North Malabar. Major castes like Nair and Thiyya were also matrilineal. Practice of matrilineal descent was different here and was predominantly virilocal with married couple residing with or near the husband's parents. Polyandry was a taboo, unlike other parts across any castes. In terms of festivals also North Malabar shows differences with other parts of Kerala. The festival of *Vishu* has more importance as the new year of *Kollavarsham* and celebrated for two days unlike the rest of Kerala where it is a single day event. Non-vegetarian food is special feature of this Hindu festival in North Malabar unlike the rest where vegetarian meal is used during festival occasions. Cuisine also shows characteristic uniqueness like the use of coconut in major dishes like *sambar* etc. and presence of lot of other dishes and food items native to the region.

Payyannur and its people

In the present research work, the area for the study of *kaliyattam* is taken as Payyannur in Kannur district. The specialties and reasons for taking Payyannur as study location are several. Payyannur is a revenue taluk and it has the highest concentration of theyyam worshipping shrines in the northern region. A second reason is that the Payyannur has a particular tradition of theyyam worshipping; the performers following a characteristic nature of performance of its own. Having a unique feature that binds together the ritual practices and the society in the area is another key factor. Payyannur occupies a major area of the erstwhile princely state of Kolathu swaroopam¹⁰ with its own cultural specificity.

Each of the princely states in North Malabar had its own sovereignty in terms of political as well as religious matters. Each of the *swaroopam* or the princely states (*nadu*) had its own chief and administration. Associated with each of the chiefdom they had a prime god or goddess as their protector. In the case of Kolathunadu it was the Thiruvarkkattu Bhagavathi and the people worshipped it as the patron goddess of Kolathunadu.

In each of the *swaroopam* it is the chief deity that acts as the nexus of all the religious matters and also such tutelary deities acted as the supreme deity of all the other gods and goddesses being worshipped in the area. All the shrines are connected to the

prime shrine and accept the sovereignty of the deity. Here, the Madayikkavu is the principal shrine and Thiruvarkattu Bhagavathi is the major deity. This being the case, the present study takes Kolathunadu as the religious, cultural as well as political entity for the study, which is roughly equivalent to the present day Payyannur taluk. Thus, it is the theyyam in olden day Kolathunadu which is being studied mainly in this work. Occasionally theyyam from other neighboring places are also discussed to make comparison and to see the characteristic features of theyyam which are otherwise not performed traditionally in the Payyannur region (theyyam not belonging to Kolathunadu). Ezhome, Kadannappalli, Kankole, Karivellur, Kunhimangalam, and Madayi are the selected villages in Payyannur taluk from where field data are gathered using fieldwork.

The history of Payyannur is divided into three -ancient, medieval and modern. The period till 16th century is ancient, from that to national movement is medieval and the latter is the modern third phase. The Payyannur Sree Subrahmanya temple is the locus of Payyannur, and is thought to be constructed in the ancient time during Parasurama an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Payyannur is one of the first Brahmana villages formed in Kerala out of the total sixty-four Brahmin settlements.

In each of the villages the Brahmin community established new temples and the Subrahmanya Swami temple is the one in Payyannur, which according to the myth is believed to be founded by Parasurama. The name 'Payyannur', itself is derived from the deity being worshipped in the temple '*payyan*', which is a second name of Subrahmanyan. The Brahmins designed *kazhakam*, the chief shrines as the epicenter of all the village shrines. All the temples and traditional *kaavu* in the region between Perumba river in the south and Chandragiri river in the north come under the sovereignty of Subrahmanya temple. The deity in the shrine, Subrahmanyan became the lord of the *kazhakam* (and hence *kazhakanaathan*) and got the title of '*Payyannur Perumal*'. During performance of every theyyam the *thottam* starts with acknowledging of Payyannur Perumal and his authority.

No shrines in the *kazhakam* could conduct *kaliyattam* ritual without the permission from *kazhaka naathan*, Subrahmanyan. Thus, the shrines, irrespective of the major as well as sub-deities being worshipped and the community who conducts it, need to accept

the authority of the Brahmin and their belief system. The Brahmins who were also called as *karalar* were the authority of rituals and shrine and they ruled for Payyannur Perumal. This group is at the top and several groups of people (especially caste groups) were there to help the Brahmin masters. Pothuval is one such important group, who looks after the general administrative and management aspects of the temple. They are the first level assistants to Brahmins and have a higher status in society.

There were ten chief Pothuval families in Payyannur in the olden times and each had specific roles assigned to them. Though Pothuval community is a single group of same status, there exists a hierarchy within it based on the role they had in temple and ritual matters. For example, Aanidil tharavad had the foremost position among all the ten families, and the elder male member of this family stand close to the Brahmins in religious possessions in temple.

The Sacred Places of Religious Worshipping

This section deals with the spatial aspect of the place of worshipping of the theyyam deities, the place where the ritual of *kaliyattam* happens. More than a mere space of religious activities a shrine has importance in several dimensions. The deity being worshipped in one shrine is the chief factor that gives particular identity to a shrine. Ownership of the shrine is the second factor and there are shrines owned by public, by specific communities (caste groups), and also by particular family. Based on the ownership shrines are representatives of social groups as well as belief in specific deities. The shrine's identity is connected to the ecology, as well as the economic and political relation between various groups of participants as well as the type of community.

The physical structure of the worshipping places shows variation in great extent from very simple construct named *thara* to highly elaborate and complex structures of modern days named as *kshetram*. The sacred place of worship has undergone drastic changes over the course of time and it is still undergoing changes day after day. The diversity of the worshipping place is based on several aspects, from the names to nature, according to communities of ownership and across places.

In the olden days the worshipping places of this particular belief system was very simple and were mostly associated with a sacred grove. A small place surrounded by thick vegetation and a sap bearing tree like banyan (*Ficus benghalensis*) or peepal (*Ficus*

religiosa) which are considered to be divine had a central place in the grove. Such a religious place is known as *kaavu* locally. A *kaavu* can be considered as the most fundamental entity of sacred space in the whole religious system that revolves around theyyam. The power of the deity or the deity itself is believed to be living in this place. There will be some crude structures, like stones, the weapon of the deity, spears, trident etc. kept at the bottom of the tree as sacred objects. An oil lamp is another key element in such a sacred place. This whole simple setup forms the material structure and the space where the propitiation of the gods and goddesses of people's worshipping is happening.

According to Gadgil and Vartak (1976) sacred groves have much importance and significance in various terms. They observe that the ecological implications of these groves and the associated religious practices are of prime significance. According to the authors:

‘All forms of vegetation in such a sacred grove, including shrubs and climbers, are under the protection of the reigning deity of that grove, and the removal, even of dead wood, is taboo.’ (Gadgil and Vartak 1976: 152)

The authors find the preservation of the nature of trees and shrubs growing in it are entirely different from worshipping of some specific trees like peepal or umber (*ficus glomerata*) on which divinity is imposed (Gadgil and Vartak 1976: 152). According to the authors these monsoon forests are rich in biodiversity and the preservation of these sacred groves are most significant in the contemporary times where large scale of deforestation is happening.

Regarding the diversity in the nature of shrine, a more modified worshipping place compared to the base of a tree is known as a *thara*. A *thara* usually is a stone-built structure, in a cube shape of roughly three feet dimension. In some instances, a stone of specific shape of a rectangular column with the top end curved is also placed at a slight angle on the top of the column. This structure is very common in any shrines of higher order representing the sacred part of ritual performances. Whenever the rituals are happening the sacred objects are placed over this *thara* and all the rituals happens around it. A similar structure known as *kalasa thara* is also a common feature in the shrine compound. This place is where the *kalasam*, the decorated pot with toddy is kept and the theyyam make rituals before the commencement of the dance. A *gurusi thara* also has

similar basic structure with a circular stone at the top. This particular structure acts as the place where the ritual sacrifice of *gurusi* is happening. In the old shrines of theyyam which are believed as protectors of social justice a similar construct as above is used as the place where ordeals are made before the deities.



Photo 2.1: A typical *thara* with the various weapons of the deity

In its structural form, there is *palliyara* which is a construction of a single room, with a base length of a few feet (5-6 feet normally) and height varying from six to seven feet. Such a shrine has roofing with tiles and one small door in the front side. Inside this room called *ara* there will be the *peedom*, the sacred stool. The weapons of the deity are kept inside this cabin over a red cloth. Here also oil lamp is a key feature. One such cabin is not exclusively for one particular deity and sometimes more than one deity is believed to be present in such a shrine. This is represented simply by keeping the weapons of the different deities in the same cabin in different stools. This type of shrines named *palliyara* is the most common in the whole area. Changes are there from one shrine to another in terms of size and decorative features. The shrine owners and managing community often make these worshipping places more attractive by using paintings, sculptures and lamps. The borders of the cabin are painted with lines and patterns of black, red and white colors. Small figurines of the theyyam are also placed usually in the front side of the shrine.

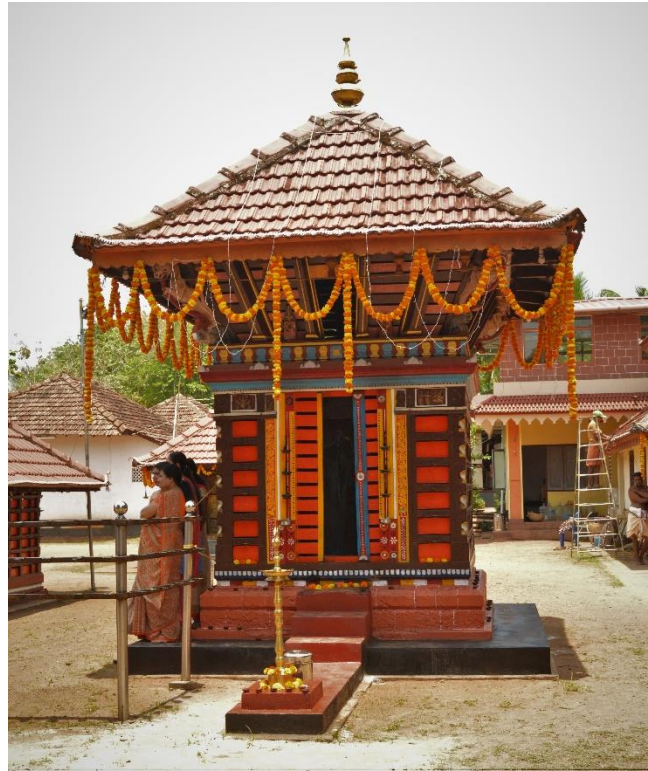


Photo 2.2: A typical *palliyara*

The modern-day shrines, those built from last few decades are more complex structures. The well-built buildings with stones and cement, painted in bright colors often has concrete roofing which is again tiled over it. The side walls are designed with sculptures or decorated with small oil lamps. The front upper part of the shrine has various small figures of the deity and those places are decorated and painted with various bright colours. Another important thing to note is the presence of *kimpurshan*, the face of a beast, in the middle part of the roof on the front side. The *kimpurushan* is believed to be the protector of the shrine as a guardian spirit.

The elaborate material construction in shrines has made several contradictory dialogues among the people. When one group says that the new type of shrines is far away from the original theyyam worshipping sacred places of *kaavu*, some villagers say that modern shrines which are totally new have little connection with those of the olden day shrines. People criticise that the designers of such structures have no much ideas on the beliefs associated with the olden day sacred places and significance of the traditional structures. In the olden days the sacred places were situated in open place surrounded by only bushes and trees. Nowadays people build solid walls around the court yard keeping the shrine in the middle. This actually is a result of imitation of the temple structure of

mainstream Hindu system of worship. There is a growing trend in the present day that the entire shrine complex is being roofed. Those people with knowledge about the tradition and significance of the conventional type of worshipping places, the sacred groves, open structures, and the surrounding shrubby forest and of course the associated ecosystem that produce a niche and a micro climate of its own, are of strong opposing stand against the modern trend.

Classification of shrines

The shrines of theyyam worshipping have a local classification. People call them by different names like *ara*, *kottam*, *mundya*, *podikkalam*, *madappura*, *muchilodu*, *kannangadu*, etc. All these indicates the type of deity or the specific major deity being worshipped there. It also matters which community own a particular shrine. That is, a *madappura* is the shrine of the theyyam Muthappan and *mundya* is that of Vishnumoorthi. Likewise, a *kottam* is usually the sacred place of Pulaya community, *muchilodu* is that of Vaniya, and *kannangadu* is of Maniyani community. In the latter two shrines certain specific theyyam has more importance, the major deity is Muchilottu Bhagavathi and Kannangattu Bhagavathi respectively.

Apart from the internal classification of shrines based on the theyyam or the community affiliation a shrine may be classified broadly into three groups based on the ownership and in relation to the society. These are publicly owned, community owned and family owned shrines. The following is an ethnographic note on a few of the shrines in the study area.

Publicly owned shrines

Madayikkavu near Payyannur is one of the most important shrines in this category and has significance in various ways. As the prime shrine of the chiefdom of Kolathunadu and the abode of the *adhidevatha* of Kolathunadu, this shrine is the centre of all *kaliyattam kaavu* in Kolathunadu. Thaiparadevatha is the main deity here and is worshiped as the great mother (*thai*) of all people in the region. In the myth, the deity is mentioned as the daughter of Lord Shiva's female power the *shakthi* and it is this *shakthi* who is being worshipped in the majority of theyyam pantheon in various forms in different names. There are several mythical stories about the installation of the deity here, and the key one is that the king of Kolathunadu brought the deity's idol from Perinchelloor temple which belonged to Brahmin community. It was after a dream seen

by the then ruler of Kolathunadu, Udayavarman Kolathiri this happened and the same incident led to a feud between the people of Perinchelloor and Kolathunadu. According to the story, it is after the installation of the deity at Madayikkavu and a proper propitiation that Kolathunadu gained much prosperity.

The ritual authority accumulated in this shrine is high, being the prime place of the tutelary deity of the rulers of the *nadu*. The political authority of the then princely state of Kolathunadu is expressed in the religious sphere through this particular shrine. The ritual supremacy of the shrine parallels with the political authority of the chiefs. The chieftdom holds the *kovilakom* (at Chirakkal in the case of Kolathunadu) as the power centre and there are several local subdivisions of power for the local administration. This power was localized in Nair *tharavad* in each locality. In the same way the prime shrine of Madayikkavu also has branches in other places within the chieftdom. The deity, Thiruvarkkattu Bhagavathi is being worshipped in other villages by giving specific names by prefixing the name of the village to the supreme deity like Vellarangara Bhagavati at Vellarangara near Payyannur town.

Each of these village deities have myth that connects to the supreme deity. The shrines may be owned and administered by different castes. By this way the status of the supreme deity is dispersed in the society across various communities of varying social status based on caste, and economic power. The sovereignty of the deity, who in a way represents the political power of the chief is expressed and maintained through ritual means. Handing of the sacred fire from the Madayaikkavu to any local shrine of any community where local form of the Thiruvarkkattu Bhagavathi is being worshipped is such an act done ritually to affirm the dominance.

The type of worshipping in this shrine also has a specialty. The priests belong to a community named Piradar and their system is not followed as such in any other shrines. Though there are commonalities in the key aspects, a deity in a village is worshipped based on the custom of that particular shrine and each of the deities have their own characteristic identity imposed on them. The Madayikkavu also gives the portrait of the changes happening in the religious belief and the worship in general in this region. The old worshipping place of the sacred groves of *kaavu* has transformed to a complex temple of the mainstream Hindu religion. Unlike any other *kaliyattam* shrines in the area, this shrine is administered by the Malabar Devaswom Board, a semi-governmental organization for Hindu temple administration in north Kerala. This Board takes care of shrines which are more into the mainstream Hindu worship which are considered as

kshetram. Associated with this, the shrine also incorporated ritual activities similar to other temples in Kerala, but uncommon to the traditional *kaavu* in North Malabar. This trend is happening in the large scale. And, most of the traditional *kaliyattam kaavu* have started following the practices of the mainstream Hindu pattern, and the case of Madayikkavu gives them a strong motive for the justification of their act.

The worshipping of different cults of different tradition is also visible here. Though the chief deity is Thaiparadevatha the performance of this goddess and associated deities as theyyam happens outside the main temple complex, mainly due to the nature of the worship. The ritual of propitiation of theyyam follows the *kaula* system, which includes animal sacrifices, use of blood, and liquor which is of *thamasik* (darker or less pure) character. According to the mainstream Hindu belief, this type of ritual is considered as polluting, profane and of lower standard, and that of the mainstream system is sacred and pure of *swathik* nature. According to the temple authorities, these two systems should be kept apart without fusing together and the *kaula* system is given a lower status to all other.

Family Shrines

By family shrines it means that the worship places associated with individual families. An extended household of a lineage is called as a *tharavad* and it will be in that particular household the shrine is normally situated. In such a shrine the family worships a particular theyyam as their family deity. All the related families in the lineage who live in different houses worship the deity and during the *kaliyattam* time all of them join together to conduct the ritual. Irrespective of castes every Hindu community in the Payyannur region have their family shrines which is a norm. Sree Porkkali Kshetram at Keloth near Payyannur is such a family shrine of the Pothuval community. Earlier, this was a school for martial art (*kalari*)¹¹ belonging to the Karippath tharavad. Every sacred shrine of theyyam worship has a myth related to its origin and such a myth explains how a particular deity came to the family and how the worship started. In the case of Porkkali Kshetram, a *karanavar* (the eldest male member who is the head of the family) in this *tharavad* went to Chirakkal near Kannur with his assistant. While taking a bath at a river, they saw a celestial beauty also taking bath in the pond. The *karanavar* asked the lady for oil and when she gave it, the *karanavar* received it with great reverence using both hands, as one receives sacred gift of *prasadam* from a temple. For him the lady appeared like a goddess, which she was. Impressed by the behavior and reverence of the *karanavar*

the deity decided to go with him and when they reached the *tharavad* she said that she needed a *kalari* to practice her martial art skills. This deity was a *kalari* expert and the members of the *tharavad* believe that she is an incarnation of Lord Shiva's wife Parvathi. Then the family established a shrine to worship the goddess. Earlier, there was no *palliyara*, instead the deity was kept the base of a huge banyan tree. Later they constructed *palliyara* and placed the *peedom* to keep the weapons of the deity which symbolises her power.

After the *kaliyattam* in 2016, they completely rebuilt the shrine as the roots of the nearby banyan tree were destroying it. Several branches of the tree had been cut off. But after an astrologer's opinion that there is a divine presence in it and the deity wants to swing on the branches of the tree, it is kept uncut now. The newly built shrine's initial rituals like *abhishekam*, *thazhikkudam samarppanam*¹² etc. were done by Namboothiri Brahmins. After the *kaliyattam* there happened a *pooja* to cleanse the shrine and that was done by Namboothiri Brahmin. All other rituals are performed by priest from the same *tharavad* only. According to the informants, this shrine receives considerable amount of money in the form of donation and also as offerings at the *bhandaram* (money vault) year around. Thus, this shrine is economically self-sufficient and independent unlike others in conducting annual *kaliyattam* and other rituals.

Porkkali Bhagavathi, the main deity in this shrine, is a *valiyamudi* theyyam with long headgear indicating enormous power. This theyyam is performed by members of the Munnoottan community which is a subdivision of the Velan caste. Long back the *tharavad* gave *janmavakasam* (birth right) to one particular Munnoottan family in Nileswaram and even now their heirs are continuing this. Now a days, Babu Munnoottan takes the *kolam* of the deity which was earlier done by his father. The reason for inviting Munnoottan family from the faraway place like Nileswaram is unknown and the family of Babu Munnoottan was the first from this community to perform theyyam in this area. In addition to the *valiyamudi* there are theyyam like Rakthachamundi, Madayil Chamundi, Vishnumoorthi, etc. which are performed by Vannan community. Usually all these theyyam are performed by Malayan community elsewhere.

Chekkippara Bhagavathi Kshetram owned by Annoor Aanidil Tharavad is another shrine of the Pothuval community in Payyannur. It belongs to the families with a common house name of Aanidil. In this *tharavad*, Chekkippara Bhagavathi is considered as the guardian goddess of the Aanidil lineage. Apart from this major deity, there are several sub deities being worshipped here.

The shrine complex consists of a main building with a compound wall. It is in the main building the *palliyara* (the sanctorum) of the deities is situated. Associated with the *palliyara* is another room for the personal use of the main priest who is an elder male member of the same family. The *peedom* (the sacred stool) with all weapons of the deity is usually kept inside the *palliyara* and during the *kaliyattam* time it is placed on the verandah of the building by constructing a partition by thatched fencing from the remaining area. Outside the compound wall of the main shrine there are two more small shrines. The first one situated close to the main shrine belong to the Gulikan theyyam. The weapons of the deity consisting of knives, swords, tridents, and brass mask are placed inside this shrine with an oil lamp at the door. The second is the shrine of Kundor Chamundi, and Kurathi where the Velan community performs theyyam. This is situated on the left side of the main shrine in the front yard. There are two *kalasathara*, one in front of the Kurathi shrine and one on the right side of the main shrine. During *kaliyattam* the Thiyya community brings the *kalasam* in the morning from a particular family and keeps it at the *kalasathara* as an obligatory offering.



Photo 2.3: Aanidil tharavad kshetram during *kaliyattam* time

The shrine is taken care of by the priest who is an elder male member from the *tharavad*. This priest, known as *anthithiriyar* is entitled to perform minor daily activities

at the shrine such as lighting of lamps every evening. During *kaliyattam* this priest is entitled to do the necessary rituals inside the shrine. He is the one who handles the sacred weapons and other things at the shrine and during the theyyam he hands over these possessions of the deity from the shrine to the theyyam performer during *kaliyattam*. Though the daily rituals and main activities at the shrine are done by the family members, Namboothiri priests come to the shrine to conduct special rituals at times. Usually the Namboothiri priest performs the initial ritual (*ganapathi homam*) and after the *kaliyattam* also there will be a purifying ritual performed by the specially invited Namboothiri priest. The Pothuval community is the one which is close to the Namboothiri Brahmins in social relations and they accept the rituals of the later as a special one.

The myth behind the coming of the deity to this place and the establishment of the shrine is not much different from any other shrines in the nearby area. According to the myth, several generations back an elderly member of the family went to a shrine, while returning from the place a divine presence came with him on his umbrella. When he kept the umbrella at his house it started vibrating and on consulting an astrologer, he confirmed the presence of deity Chekkippara Bhagavathi. The family decided to build a shrine and started worshipping the deity. Later, when the astrologer conducted a *swarnaprasnam* (a higher form of astrological intervention) found that there should be more deities to be worshipped by the family and hence started worshipping other deities also. The *tharavad* decided to entitle families belonging to Vannan, Malayan and Velan communities to perform the theyyam by giving the birth right (*janmavakasam*) to them. These three communities have priorities, Vannan with higher position followed by Malayan and Velan. The main theyyam of the *tharavad*, the Chekkippara Bhagavathi is performed by the Vannan.

The conductance of the *kaliyattam* and other yearly rituals are completely a matter of the respective family only. At the time of *kaliyattam* the families in the lineage contribute money to the conductance of it. For a *tharavad* it is a matter of pride to conduct a *kaliyattam* at their family shrine. When asked about the organizational procedure to a family member the informant told with pride of their caste and economic status, “*we do not need any such system of taking donation from public, because the family members in the tharavad are capable of conducting the kaliyattam without the help of anyone from outside.*” The informant was mentioning about the communities like Vaniya and Thiyya, among which there is the system of *valyakkar*, a group formed by male members of the community irrespective of the *tharavad* affiliation. This system of *valyakkar* helps to

develop the collectivity, togetherness and solidarity among the community members and also in conducting *kaliyattam* especially when it comes to financial matters.

During *kaliyattam* the participation of all family members is expected as it is an occasion to affirm the solidarity among the members and also this event gives an opportunity for forming a collective of communities other than that of the particular *tharavad*. Communities like Thiyya, Vannan, Malayan, Velan etc. join together for playing their ritual roles at the *kaliyattam* which represents the formation of a collective entity in the society across communities of varying social status. One key informant from Aanidil family was very confident that *kaliyattam* plays a great role in the society as it brings several communities together. The informant mentioned that “*during other times we (the Pothuval forward caste) are at a higher level, and the performing lower caste people bow in front of us, whereas on the occasion of kaliyattam we bow in front of the lower caste people, who are now theyyam, the gods.*” The informant was very open to this particular socio-religious system. Irrespective of maintaining his higher social status he was of the opinion that *kaliyattam* definitely contributed to some kind of solidarity in the society across castes.

There are occasions in which some family members are not allowed to participate in rituals due to ‘pollution.’ When death occurs in a family, the members of that family are considered as polluting and the particular family (may consists of a few households of close relatives of the deceased) are not allowed to participated in the rituals at their family shrine. Though there are no strict rules about the contribution of money to the ritual events it is obvious that members of that family are not allowed to come close to the shrine, beyond a certain.

Sree Pulukkool Tharavad Kshetram at Thalayaneri Annoor is a family shrine of Thiyya community. Usually a *tharavad kshetram* is a shrine of one particular lineage (a number of houses with same ‘*veettuperu*’). Here the name of the *tharavad* is Pulukkool. Though it represents one *veettuperu* when this shrine is revived five years back the members in the Pulukkool family contacted other lineages having common descent. Pulukkool tharavad consists of six matrilineages (*thavazhi*) namely Pulukkool, Narothe, Athathan, Eliyan, Karakkeel, and Mettamal. Now all these six *thavazhi* are a part of Sree Pulukkool Tharavad Kshetram which is uncommon compared to other *tharavad* shrines where only one lineage is present. Today, this shrine does not represent any of the single matrilineages rather a collective of all six related lineages. Kudiveeran is the main deity in this shrine and is considered as the ancestor god of the family. Apart from

this theyyam there are a number of other theyyam also being worshipped here, Kurathi theyyam being an important one.

A shrine at Nileswaram in Kasaragod district named Kakkattu Madom Kovilakom is worth mentioning though this does not come under the Kolathunadu region. What make it special to mention about this is that the Kakkattu Madom is one of the main local chiefs in the Allada Swaroopam which is a neighbouring chiefdom to the Kolathunadu. The place named Nileswaram is the locus of Allada swaroopam and the Kakkattu Madom *kovilakom* is situated here¹³. This local chiefdom had a strong connection with the Kolathunadu and they were the local rulers. The male members of the Kovilakom have a title of 'Raja' and females 'Thamburatti', both representing the Royal status. In the caste hierarchy this community ranks just below the Namboothiri Brahmins and have a status higher to all Nair and related castes. The extended household called *kovilakom* indicates the palace of the feudal lord (Raja) and is associated with large possession of land and wealth, political power and high status in society.

The lineage deity of the *kovilakom* is Yogyar Akambadi and Ummachi theyyam is another important theyyam which has almost equal importance as that of the former. The coexistence of a Muslim lady as theyyam with the higher caste Hindu mythical person is considered as a typical example of secularism and inter religious harmony in North Malabar. The myth says that Yogyar Akambadi was a heroic man who came from Nediyruppu swaroopam to Nileswaram as a protector and watchman of the *kovilakom*. During his time the *kovilakom* raised to its highest status of wellness.

The husking of paddy was done by Muslim women and once Yogyar Akambadi saw one lady eating a handful of rice which was specially kept for use at temple. The angry Yogyar Akambadi, stabbed her to death for polluting the sacred rice. After this incident bad luck fell on the family and the members of the family realized that it is due to the cruel activity made by Yogyar Akambadi on the lady. They found that the lady got raised to divinity and they started worshipping her as theyyam. Yogyar Akambadi was also given a special status for his distinctive abilities and protection he gave to the family during his time and was later worshipped as theyyam.

The *kolam* of Yogyar Akambadi has an outfit of a hero cult common in theyyam costume. The Ummachi theyyam is performed as a '*kolathinmel kolam*' (one cult over other), in terms of costume, by covering the *mudi* of the Yogyar Akambadi with a white cloth, just like a Mappila woman covers her head. Earlier in this shrine there were twenty-five theyyam (*irupathivar*) and later this number increased to thirty-nine (*onnukure*

nalppathu). All these theyyam are performed at the shrine during a three-day *kaliyattam*. Since a conductance of such a big event is difficult to coordinate for reasons of huge cost involved there happens *kaliyattam* very rarely these days.

Community owned shrines

When the previously discussed shrines are based on the family level ownership the community owned shrines are at the next higher level. Such shrines are grouped as *samudaya kshetram*, meaning that the one belonging to a particular *samudayam* or community. When a family shrine (*tharavad* shrine) belongs to a lineage of a particular community and caste in terms of ownership and management a community shrine belongs to the whole people of a particular caste in a given area mostly at the village level. Vaniya, Thiyya, Shaliya, Maniyani, Kammala, Pulaya etc. are the main communities that have shrines with strong community affiliation. The specialty is that each of these communities has some particular theyyam which are considered as community deities. For example, Muchilottu Bhagavathi is considered as the community deity of Maniyani, Vayanattu Kulavan (among others) for Thiyya, Kannangattu Bhagavathi for Maniyani, Baali for Kammalar, Thondachan for Pulaya and so on. All these deities are mythically connected to each of the particular communities (castes) as patron deity. The shrines of their worshipping acts as a union point of the whole community members in a particular area.

The worshipping place of Vaniya community is known as a ‘Muchilodu.’ It is based on the myth that the Bhagavathi gave her first blessing to a Vaniya man and the community adopted the Bhagavathi as their *kuladevatha*. For each cluster of Vaniya families in a village there is a Muchilodu of their own. It is not based on family level rather all the Vaniya caste families living in a village with specific boundary affiliate to the shrine. The number of families varies from one hundred to three hundred roughly. If the number of families exceeds a certain limit a new shrine will be established in a new locality. The myths say that the first ever Muchilodu shrine is that at the village named Karivellur, around eight kilometers north to Payyannur. This shrine is the most important of all the Muchilodu and is known as ‘*aadimuchilodu*’. Including this one, there were eighteen Muchilodu in Kolathunadu in the olden days and with the increase in number of Vaniya families at present there are around hundred and eighteen Muchilodu here. The characteristic feature of the community is the *valyakkar* who are elder male members in the region affiliated to a Muchilodu. The number of *valyakkar* varies from one shrine to

another. The Karivellur Muchilottu is the largest with more than six hundred *valyakkar* whereas in Kadannappalli Muchilottu (14 kilometre south of Payyannur) it is only around one hundred. One needs to pass through a ritual event at the shrine to become a *valyakkaran*. In the ritual the novice gives offering to the shrine, like beetle leaf and areca nut. This is actually a life cycle ritual and only after this one Vaniya man is considered as a full member of the community. To get married, one definitely has to pass through this ritual and should get the status of *valyakkaran* at a Muchilodu.

A *valyakkaran* is entitled to do several works at the shrine and should make compulsory contribution towards the organization of rituals and festivals. During *kaliyattam* a *valyakkaran* needs to give his manpower at least for five days, and also contribute specific quantity of grains, money and other things. If one is not able to provide his man power or other material resources, he may give an equivalent amount of money to the committee. When *kaliyattam* is fixed, the members of *valyakkar* go to invite people from their own caste and upper caste families in the area. However, they will never go to houses of lower caste for invitation like Thiyya.

All the administrative roles are handled by the community members forming a committee every year or every alternate year. Normally a shrine is a property of the community in a given area but large shrines like the one in Karivellur has a further higher managing committee headed by Malabar Devaswom Board. Apart from the administrative roles several other roles like that of main priests, oracles, etc. are also performed by community members only. Theyyam like Muchilottu Bhagavathi, Vishnumurthi, and Kundor chamundi are performed communities like Vannan, Malayan, and Velan respectively. Similarly, Thiyya and Kammalar also take part in the event by contributing their respective hereditary duties of providing liquor or toddy and the sacred swords of the deity.

Near Payyannur there is a village of Shaliya community who were the traditional weavers in the region. This community has Sree Ashtamachal Bhagavathi as their community goddess and the shrine of this deity is the centre of the village which is traditionally known as *theru*. This is a notable temple in the Northern Kerala distinguished with characteristic ritual practices when compared to other community shrines¹⁴ like the Muchilodu for Vaniya people. All the families living in the village are affiliated to this shrine and here also the elder male members are called as *valyakkar*. The role of this people is same in both the cases and here also a ritual is needed for a common man to become a *valyakkar*.

There is a myth associated with Ashtamachal Bhagavathi that explains how the deity happened to be the *kuladevatha* of the community. Believed as a local incarnation of the chief goddess in Kolathunadu, the main deity Thiruvarkattu Bhagavathi has various forms and features. The rituals and festivities also show distinctive identity. Of all the celebrations, *perumkalasam* festival is the significant one which is a seven-day event. The *perumkanisan* (great astrologer) performs the *nadayil prasn* and decides the date of the festival. Sacred light (oil wick) and *prasadam* from Madayikkavu, Kaarali temple and Shree Subrahmanya temple are brought to the shrine to begin the grand festival. On the fifth day special event of *meen amruthu* happens in which all the male members go for fishing in the nearby river and the catch is offered at the shrine as an offering. On the sixth day another ritual called *raakkalasam* happens. In this ritual various theyyam are performed including that of Ashtamachal Bhagavathi and Kshetrapalakan. Also, the special shrine of *vadakkem vaathil* opens for worshipping which happens only once in a year. This shrine acts as a religious centre of all the individuals in the Shaliya community living in this village. In the annual *kaliyattam* rituals the entire community gets mobilized and participated. Characteristic to any community shrines all the major roles in administration are performed by the male members in the community only.

The Muthappan Madappura at Parassini is a renowned shrine just like the Madayikkavu. A shrine dedicated to the theyyam Muthappan, this was once owned by a Thiyya family in the same village. The wide fame and ever-growing number of devotees made it essential to establish a management beyond a family heritage that can deal with the large number of devotees and worship they make. The case of shrines of the same theyyam associated with railway stations shows the secular nature of the beliefs in theyyam. Almost all the major railway stations in Kannur district and those in the southern part of Kasaragod has Muthappan madappura situated in close proximity. Having myths that narrates the divine power of Muthappan in helping British engineers by removing obstacles in the railroad construction, the 'Railway Muthappan madappura' stands above community or family affiliations and identity. The theyyam in these shrines happens mostly as offering by devotees.

The number of shrines belonging to Thiyya community is so large, owned both by family as well as community as a whole in village. Malliyottu Palottu Kaavu, Thayineri Kurinji, Thalayaneri Poomalakkavu etc. are some of the major ones where fieldwork had been conducted. All these places are famous for their special deities and rituals and draws

huge crowd every year. Similar is the case with shrines like Kadangottu Tharavad, Mattummal Kalari, Pattwa Tharavad etc. of Nair caste. In all these shrines there will be specific major as well as sub-deities being worshipped. Worship of ancestor or tutelary deities are done at specific cycles, usually annually with few exceptions where the *kaliyattam* happens every alternate year or even once in a decade.

Kaliyattam conducted as offering at an unconventional space and at houses of devotees are also frequent in the area. All these different events give varying picture on the whole belief in theyyam and *kaliyattam*. The study is based on fieldwork carried out in all such different types of shrines, and gives an overall picture of the whole religious system with large diversity. The contrast among the shrines and practices is also significant here.

Notes

¹ This discussion is based on the information given in the official internet portals of Kerala state government and Indian census. Retrieved from the following, <https://kerala.gov.in/state-profile>; <https://scdd.kerala.gov.in/index.php/basic-details/kerala-population-statitics-asper-2011-census>; <https://kannur.nic.in/history/>; <https://www.census2011.co.in/data/religion/state/32-kerala.html>; <https://www.census2011.co.in/data/religion/district/272-kannur.html>. Additional information on history of Kerala can be found in Iyer 1968; Ganesh 1997; Gurukkal 2010; Veluthat 2012 & 2013; Sreedhara Menon 2019.

² North Malabar is not a statutory or constitutional region but can be considered as cultural area kind of entity with considerable geo-political specialties in the olden days.

³ Menon (2008) opines that the early Sanskrit texts like Katayana, Arthasastra, Patanjali dating back to fourth to second century B.C. mentions about the present-day Kerala.

⁴ The five territories were Venad, Kuttanad, Kudanad, Puzhinad, and Karkanad, from south towards north; the classification was mainly based on the nature of soil, elevation, vegetation, etc.

⁵ Though there are a number of works on these concepts Jeffrey (1978:82) in his essay on the history of communist party in Kerala gives a valuable reference on it.

⁶ A detailed discussion on the arrival of Brahmins to Kerala can be seen in Veluthat 2013, which is considered as the most authentic and pioneering work on the same. His work deals with the formation of thirty-two settlements as villages in various parts of Kerala.

⁷ The eight *illam* or the father's family of Thiyya caste according to Thurston are Nellika, Pullanhi, Vangeri, Koyikkalan, Padayam Kudi, Tenan Kudi, Manan Kudi, and Vilakkan Kudi (Thurston 1987, vol 7: 43)

⁸ Prakash (1998) while dealing with agriculture backwardness of Malabar. Malabar has seen several agitations and protest movements especially in the first half of twentieth century related to feudalism and peasantry.

⁹ Kumar (1962) in his essay on caste system and landlessness has analysed this phenomenon in detail which reveals the 'caste-land-power' relations in the Malabar.

¹⁰ The suffixes *swaroopam* and *nadu* are conceptually different. By *swaroopam* it means the property of the god. A ruler of a place considers the land he reigns as a property of the chief god or goddess they believe as their tutelary deity. A *nadu* on the other hand is the territory with political boundaries under the ruler.

¹¹ A place where martial art was taught and practiced. The martial art indigenous to Kerala known as *kalari payattu* was practiced in a type of residential schooling system with masters belonging to specific castes (mainly Nair).

¹² *Abhishekam* and *thazhikakudam samarppanam* are two rituals used to perform in the shrines where Vedic type of system are in practice. The first one means a holy bathe of the deity in a shrine, while the second is a ritual of installation of dome of the sanctorum. Both these rituals were absent in the traditional *kaliyattam*.

¹³ Kakkattu Madom is located in a village named Madikai about five kilometers from this main Nileswaram Kovilakom (palace). The heads of the family are known with a title of Raja and were the regional rulers.

¹⁴ Based on various discussions with ritual heads of the shrine and community members and information given in the souvenir published during the *perumkalasa mahotsavam* in 2016.

Chapter Three

Myths, Narratives and the Belief System in *Kaliyattam*

The religious belief and practice system of a society will have its own characteristics and it reflects the culture of that particular place where the given society thrives. At any point of time, the beliefs and practices of a society may exist as its own unaffected by any external factors, showing distinctive features of one's own culture in the circumstances in which the society exists. But in most cases, the general features of beliefs and practices of a society will be definitely influenced by the culture of neighboring societies. The first society may adopt the customs and practices of foreign system or borrow some features and make necessary changes so as to fit into their own context. The little and great tradition (Marriott 1955) in the case of Indian context is the best way to look into these processes characterised by the belief system which they exhibit.

In any society, the little tradition in the aspect of religious beliefs is supported by folktales, myths and sometimes legends. A worship based on such cultural aspects will be indigenous to that particular society and they will have practices in terms of celebrations, rituals and so on associated with it. All societies around the world possess at least some kind of such religious traditions. In Kerala, most of the Hindu caste groups show similar traits in religious beliefs, practices, and folklore in spite of various internal differences in their religion. Within the geographical space of Kerala also we could see different cultural zones. For instance, the southern and northern parts of Kerala have a history of being part of different princely states with slightly varying culture including political and economic aspects. Here the former region comes under the erstwhile Travancore and Cochin princely state whereas the latter part comes under the erstwhile Zamorin, Kolathunadu and Thulunadu princely states.¹

Even when major festivals of the state show considerable differences in the way people approach, the regional festivals associated with local beliefs definitely have more variations and there could find indigenous rituals and festivals based on regional myths and beliefs that exist in the two major cultural zones of Kerala. The differences are more visible when considering the myths and local legends including folklore. The North Malabar itself has a wide array of folk culture of its own which is reflected in the

religious belief. The folk religious system, if we want to represent so, is heavily influenced by the folktales, myths, and legends prevailing among the people. The beliefs in regional deities of theyyam and the ritual event of *kaliyattam* are one such. The central event of propitiation of the local gods and spirits is heavily influenced by the myths and the customs, traditions, and practices associated with worship of theyyam. This in a way creates a distinct cosmos of ritual practices characteristic to it which is connected to the regional social life and culture.

In the study of belief systems in theyyam and its rituals a detailed analysis of narratives associated with it forms a major part. Narratives are the base to the belief systems of theyyam worship. These narratives explain the complete stories behind each of the theyyam and covers different types of themes from completely mythical stories to experiences of individuals and also events which are historical to the region. It is through these narratives the identity of theyyam originates and are spread across the society where it is a part. Again, it is only through the narratives that the additions, alterations and changes are getting introduced to the religious system. New stories are often added upon to the already existing ones which results in the changes in identity and scope of theyyam. Most of the theyyam have very simple stories of origin or the base characters which are localized. They can be compared to the folk religion and it is to this system the characteristic identities of mainstream Hindu religion's beliefs and practices are added. Through this, the once purely local cults get identity of the mainstream Hindu religion.

The belief system associated with theyyam worship

The North Malabar has a rich folk tradition and the local religious beliefs and practices are connected to the myths and legends in the folklore². The stories of warriors, feuds, miraculous tales of supernatural beings, black magic, superhuman acts of people, love and family tales are the main themes of this folk culture. Such mythical stories and legendary tales build the background of religious belief when supernatural incidents according to people are served to it.

According to the believers, the popular theyyam like 'Muchilottu Bhagavathi,' 'Kadangottu Maakkam,' 'Kathivannoor Veeran' and so on are based on real-life individuals and the lives they lived. Another group of theyyam has a more mythical elements added to humans like that of 'Pulimaranja Thondachan' or 'Pottan theyyam'. And a third set of theyyam has pure mythical stories behind them like that of

‘Thiruvarkattu Bhagavathi’ and ‘Chamundi theyyam’. Theyyam like ‘Vishnumoorthi’ and ‘Baali’ have stories behind them that are directly connected with epics of mainstream Hinduism like the Ramayana. The case of Vishnumoorthi theyyam can be taken to demonstrate how a single deity is being ascribed with two different narratives of two different religious traditions, viz. a local and a pan Indian. Vishnumoorthi is a combination of two stories in the present day, one the myth of a common man named Palanthayi Kannan who got killed by his feudal lord and the second is the myth connecting Palanthayi Kannan with the divine godly power of Lord Vishnu from the Hindu tradition. Thus, a single cult has two dimensions at its belief level, one at the folk religious level and the other the mainstream Hinduism. On the other hand, the ‘Baali theyyam’ which is primarily being worshipped as the main deity of artisan communities is directly connected to the epic Ramayana and has no parallel stories that connect with the local tradition. Gods like Baali from the great tradition gets into the local tradition of theyyam worship through such mythical stories as someone experiencing a divine presence of the particular deity and the astrological finding confirming the presence of the deity and starting worship by performing theyyam at specially designed shrines. The group of deities known as Marakkala Devatha, Chamundi and several ancestral deities give us an understanding of the formation and evolution of the belief system that forms the core of the theyyam.

The belief of the people of northern Kerala in theyyam also revolves around the gods and goddesses of popular Hindu³ religious belief system and such divine figures like Lord Shiva, his wife Parvathi, and their daughters in various demonic forms. In the Dravidian and folk religious system, the Shiva cult has the most prominence and the demonic, fierce and malevolent female spirits whom the people worship in several occasions also finds a connection to the primary figure of Shiva.

On the origin of theyyam worshipping, the villagers comment that theyyam has its root in rituals performed by Velan caste in the olden days and its history goes back to Sangam period. They also mention that the theyyam performing communities had a social organization similar to that of tribal communities in the nearby area and they were also connected to Buddhism and Jainism⁴. The people of Thiyya caste practice theyyam most frequently when compared to any other castes in North Malabar. According to an informant, the present Thiyya caste too had a social organisation of *gotra* (synonymous to tribal type social organisation) kind in the olden days and the present affluence in theyyam worship by them is a legacy of their past. In the

beginning, all the deities and spirits being worshipped as theyyam were local. The established and widely practiced text-based belief and worshipping of Tantric and Vedic type came only at a later stage and the traditional folk type of religious belief system got absorbed into the text based religious system. Several subsections of Tantric sects like *kaula*⁵ became the mode of worshipping in the rituals of the folk religious system so far practiced. The arrival of Namboothiri Brahmins in Kerala brought new additions to the religious beliefs and practices⁶. The introduction of Aryan cults and intentional blending of those Aryan cults with local deities are done in varying levels from myths and epics to imposing incarnation status to regional deities. Several deities that are being worshipped in the shrines as theyyam in the present day justify the blending of two different religious practices.

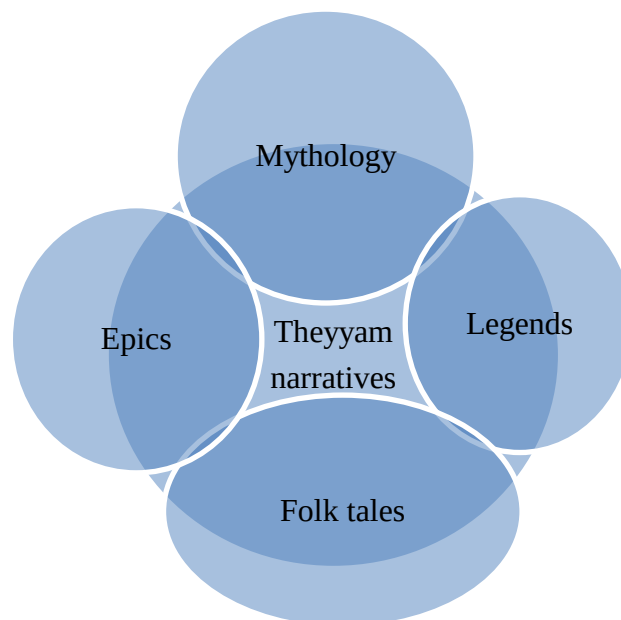


Diagram 3.1 Narratives in theyyam belief system

A classification of the narratives into different titles like myths, legends folktales and epics are rather lucid, but helpful to look into the pantheon and beliefs to understand its diversity. Parameters like time, human elements, extent of imagination and factuality are considered in this. A myth is characterised with the immemorial time, super human, fabulousness and something beyond the logic of human thought. Legends features a recent past, often includes relics, human characters, often heroic features, and so on. In the case of folk tales, the time is fluid, completely fictional with human as

well as animal characters. Lastly, epics, in this case the reliance and connection of the local cults with characters in the major epics of Hinduism like the *puranas* and *ithihasas*. Thus, all these can be found in both the belief systems and in theyyam itself.

Diversity in theyyam

Referring to local experts, theyyam has a history running back to Sangam period in South India⁷. Obviously, it was not in the same form as that happens today, but several elements of this ritual are as old as that time. According to the popular belief, the pioneer of theyyam ritual in the present form is considered as Manakkadan Gurukkal. Manakkadan Gurukkal was a sorcerer and a religious expert who lived in the village of Karivellur, north of Payyannur. Once, the chief of Kolathunadu invited him to test his abilities and ordered Manakkadan to perform thirty-nine theyyam in a single night which was impossible for a common man. With the divine ability, Manakkadan designed and performed all the thirty-nine theyyam in a single night. Impressed by this, the chief gave Manakkadan the title of '*Gurukkal*' the supreme master. Even now, Manakkadan Gurukkal is believed as the creator of theyyam. The physical form of the theyyam which is known as *kolam* consisting of facial drawing, dress, crown and so on are thought to be first designed by Manakkadan. The thirty-nine theyyam which are performed by this person is known as the '*onnukure nalpathu*' ('one less to forty,' that is thirty-nine). In addition to this thirty-nine theyyam by Manakkadan Gurukkal there is one more set of theyyam which is also considered as ancient, the '*muppathaivar*' meaning the thirty-five theyyam. These two groups of *onnukure nalppathu* and *muppathaivar* do not have any form in common. Depending on the chiefdom the primacy of group of theyyam also changes, and in the Kolathu swaroopam⁸, the first group of thirty-nine theyyam has more importance.

The myths and stories related to the origin and evolution of theyyam belief is mostly embedded in the oral literature of theyyam, the *thottam* songs. Migration is an important factor that had influence in the belief and practice system of the people. The North Malabar has considerable influence by the neighboring Thulu culture from the northeast and the Tamil from the southeast. This cultural contact has produced significant imprints in the whole belief and practice of the theyyam worship in the regions of Kannur and Kasaragod. There are instances of accommodation and adjustments happening to theyyam. Such incidents have usually happened due to the contact with mainstream Hindu belief system.

As there are around four to five hundred different theyyam in North Malabar, a complete study of all theyyam and their respective rituals is a herculean task. Since most of the theyyam can be arranged into groups based on their characteristic similarities, a classification is made in the first step. By taking selected theyyam which are representatives of different groups a detailed study can be done which can give a clear picture about the diversity in the pantheon. An approach based on analysis and interpretation of the myths, stories, caste system, nature of rituals, and changes happening to both beliefs and practices over the course of time can give an understanding on what the whole idea of theyyam means to the people. The study of contemporary scenario apart from that of the customs and traditions of the belief could reveal the people's perception and perspective on their religious practices in the modern time. The first step in doing this is to make an idea about various forms of theyyam, which is done in the following section. The myths and stories of cults, their form, relation with various caste groups, major shrines, worshipping pattern and such are narrated for the basic understanding.

Though it is not a complete list, a grouping of the theyyam can be made in the following way. For this only a few deities are taken, mostly female deities.

Mother goddesses

(Ammadaivangal)
 Thayipparadevatha (Thiruvarkattu
 Bhagavathi)
 Ashtamachal Bhagavathi
 Arathi Bhagavathi
 Ilambachi Bhagavathi
 Kannamangalathu Bhagavathi
 Bhagavathi
 Chembilottu Bhagavathi
 Manjacheri Bhagavathi
 (numerous village deities all
 connected to the Thiruvarkattu
 Bhagavathi and worshipped as
 village goddesses)

Chamundi

Rakthachamundi
 Madayil Chamundi
 Muvalamkuzhi Chamundi
 Kundor Chamundi
 Karinchamundi

Kaali

Bhadrakaali
 Veerarkaali
 Karinkaali
 Kodumkaali
 Puliyoorkaali
 Pullikkarinkaali

Table continues...

<u>Village deities</u> (<i>grama devatha</i>)	<u>Marakkala devatha</u>
Kakkara bhagavathi	Aaayitti Bhagavathi
Pramancheri Bhagavathi	Aryappoomkanni
Kannangattu Bhagavathi	Aryakkara Bhagavathi
Narambil Bhagavathi	Asuraalan Daivam
Muchilottu Bhagavathi	Vadakken Kodiveeran
	Bappiriyam
	Poomaruthan
	Chuzhali Bhagavathi

Table 3.1 Classification of theyyam⁹

The popular Hinduism and regional deities

This section discusses about the theyyam which are connected to mainstream Hindu belief. Several of the theyyam worshipped in North Malabar has myths and stories related to the epics of the Hindu religion. The chief gods of the popular Hinduism like Shiva, Vishnu, and their various incarnations are adopted in the local beliefs of North Malabar. In the region, people worship these mainstream Hindu deities not directly, but indirectly by making them as parochial or regional cults of theyyam which are believed as the incarnation of the Hindu gods and goddesses. Another specialty is that the majority of local deities are females who are worshipped as mother goddesses which are otherwise the female part of Shiva.¹⁰ This female part of Shiva is synonymous with power (*shakthi*) and it is in this ‘power of the destruction’ of evil spirits the people believe and worship.

The Thiruvarkkattu Bhagavathi is an important and significant theyyam in the region of Payyannur. This goddess is believed to be an incarnation of Shiva’s wife Parvathi who is synonymous to ‘power’ (*shakthi*). This deity has an image of a ‘grandmother’ to every devotee and is also known as ‘Madayikkavil Achi’ and ‘Thaiparadevatha’. The suffix *achi* itself means grandmother on either paternal or maternal line in regional language. Just like a grandmother’s authority to instruct and protect her children and grandchildren the people of Kolathunadu consider that

Madayikkavil Achi too has the same position and roles in their lives. This fierce goddess, also called as 'Bhadrakali' is believed to have born from the 'third eye' of Shiva having her aim to kill the demon Darika. In the eighth day of the war against Darika, Bhadrakali killed the demon and drank his blood. After fulfilling the purpose of her incarnation and being blessed by her father Shiva, she was sent to earth for the protection of human beings.

This mother goddess also symbolizes the fertility of both the flora and fauna of the region. The Madayikkavil Achi is much benevolent but at times shows the fierce malevolent character on those who make misconduct. This is just like the action of a grandmother protecting her children and punishing them for their mistakes. Informants from the village opine that the shrine of Madayikkavu has a history dating back to the time of Jainism in the region and there are myths related to this. According to local narratives, the deity is also connected to the mythical character of Kannaki of the Tamil epic 'Chilappathikaram' as the female incarnation of Lord Shiva.

Another theyyam 'Puthiya Bhagavathi' renowned in the region has a complete mythical story connected to Lord Shiva. Shiva once produced a group of goddesses from his third eye to take care of human beings on earth and the gods and goddesses in heaven with happiness and wellness. But these goddesses turned into malevolent beings and spread smallpox to the whole earth and the entire heaven. In this act even their father Shiva was not exempted from the deadly disease. To solve the trouble, Shiva again produced a spirit who could stop the epidemic and this new spirit is known as 'Puthiya Bhagavathi'. After completely eliminating smallpox from heaven the spirit came to the earth with a sword, and turmeric powder (*kanakappodi*) given by Shiva to save the human beings from the disease. After destroying the evil spirits (*asura*) who causes the epidemic on earth she found a place in a family named Moolacheri to settle down. The goddess then visited the chief of the region and the chief decided to worship the goddess as theyyam in Kolathunadu. In return the deity started to take care of the people from all bad happenings. Puthiya Bhagavathi, who is also known as *naattu paradevatha* (village tutelary deity) is mainly worshipped in shrines of the Thiyya and Maniyani communities and there are myths explaining the special relationship with these caste groups. The common plot of the mythical stories associated with the theyyam narrates the origin of the deity, its intention, miraculous activities etc. and the way they became deities worshipped in shrines.

One such myth says that the Puthiya Bhagavathi from Kolathunadu reached a *tharavadu* (ancestral household) of Thiyya community at a place called Kappoth-thara. She asked the *karanavar* (head of family) of the *tharavadu* to build a shrine (*aroodom*) for the spirit and start worshipping her with flowers, toddy and by performing theyyam. Thus, Kappothukavu became the primary shrine of Puthiya Bhagavathi. Similar is the story that explains the visit of the deity to a Maniyani *tharavadu* and occupying a sacred place. Receiving special shrines primarily at Thiyya and Maniyani families makes this theyyam a major deity of the same castes. Later there developed several other sacred shrines (*kaavu*) with the special worshipping of the deity through performance of theyyam. All these incidents and stories regarding the theyyam are narrated in detail in the oral literature (*thottam*) of the respective theyyam during the *kaliyattam*.

Similarly, the Chamundi theyyam is a group of theyyam that is again related to Lord Shiva and are considered as his daughters. These fierce, malevolent demonic deities are born to kill the demons. The myths say stories of benevolence and malevolence of these incarnations. Though there are several Chamundi theyyam, Rakthachamundi, Madayil Chamundi, Kundor Chamundi, Karinchamundi, and Kaithachamundi are the major ones. All these theyyam have their own mythical stories that explain their birth, motive behind their birth, the war they fought and the assassination of *asura*, and also their final abode in a particular shrine.

Rakthachamundi has a myth connected to the destruction of an evil demon named Rakthabeeja and the rescuing of people. Similar is the case with Madayil Chamundi. In the myth of the later, human beings are also mentioned. During their hunting two men accidentally attacked a demon named 'Paathala Bhairavi'. The angry demon took revenge on these men in the form of mishaps in their family. So as to save from misfortunes the whole family started to worship the demon as theyyam. The name Madayil Chamundi is derived from the word *mada* meaning cave where the demon often hides while in the forest. Kundor Chamundi is another theyyam belonging to the same group as the above one, Lord Shiva as father, born to assassinate the demons. The myth behind this has a slight difference from other Chamundi theyyam which are also worshipped as a 'war-goddess'. According to the myth, the spirit after killing the demon Darika went to take a ritual bath in the Kaveri River so as to cleanse all the impurities developed after the act of killing, after which, she started living near the river bank. Once a Brahmin priest named Kundur Thantri came near the river to take a

ritual bath and in his return the goddess also followed him to Kolathunadu. She was given a place at the shrine of the village god named Kundorappan (another incarnation of Lord Shiva) and people started worshipping her as Kundor Chamundi.



Photo 3.1: Raktachamundi theyyam at Anoor Puthiyaveedu Tharavadu kshetram

Karinchamundi is another forest deity which is demonic in nature. This deity is an associate of the goddess named Someswari who is also connected to the myths of Lord Shiva. The story behind this has a specialty with the presence of a Muslim man who is also performed as a Mappila theyyam associated with that of Karinchamundi during the *kaliyattam*. In the myth, the evil spirit of Karinchamundi (in human form) approached a Muslim man named Ali by offering help to assist the childbirth of his wife. The evil spirit killed the pregnant lady and ate the foetus. Seeing this, Ali who had magical abilities attacked Karinchamundi and the later became physically handicapped. Though a malevolent spirit, this theyyam is worshipped by people for its unnatural power and also to save themselves from the anger of evil spirits.

The commonalities and specialties of all these Chamundi theyyam are that they are connected through similar underlying ideas. All are basically one spirit, believed as a feminine part of Lord Shiva and has emerged for the destruction of evils in the world. The ferocious and malevolent spirits after accomplishing their motive continue to reside on earth. A proper propitiation of the spirits is necessary because of the highly

malevolent nature it can take which could make the life of human miserable. To prevent the evil activities of the spirit they are worshipped as goddess by the people. For the devotees, the worshipping of this Chamundi theyyam is a way of getting psychological satisfaction from the problems they face in their everyday life.

Kuttichathan is one of the main evil spirits being worshipped as theyyam. This theyyam comes under the group of 'Manthramoorthi theyyam' and has the Vaishnavite identity imposed on the cult. This theyyam is a key cult which is being worshipped by the Namboothiri Brahmins which is quite ironic, as belief in theyyam and their worship is practiced predominantly among the lower caste people. The Kuttichathan is one important spirit among 108 different evil spirits (*chathan*) and has three forms namely Karimkutti, Pookkutti, and Theekkutti. The story behind this theyyam is connected with the myths of Shiva and Vishnu and also has link with the Kaalakattu Brahmin family. Kuttichathan was born to Shiva and a female incarnation of Vishnu and hence the theyyam got the identity of Vishnu. The story behind this theyyam justifies the relation with the Namboothiri Brahmin caste. When Shiva and his wife Parvathi took the form of Valluvan and Valluvathi (people from the caste group Valluvan –ballad singers) and incarnated on earth, a boy was born to them with a flower mark on the forehead resembling the 'third eye' of Lord Shiva. The couple gifted the baby to Kaalakattu family and the young Brahmin couple brought up the baby as their own and appointed a scholar to educate him. As the child grew up changes started to appear in his character which is against the practices of the Namboothiri Brahmins. The boy was highly destructive in nature and showed all the heinous characters of demons and the life of the Brahmin family and life the whole village became miserable. The desperate people in the village made a plan to start worshipping Chathan to stop his cruelties. The angry and fierce Chathan got impressed by the devotion of Chalayil Perumalayan, a lower caste sorcerer. The Perumalayan worshipped the Chathan sincerely and appropriately by performing theyyam. It is believed that it was Chalayil Perumalayan who performed Kuttichathan theyyam for the first time.

Baali theyyam is an example for the connection between the local beliefs and popular Hinduism. The story of Baali as theyyam is very elaborate and it consists of both the epic Ramayana and the local myths based on the folktales that make a connection between the Ramayana characters and the theyyam cult at the regional level. Thus, Baali theyyam blends both the aspects of great and little traditions. According to the myth Baali is the son born to Indra (the king of *deva*) and Aruna (female

incarnation of Sun god). He was the king of Kishkindha and was assassinated in a war with his brother Sugreeva with the help of Lord Rama. When Baali realized that it was Rama (whom he worships with high reverence) who had killed him, was really shocked with his destiny. He questioned Rama for his act though he was a devotee of him. Impressed by the goodness of Baali, Rama blessed him to achieve *moksha*, the eternity. This is what the Ramayana epic in great tradition tells about Baali. However, based on the folktales in the region, the story continues as follows. Baali, after his death and attaining *moksha* got elevated into the status of a god and became a *daivakkaru*¹¹ through deification. He came down to earth and happened to see Mannungal Viswakarmavu -the supreme craftsman. Impressed by his attire, beauty, elegance, and good conduct, Baali decided to go with him and get an abode at his place. Baali went with the man in his umbrella (*vellolakkuda*) to his house named Mannungal and was offered oil lamp and a sacred stool (*peedom*) at a special place in the house (*padinjatta*). Thereafter, the family started worshipping Baali as *kula devatha* (clan deity) of the whole community. Later, many shrines came up in the name of this deity in places where the community lives such as Morazha, Kavunthazha, Vadakkan Kovval etc. Worshipping of Baali is considered as equivalent to that of worshipping Lord Rama and people do it for various matters like the destruction of an enemy, for increasing self-confidence, and for health and wellbeing.



Photo 3.2: Baali theyyam at Annoor Puthiyaveedu Tharavadu kshetram

Baali is one of the *kula devatha* to a group of artisan community which includes four castes namely Asari, Moosari, Thattan and Kollan (wood carpenter, brass worker, goldsmiths and blacksmith respectively) together known as Kammalar. These four castes are also known as *naanku varna* (four *varna*- meaning four castes) and all these castes frequently worship the theyyam of Baali. The *thottam* song of the theyyam is much depended on the mainstream Hindu mythology and epics. This theyyam is one of the most prominent ones which have a strong connection with Hindu mythology depicted in the epic Ramayana. Though there are two other Ramayana characters namely Sugreeva and Hanuman who are also performed as theyyam, Baali's position and status is different from the other epic characters in the Hindu pantheon. This is because the people have created their own regional myths glorifying the epic character which is a precise case of parochialization.

The performers belonging to Vannan caste have good knowledge of several stories from Ramayana and according to the situation they recite it and perform the *kaliyattam*. These include the birth of Baali, his heroic stories of victories, death, '*Thaaradukham*' (mourning of Thara, Baali's wife), '*Vibheeshanopadesam*' (advise to Vibheeshana), and Hanuman's sermon to Sita are some of the main themes they perform during theyyam. In the *Baali vijayam*, the *thottam* explains Baali's victory against Ravana.

So far, we have explained the myths and stories associated with the religious belief of the people and the nature and character of the deities they are worshipping. All these deities can be considered as the local narration of the mainstream Hindu beliefs customized to fit into the belief of the local people. This is only one case in the general themes of deities in theyyam pantheon and the following section discusses other groups with characteristic specialties.

Caste system and regional deities

When one group of theyyam is connected to the great tradition of Hindu mythology another one is more connected to the little tradition and local myths. The myths of the later type are characteristic to the North Malabar region and are connected to the life of the people in that area and to the culture of the society. Such local theyyam are mostly linked to the people who lived a common life among others. Certain annoying happenings in their life and ill-fated death followed by such incidents remain prominent in the mind of the people for a long time. The individuals who met with awful fate are

believed to take rebirth to avenge their murderers. This is a common scenario in most of the theyyam. The crucial factor in the death may be different but any such incidents or reasons reflect the social life of the people. Caste system and the concept of 'purity-pollution' including untouchability are associated with it. Male dominance and patriarchy in all socio-cultural aspects including political power, economic wealth, and knowledge act as the core aspect. Apart from these, even the basic human emotions of love, jealousy or ego in familial life become a theme of belief in theyyam. These are the prime themes behind a number of local theyyam in Payyannur region and North Malabar area in general.

The 'Thottinkara Bhagavathi theyyam' has a mythical story behind it that explains the inhumane nature of the local chief relating to caste and gender issues. According to the story popular among the devotees, a lady of Thiyya community after losing all her twelve babies at young age tried to hide all her sorrows by regularly reciting Ramayana. One day a servant of the ruling family of Chirakkal Kovilakam saw this lady reciting religious texts which was so uncommon during that time, since a lady is supposed to lead a life of sorrow and in veil. The angry servant informed the chief about the lady and the chief ordered to place fire torches on her head so as to check her power and devotion. The lady got burned and ran into a nearby river to cease the fire. She then entered a nearby house and the old lady in the house gave her clothes to wear and water to drink. After drinking water, the gravely burnt lady died there. Since then good omens were often sighted in that house and she was raised to the status of a goddess. This deity is known by the name Thottinkara Bhagavathi¹².

The story of Muchilottu Bhagavathi theyyam explains the extent to which patriarchy was very much obvious in the field of knowledge and learning. The higher caste people like Namboothiri Brahmins were the locus of knowledge and moreover, it was exclusively a matter of the male folk. Muchilottu Bhagavathi is apparently the most celebrated of all theyyam in North Malabar. With Karivellur Muchilodu as the primary shrine, there are around hundred and eighteen Muchilodu (the abode and worship place of this particular deity) in North Malabar, of which eighteen have special significance being the first group of sacred shrines of the Vaniya community. The Muchilottu Bhagavathi is also referred as *Muchilottachi* (as a grandmother), *Muchilottamma* (as a mother) and *Muchilottupothi* (as a Goddess) by devotees with high reverence. The self-sacrifice of a humiliated scholarly Brahmin lady in fire is the plot of the myth.

According to the myth, the Brahmin scholars of Perinchelloor village were experts in Vedas and there were no one in the region to challenge their knowledge. Scholars from faraway places used to come to the village and engaged in scholarly disputes with the Brahmins of Perinchelloor. The knowledge, expertise, and fame of the virgin teenage girl at the Rayaramangalam Brahmin family in Perinchelloor were unacceptable to the male folk of Brahmin scholars and the envious people waited to get an opportunity to defeat the young lady. Once, while the girl was preparing for her marriage, the chief of the village visited the Rayaramangalam Illam and requested the Brahmin to send his daughter for a discourse against a group of Brahmin scholars of Perinchelloor. The competition started at the premise of the Udayamangalam temple and in the first two days the girl defeated all elderly scholars. The enraged scholars decided to make errant plans to defeat the girl by any means to secure their pride and satisfy their wounded ego. Next day, as previously planned, they asked the girl two devious questions, “what is the most intense pain?” and "what is the most pleasurable experience?”. The virgin girl, without any doubt, replied that the pain is ‘labor-pain’ and pleasure is ‘love-making’.



Photo 3.3: Muchilottu Bhagavathi theyyam at Kadannappalli Muchilottu

The Brahmin scholars laughed by hearing the right answers and surmised that she is not a virgin and started to humiliate the girl shouting that she has experienced sexual pleasure and has given birth to children in an illegitimate way. The humiliated and insulted family of Rayaramangalam ostracized the girl. Because of this, her marriage did not happen and the humiliated girl decided to end her life by jumping into fire. She prayed before the shrines of Karivellurappan and Dayaramangalam Devi. She then saw a Vaniyan carrying oil and told him to pour oil into the fire and she jumped into the fire and ended her life so as to prove her chastity. The Vaniyan became desperate in his act and started sobbing. Later, a divine light emerged from the fire and blessed the Vaniyan. The girl ascended to the status of goddess with the blessing of Karivellurappan (Lord Shiva). This goddess has later come to be known as Muchilottu Bhagavathi. As the goddess gave her first blessing to a Vaniyan she became the community deity (*kuladevatha*) of Vaniya community and the community worships her as *Thamburatti*.

The *kaliyattam* of a Muchilottu Bhagavathi is celebrated for five or six days and the feast is an essential and key part of the *kaliyattam*. The event is considered as the marriage of the Bhagavathi, which never happens just like what happened to the girl in the myth. In the key shrines of Bhagavathi like Karivellur Muchilodu, only *perumkaliyattam* are conducted at an interval of twelve or more years. In other small shrines like Kadannappalli Muchilodu, every year *kaliyattam* is conducted. In association with the performance of Muchilottu Bhagavathi theyyam it is common to conduct the theyyam of Puliyoor Kannan and Puliyoor Kaali which are all sub-deities worshipped by the Vaniya community.

The theyyam named ‘Pulimaranja Thondachan’ also has a similar base plot related to knowledge and learning. Here it was a lower caste Pulaya man who became the victim of the power of higher caste people. This is one of the important theyyam of the Pulaya community performed at the shrines of the community by themselves. This theyyam is based on the mythical story of a person named Kaari Gurukkal. According to the story, Kaari was the son of Maniyan Kanjon and Vallikkudichi Viruntha, both of them slaves of a feudal lord named Kunjambu Nair of Chenicheri Tharavadu in Kunhimangalam village. He purchased the slave couple from Thiruvarkattu Kaavu where in the olden times slave trade was common.

The couple’s lord was kind to them, allowing their son Kaari to learn basic education at Chembidan Gurikkal which was very unusual since the lower caste people

were never allowed to learn and the lords never gave permission to their slaves to learn. However, their master also allowed Kaari to get training in martial arts by hiding his caste identity. Once he was invited to the neighboring chiefdom of Alladam Nadu for the treatment of mental illness of the chief of the region. His foster father denied permission to Kaari for this but when he received a letter for the sixth time, which mention that he will receive half of the entire property of the lord if he cures the disease of the chief, Kaari decided to treat the chief. He went to Alladam Nadu with his assistants and cured the illness of the chief. But the chief was not ready to keep his promise regarding the remuneration. He played a trick to kill Kaari by telling him to bring milk and the hair of a leopard, and if he does so the lord would give the property as he promised.

Kaari accepted the demand of the lord and decided to do the adventure by his trick of metamorphosis. He turned into a leopard and brought milk and the hair of leopard as directed by the lord and placed it in the front door of the lord's house. However, Kaari was not able to regain his human form. Thus, the lord and his assistants played this cruel trick to save their property and wealth from going into the hands of a lower caste person. After this incident, the lord's family started facing problems and misfortunes and realized that their evil act towards Kaari was the reason for all these. The lord's family gave half of their property to Kunjambu Nair, who was the patron of Kaari, and started worshipping Kaari's spirit as Pulimaranja Thondachan theyyam. Though this is the case, no higher caste people, not even the families of the chief involved in the story perform this theyyam, whereas it is only the Pulaya community who conduct it.

A discussion on theyyam related to the theme of acquiring knowledge by lower caste communities in a highly caste-based society cannot neglect the Potten theyyam. The story of Potten theyyam is connected to the Pulaya caste and Aadi Sankara, the pioneer of Hindu religious ideology. The basic plot of the myth depicts about the dialogical dispute between Adi Sankara and a Pulaya man. Though Aadi Sankara is the expert in all religious knowledge and is now intending to conquer the whole mountains of knowledge, the 'purity-pollution' concepts were rigid in his mind. Sankara was not considering all human individuals as equal which is just opposite to the ideology he preaches. One day, on his journey, a Pulaya man blocks Sankara's path and enters into an argument with him about the basics of human life touching upon the inequality

prevailing in society. After the debate, Sankara realizes that he was not practicing what he was preaching.

This popular story has another parallel version. The popular belief in the present days is that it was not a Pulaya person who blocked Sankara and questioned him but it was Lord Shiva himself in the form of a Pulaya man who tested him. One group of devotees argues that the concept of Lord Shiva was actually a construction by the higher caste people to hide the failure of higher caste person Sankara before a Pulaya man. ‘Potten theyyam’ is being worshipped by people irrespective of their caste identities. The first shrines of the deity exist at places named Thayikkara and Konthan and the primary shrine (*arooda sthanam*) is at Thalipparambu near Payyannur. Later several shrines were established at eight *kottam* (the worship places of Pulaya community) and seventy-two *sthanam* of the Pulaya communities.



Photo 3.4: Potten theyyam falling over pyre

Potten theyyam is very important for the Pulaya as well as the Malayan communities. In several places people build small shrines in a particular corner (*kanni raasi*) of their house to worship Potten theyyam. Also, there will be shrines in common places and sometimes they worship by constructing temporary shrines in the paddy fields after the harvest. The performer jumping into the fire is one of the main acts in this theyyam ritual. The pyre, known as *meleri* is made with wood of tamarind and

champak (*Tamarindus indica* and *Mangolia champaca* respectively) which are believed to be sacred. The theyyam carries fire torches made with dry coconut leaf in his hand, wear a mask and covers his body with green coconut leaves and dance over the fire. Through these acts it is believed that the theyyam is trying to communicate with the people about the power of the theyyam in handling any problem they face in their lives. The story of Potten theyyam has several meanings according to the people and for them it is mainly a symbol of resistance against the oppression of higher caste people. The social reformists often quote the story of this cult in their protests and resistance against social inequalities in terms of caste and class.

The ‘Vishnumoorthi Theyyam’ which is also known by the name *paradevatha* is the most important theyyam performed widely by Malayan community. The story of this theyyam explains the relationship between feudal lords and their serfs in the olden days. The core plot of the myth behind this theyyam is connected to a cattle herding boy named Palanthayi Kannan and the divine blessing he received from Lord Vishnu. The boy was a servant to a Nair family and one day while plucking mangoes he accidentally dropped a mango to the niece of the *karanavar* of the family. The angry man supposing that Kannan did this intentionally beats him severely and the frightened boy ran away. This boy then took shelter with an old lady who was a dedicated believer of Lord Vishnu and later Kannan also followed her and started to worship Vishnu.

After several years this boy, now a young man decided to return to his native village hoping that the *karanavar* must have forgotten the old incidents. The old lady gave a sword and shield (*pallivaal* and *paricha*) to him. Reaching the native village, he decided to take a bath in the pond and kept his weapons on the steps. The *karanavar* became angry hearing Kannan’s return and assassinated Kannan with his sword. Suddenly the *pallivaal* and *paricha* of Kannan started to vibrate and the frightened *karanavar* ran back to his house. There he saw all his cattle dead and all family members ill and the house devastated. Later the man approached an astrologer and in the astrological finding he realized that Kannan had the divine blessing from Lord Vishnu and he rose into divinity. To solve the evil happenings the *karanavar* started to worship the spirit of Kannan as ‘Vishnumoorthi theyyam’. A parallel myth associated with the theyyam connects to the epic story of Narasimha incarnation of Lord Vishnu and the assassination of Hiranyakashipu by relating with Palanthayi Kannan and the cruel Nair man.

According to beliefs it was a Malayan named Palayi Parappen who performed the theyyam of Vishnumoorthi for the first time. This Malayan was blessed with the divinity and had instruction from Vishnu in his dream about the form and the rituals to be performed for the theyyam. Vishnumoorthi theyyam is worshipped widely in this region. Whatever may be the main deity in a shrine, there will be Vishnumoorthi as sub-deity (*upadevatha*) in most of the shrines. The deity is considered as a village god, the *naattu paradevatha*, as a war deity, and as a hunting god. Because of the comparison made with the Narasimha incarnation, Vishnumoorthi theyyam is sometimes considered as an animal deity too.

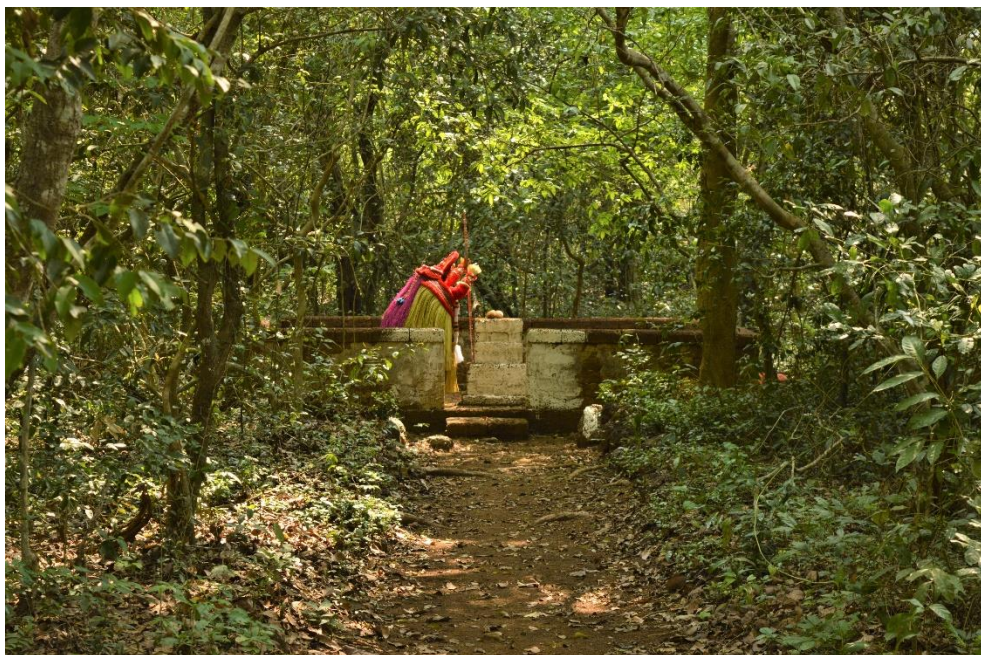


Photo 3.5: Vishnumoorthi theyyam performing rituals at a traditional *kaavu*

The *thottam* of the theyyam is lengthy and is recited by the main singer who is assisted by two other singers and drummers. Important parts of the *thottam* are Narasimha Purana and Prahladopathi. During the *thottam* the entire story of Palanthayi Kannan, Narasimha incarnation of Vishnu, the killing of Hiranyakasipu and such are recited and the theyyam dramatically demonstrates every incident. The theyyam also performs six out of the ten different incarnations of Lord Vishnu during the *thottam*. The Ottakkolam theyyam is an associated cult with Vishnumoorthi. This can be considered as a specialized form of Vishnumoorthi theyyam performing exclusively the incarnation of Narasimha and the dance on fire. It is based on the belief in Narasimha's

dance over the fire and is conducted during Ottakkolam theyyam ritual. A parallel myth behind the dance on fire depicts the incident of the Nair *karanavar*'s act of throwing Kannan into fire and the rescuing of Kannan by Vishnu from the fire in the local myth.

In the *kaliyattam* of Ottakkolam, the performer with a special protective shield with coconut leaves jumps into the huge burning heap of fire. The theyyam jumps into it several times, usually hundred or so. Because of the play with fire this particular theyyam is also known as *Thee Chamundi* (*thee* meaning fire). The gender of Ottakkolam is sometimes a matter of debate among the believers including the performers. The myth says that this is a secondary form of Vishnumoorthi, the Narasimha incarnation and, is also called as Chamundi. According to one informant who is an eminent performer of this theyyam, Chamundi is definitely a female cult, but in certain regions between Manjeswaram in the north to Korappuzha river in the south this theyyam is associated with a certain particular belief. It is in a traditional indigenous way people follow their belief and practices. In Allada Swaroopam this particular theyyam is called as Ottakkolam but in places south of Talipparamba (till Korappuzha) the same cult is named as *Thee Chamundi*. This theyyam is also treated as a cult that represents all the ten incarnations of Vishnu and when considering as *Thee Chamundi* it just represents the *moorthi* (image) of the Narasimha incarnation and has no connection to any other Chamundi, which is a common name used to represent female Shivite goddesses. Vishnumoorthi is considered as '*Lokanathan*' (the lord of all worlds) and is very important among all the theyyam. No other theyyam has the title '*moorthi*' and none of them takes different forms as this theyyam does; that is, performing several incarnations of one single divinity.

Depiction of family and kinship relations

Family life and human emotions also matters in the belief system of the people and theyyam like Maakkam and Kathivanoor Veeran have myths related to that. 'Maakkappothi' theyyam is based on the story of a Nair woman and her two young children who once lived at Kunhimangalam village near Payyannur and was killed by her own brothers believing the false words of their jealous in-laws. Maakkam was the youngest and the only girl to twelve brothers in a Nair family named Kadangottu. She was the dearest sister to all her brothers and after her marriage she gave birth to twins, a boy and a girl. All her brothers were married but none had children and their wives were jealous of Maakkam for being a mother and being the dearest to their husbands.

They decided to put her in danger and when all the brothers were out of the village for their duty of helping the local chief in war, their wives executed their plan.

The envious sisters-in-law made false stories of an illegitimate relation of Maakkam with a Vaniya man who sells oil at their house. The ladies convinced their husbands about this relationship and advised them to kill their sister to protect the pride of the family. The brothers took her to a shrine at a distant place and she realized that they are planning to assassinate her and her children. She prayed to their family deities about her innocence. Later, on the way, the brothers assassinated Maakkam and her children and put their body in a nearby well. It was only the youngest brother and his wife who were against this plan and they did not join with others in the cruel act.

Soon after tragedies started to affect the Kadangottu family. The house caught fire and got destroyed completely. The brothers lost their mind in killing their innocent sisters and killed each other and their wives also became mad. It was only the youngest brother and his wife who did not end up in bad fate. The innocent Maakkam and her children who later became *daivakkaru* are believed to take revenge on her family members. After this incident, people of that region started worshipping Maakkam and her children as theyyam and were propitiated during important occasions. The performance of the theyyam is usually known as '*Maakkavum Makkalum*' (Maakkam and her children). Apart from the three key theyyam, a clown named Maavilan is also involved in the event. He was the person who got murdered by the angry brothers of Maakkam suspecting that he witnessed the assassination of Maakkam.

Since Maakkam and her daughter Cheeru are the female cults they have the normal appearance of Bhagavathi cults. Fire torches are important in the theyyam. Maakkam has six and Cheeru has four large fire torches (*kettu pantham*) attached to the waist dress and twenty-one and three small fire torches are attached on the crown of Maakkam and Cheeru respectively. On the other hand, her son Chaathu being a male cult is portrayed as a *veeran* (hero) with characteristic costumes. The heroic nature of this cult is displayed with elaborate martial art performance. Maavilan, the fourth character in the performance has an entirely different attire compared to the other three. Also, this character is not a 'god' or 'goddess' though he is a part of the event. He has black and white dress with facial and body painting along with ornaments made of leaves, sickle and a bunch of grass in his hand. This character is portrayed as an entertainer who makes presence in the event in a humorous way, acts like a clown, interfere in the dance of the theyyam and entertain the audience.

In the *kaliyattam*, the complete life of the Nair lady and her children is narrated in poetic manner and enacted by ritual performers. This entire narration takes almost six to eight hours. Though it is the divine stories of gods and goddesses conducted as a religious ritual, in the performance the entertainment elements have dominance. Two cases where there is an overemphasis on entertainment elements are the characters of Chaathu and Maavilan. Chaathu was assassinated when he was a boy but is presented in the event as a hero in characteristic costumes and with an elaborate display of martial arts. Similarly, the Maavilan who is a tribal man who happened to witness the killing of Maakkam and her children is presented as a clown who makes funny acts during the event. These elements show that the *kaliyattam* is not a mere performance of a religious ritual but it is also a dramatic performance of folk culture in the particular region.

Kathivannoor Veeran is one of the most celebrated theyyam in this region, the performance takes one night and a day explaining the life of the hero named Mangattu Mannappan. People believe that this is based on the life of a real person who lived a few centuries back and died in a war. Informants affirm their beliefs by quoting all the places mentioned in the story as real. There are also evidences which substantiate the real existence of the person who is now being worshipped as a theyyam. The elaborate *thottam* song of this theyyam narrates the incidents like the birth of the protagonist, his expulsion from home, his journey to the distant place of Kudaku to meet his maternal uncle, his married life, and the tragic death. One of the performers of this theyyam informed that the names of the places which are mentioned in the *thottam* were used to explore the reality of the historical life of the person and researchers were able to trace the complete route. They also found several places mentioned in the *thottam* and most significantly, they found a bunch of weapons, mostly swords and knives, which are thought to be used by the protagonist.¹³

The lead character in the story, Mannappan was born to Kumarappan and Chakkiyamma of a Thiyya family named Mangattu tharavadu. He was the only child born to them after long prayers and waiting and they treated him with much love and care. Mannappan was always into play in his childhood. Even when he reached his teenage, he was not ready to listen to his parents and did not work or assisted parents and was leading a playful life. One day while having his meal angry Kumarappan scolded Mannappan for his carelessness and laziness. Enraged by this, Mannappan left home and on the way, he saw his friends going to Kudaku heading towards the market. There was a high level of mercantile contact existing between Kolathunadu of North

Kerala and Kudaku of Karnataka in those times. Though Mannappan was a close friend of the trading group, they were not interested in taking Mannappan with them due to his laziness which may bring trouble to the whole group and also for the reason that Mannappan left home after a fight with his father. Upon arriving at his uncle's house, the family received him with pleasure. His uncle gave a share of land to Mannappan and he started working very hard in the field and became a successful farmer. One day, on his way back home after selling coconut oil at Virajpettai market Mannappan saw a lady named Chemmarathi from Kavuthiya community. He fell in love with the lady and got married.



Photo 3.6: Kathivanoor Veeran theyyam dancing around *Chemmarathi thara*

Though the couple loved each other their marital relationship was not very happy. Once, after his trade at the distant market Mannappan was not able to return home on time and spent the night at a kraal. In the morning, by the time Mannappan arrived home his wife was angry and she was not ready to open the gate. She was shouting at Mannappan about where and with whom he spent the previous night. Later, while having his meal he saw several bad omens and after that he heard the roaring sound of Kudaku people for war. Since he was a fighter, he left the meal unfinished and set for war. A successful warrior Mannappan and his friends were able to defeat the Kudaku people and returned triumphantly. On the way back, he found that he had lost his little

finger and a ring. Mannappan believed that it is not a heroic attitude to return without the particular ring which is a status symbol. He also thought that if he returns home with a lost finger, physically handicapped, his wife will definitely mock and make fun of him by calling him a handicapped. Neglecting the words of his friends, Mannappan returned to the field alone and the Kudaku people killed him.

Mannappan's uncle and his nephew rushed to the scene and they were not able to find his body which was cut into several pieces by the enemy. With the few body parts which they could retrieve they prepared fire to make a proper cremation. When the fire was lit, Chemmarathi reached there, crying loudly and ended her life by jumping into the fire. After cremating Mannappan's body parts at the riverside his uncle and nephew realized that Mannappan and Chemmarathi became *daivakkaru*. They started worshipping them by making necessary arrangements like the shrine, the *palliyara* and the sacred stool, the *peedom*.

In a *kaliyattam* of Kathivanoor Veeran theyyam, there is only one *kolam*, that of Kathivanoor Veeran. Chemmarathi does not have a *kettikkolam* (the form of theyyam) instead the special construction of a raised platform with sixty-four oil torches indicates Chemmarathi. This is called *Chemmarathi thara* and the major rituals and dramatic acts are centered on this fire. In the performance, the entire story of the life of Mannappan is explained which takes almost one full day to complete. By around midnight the *thottam* ends and an elaborate display of martial art by the *kolakkaran* starts. This performance demonstrates the heroic nature of the warrior Mannappan, his expertise in warfare as a 'veeran'. The performer displays various *kalarimura* (martial art tricks) and skills with a variety of swords and other weapons, jumping into fire and so on. This is done to symbolize the heroic nature of the protagonist before the audience and it produces a lot of excitement and reverence in the mind of the devotees towards the theyyam.

While reciting the incident of the marriage of Mannappan, the theyyam considers all the devotees and entire people gathered there as participants in the marriage and starts talking to them just like that. Another important event is that of *vazhinada*, which involves the acts and performance of explaining Mannappan's journey from Mangattu to Kudaku. During this time, the theyyam make visit to nearby houses, sometimes that of the relatives' families of the conductor of the ritual. During all this time, theyyam converses with people in an entertaining way as well as in a serious mode. The deity listens to people's problems and suggests proper remedies and also consoles them.

People conduct and worship this theyyam for various reasons and it is related to the character of the protagonist too. Believing that Mannappan is a warrior who won the fight against enemies in the war, devotees take vows to conduct this theyyam for their attainment of victory or the satisfaction of their needs and wishes. There are several instances when people take a vow to conduct this theyyam as an offering, for example, if they win a court case in favor of them, usually related to land disputes or other property related issues. In the case of land disputes, a devotee may make an offer to conduct the theyyam in that particular land which was under dispute if he wins the court decision.

Similarly, young women worship Kathivanoor Veeran to get good husbands. This is based on the belief that Mannappan was a good loving husband to Chemmarathi and devotees expects a husband like him by worshipping him. This has considerable symbolic meaning and significance. That a belief pattern has developed in the minds of the people based on certain specific characters of the protagonist in the myth. By rising to the status of a god, Mannappan got his characters became ideal and people worship him in getting such characters. The human character that is portrayed in the story of Kathivanoor veeran explains how the god is closely related to common man and their emotions. In the story of the theyyam, till the assassination of Mannappan by Kudaku people, the protagonist exhibits all the human nature like laziness, pride, hardship, love, affection, despair etc., and only after the death, he rose to the divine status with special characters. Through the performance of this theyyam this ritual ceremony tries to communicate with the audience the very humane emotions of divinities as well as the godly nature of the theyyam. For the villagers, this theyyam is a representation of everyone's individual character.

There are parallel stories related to the death of the protagonist that give an idea of how a common man he was. Mannappan was highly depressed and lost his family life. His relation with Chemmarathi was miserable. According to other narrations and interpretations, for escaping from all these troubles Mannappan had committed self-sacrifice. Informants opine that a man who failed to live a normal life and committed self-sacrifice can also become a divine person. What the informants say is that the common people of this land have a mind to make even a failed man into a god, if his heart is pure. That is, it is not necessary to have any divine blessing on a person to become a god after death and a virtuous life in earth followed by hapless demise give rise to divinity. Another important aspect the informant differentiates here is the

difference between the folk deities and deities of mainstream beliefs. Though the major gods of the mainstream religions are no exception from bad characters of envy, jealousy, lust and such; it is by masking all such negative aspects of these deities people worship them as complete virtuous and divine. But in the case of folk deities, the gods are closer to human and people worship their gods with all their humanly characters, irrespective of good or bad. Apart from these major ones, in the stories associated to many other theyyam the family relations also become a theme. ‘Kuttichathan’ and ‘Muthappan’ are examples for this; both having a plot of adoption of babies of celestial god by childless couples and their conflicting ways of life as human in the society and a final exhibition of divine characters either as destroyers or as protectors.

Theyyam related to agriculture activities and fertility

Fertility cults are an important part of theyyam worship and ‘Kurathi theyyam’ is one such cult worshipped in family shrines in this region. The deity is believed as the incarnation of Parvathi. More than being a fertility cult the deity is also considered as a protector of family and as a great mother. A favorite goddess of women, the deity is a loving and caring mother. If Kurathi theyyam is traditionally worshipped in a shrine, it will be the first one to be performed in the *kaliyattam*.



Photo 3.7: Kurathi theyyam with sickle and a bunch of grass depicting paddy harvesting

The theyyam comes before the devotees with a sickle in one hand and fresh coconut leaves in other hand indicating paddy. Sometimes the theyyam dance with a *muram* (winnowing sieve) in her hand, representing various agriculture activities. Giving feast to the theyyam is a key element in the rituals associated with this theyyam. In the feast, beaten rice and puffed grain are served in a plantain leaf. In another leaf, cooked rice, various vegetable curries, chicken, and fish are also served. Tender coconut water and milk are placed near the food. The theyyam sits before the food and acts like enjoying the feast.

Usually, men from Velan community perform this theyyam. However, Koppalar and Pulayar also perform it in their shrines. The regional variations in the myths have resulted in the diversity of Kurathi theyyam across Payyannur region and there are local deities named Kunjar Kurathi, Pullikkurathi, Malamkurathi, Thekkankurathi etc. Each of these cults will have some special identities but the core myth and concept remain the same as an agriculture or fertility goddess. In other way, the underlying structure of the myths and narratives remain same and the visible identity changes across villages.

‘Kaalichaan’ is another theyyam in the same group and among all the agriculture fertility theyyam Kaalichaan is the most important one. Performed by Pulaya community who were the main agriculture laborers, this theyyam is considered as a cattle herder and protector of cattle. The theyyam enters in the paddy fields and perform the first sowing of paddy of that season and is considered as an important agricultural ritual.

The underlying myth is again connected to Lord Shiva who once came to earth for hunting and the highly enthusiastic hunter lost sense of time and failed to return home before dusk. A boy born to Shiva and a village deity named Paadikkuttiyamma is the protagonist in this myth. The mischievous boy made calamities in the village with the divine power gained from his father. The boy one day turned against his own foster family and made the family members sick. The head of the family after finding the reason for the fate through astrological device realized the divine power of the boy and decided to worship him as theyyam. The god then moved to Karivellur and joined with *kaaliyan* (cattle herders). The deity is worshipped in many sacred shrines in various places in the region.

Kaalichaan is believed to be living in *kanjiram* tree (*Strychnos nux-vomica*) which is an evergreen tree and it symbolizes year-round wellness. Worshipping of

Kaalichaan on the 10th of Thulam month, which comes usually in the last week of October every year, is very important to the believers. It is with this ritual the *kaliyattam* in Payyannur region begins. A special ritual feast of ‘*kaalichaan oottu*’ is performed at the base of *kanjiram* tree thereby worshipping Kaalichaan for a good agriculture season and for the wellbeing of livestock. Rice cooked with milk and sugar is prepared for the deity. The theyyam, with sickle, bow, and arrow walk in the paddy field and sow paddy in the freshly prepared field. The special food made as an offering to the theyyam is distributed to the devotees at this occasion.

The ‘Vayanattu Kulavan’ who is also known as *Thondachan* (great father) is an important theyyam of Thiyya community. Though this theyyam has the same myth both in Kannur and Kasaragod districts, the rituals associated with the festival have considerable variations. In the Kasaragod region, a *kaliyattam* of Vayanattu Kulavan, named as ‘*Theyyamkettu Maholsavam*’ is an elaborate ceremony just like a *perumkaliyattam* in other regions. The crux of the myth is related to the life of a divine person who is believed as the founder of Thiyya community in North Malabar. The local myth narrates that Lord Shiva created a son from his thigh and named him Divyan and assigned him to collect toddy from the palm trees. He was entitled to collect toddy from all the gardens for Shiva except from a special garden called ‘*kadali madhuvanam*’. One day Divyan entered into that forbidden garden and seeing big pots filled with toddy he drank it ignoring his father's direction. As Divyan broke the rule and committed a sin he lost his eyesight.

Witnessing the sadness and agonies of his son, the affectionate father gave his son a pair of fake eyes. Lord Shiva gave him a fire torch also, made of bamboo and directed him to go to earth as a punishment as he violated his rules. He arrived first at a place called Wayanad and hence the name ‘Vayanattu Kulavan’. Though he had pseudo eyes and fire torch, he was not able to see anything properly and the smoke from the burning torch again reduced the visibility. The desperate and angry Divyan threw the torch and pseudo eyes from a hill top and they fell into the property of a person named Kannan of Aadiparamban family. The eyes and torch fell in the *padinjatta*, the room where worship take place and other religious and sacred things are kept and the family started worshipping these sacred objects. After this incident, Divyan is known by the name ‘Vayanattu Kulavan’ –a divine being. Kulavan means lord or chief of a *kulam*, meaning a community. Worshippers belonging to the Thiyya caste believe that he is the lord or founding father of the Thiyya community, whose main job is toddy tapping. There are

also myths explaining his journey to places from Valappattanam in the south to north of Kasaragod.¹⁴ The *thottam* song explains his journey in detail, the hurdles and resistance he faced from various people, and also the establishment of various shrines of worship.

The myths add that, on his journey to Kolathunadu, Divyan was subjected to trial by the lord of the region who asked him to fetch some wild meat. In a barren land, he could hunt wild boar and leopard (*nari*) and presented the meat to the chief. With this story people believe that he is a ‘hunter with divine power’ and the theyyam always carries a bow and arrow. The hunted game was an essential part of the rituals of this theyyam in the olden days. In the present-day changes are happening and regional variation exists in using meat in rituals. In the Kasaragod region wild games are hunted and served to devotees during the *kaliyattam*, where as in Kannur the organizers replace wild meat with chicken and in southern parts of Kannur no meat is used in the ritual.

There are two other theyyam which are also performed during the event of ‘*Vayanattu Kulavan Theyyamkettu Maholsavam*’. One is named Kandanar Kelan and the other Korachan. According to the myth, Kelan was a servant of a wealthy family named Meledath tharavadu and he was entitled to do shifting cultivation in their land. One day, intoxicated Kelan lit fire to the forest and later only he realized that he got surrounded by fire with no possible exit. The alarmed Kelan tried to escape by climbing a tree but was bitten by two cobras that were living in the tree. Kelan and the two snakes fell into the fire and burned to death. Vayanattu Kulavan happened to see the burned corpse of Kelan and gave rebirth to him by using his sacred bow. Blessed by Vayanattu Kulavan, Kelan got deified into a God and joined with Vayanattu Kulavan for the rest of his journey.

The myths of these characters give light into certain economic activities of the people in the region in the olden days. The toddy-tapping and its processing is the occupation of the Thiyya caste and is the same job that is done by Vayanattu Kulavan. This community is also engaged in small-scale agriculture activities and production of cash crops. In the mythical story, Vayanattu Kulavan is portrayed as the protector of the agriculture land. The hunting has two aspects, one representing the subsistence activity of hunting the game and also protecting the crop from wild animals by killing them. The bow and arrow of the theyyam is an essential object in the ritual. The myth also narrates the slash and burn mode of cultivation that was prevalent in the North Malabar. Kelan was actually a peasant who was engaged in clearing the forest for cultivation. Attacks by snakes and other wild animals were common in the olden days and the story

of Kelan also commemorates the difficult life situation of the past generation in finding a living.



Photo 3.8: Vayanattu Kulavan theyyam

Apart from the high popularity among devotees, Vayanattu Kulavan theyyam has been a matter of controversy for a long time for the animal sacrifice associated with it in this region. This has invited a considerable attention from people of various scores ranging from researchers, activists, government officials of forest department apart from the religious worshippers and ritual enthusiasts in Kasaragod district. On the contrary, in Kannur district it is conducted as a religious ceremony just like any other theyyam ritual with a kind ‘grand-fatherly’ figure, mostly in an amusing mood and often entertaining the kids.

It is noteworthy to mention about the ritual of *Kothamoori aattam* while discussing about agriculture deities. This theyyam performed by young boys from Malayan community is nowadays not taken as pure theyyam and a ritual of *kaliyattam*, but still comes under the broad spectrum of theyyam. The performer uses costumes imitating an ox and dance with the songs sung by the drummers and assistants. The theme of the song is related to Lord Vishnu and his incarnation of Krishna, a protector of cattle and a herder. This ritual demonstrates the prosperity of agriculture activities, connecting with the cattle named Godavari (Kothamoori is a corrupted form of the word Godavari in local language). Once an essential part of the agriculture related

rituals and festivals, this dance form (*aattam*) has less significance in the ritual space of *kaliyattam*.

Elements of animal worshipping in theyyam

The belief system of the people of North Malabar is connected to the nature and often worshipping of various animal forms an important part of theyyam. Animals are being used in sacrifices and form a major aspect in theyyam too. There are two types of animal deities in theyyam; first one is the direct performance of mythical animal characters and the second is the performance of animal incarnation of deities which are otherwise anthropomorphic. The main animal figure in theyyam is the leopard and there exist a group of theyyam with '*puli*' (leopard) as major character. Similarly, there is the snake (Nagakanni), monkey (Bappuran, Baali, Sugreevan, Hanuman etc.), and also the representation of crocodile (Muthala-theyyam). Of all the animal deities, the Puli-theyyam and Baali are the most important and the significant one.

The most important group in Puli-theyyam is the '*aivar theyyam*'. According to the myth, Shiva and Parvathi once took the form of leopards and came to earth as Pulikandan and Pullikarinkali. They had six cubs, five males and one female, namely Kandappuli, Maarappuli, Pulimaaruthan, Kaalappuli, Puliyoor Kannan and Puliyoor Kaali. One day, the hungry leopards killed the cow of a local chief of Kurumbrathiri and the angry chief asks one of his warriors, Karinthiri Kannan to kill the leopard. During the attempt to kill the leopards, the animal kills the warrior as the leopard was an incarnation of Lord Shiva. This warrior later got elevated to the divine status and became a *daivakkaru*. The chief's fate was opposite to this. The furious leopard gods started making troubles to him for his attempt to kill them and when it was revealed to him that he needs to appease the angry gods by giving a proper abode of *kaavu* and *peedom*. The chief then started worshipping the godly beings in the form of leopards by conducting *kaliyattam* ritual and theyyam.

This *puli-theyyam* became an important and major deity in around forty shrines in Payyannur region and also became associated as sub deities of other gods. There are shrines where all the five theyyam are performed (*aivar theyyam*), but most usually two theyyam, that of Puliyoor Kaali and Puliyoor Kannan are performed. Though these deities are children of Shiva and Parvathi, the female theyyam (Puliyoor Kaali) is considered as Parvathi herself. These theyyam are performed by Vannan community and the most attractive thing regarding this theyyam is the appealing steps and dance of

the deity. People gather in large numbers to witness the dance of the theyyam. The two theyyam exhibits considerable differences in their appearance when compared to other theyyam.

Worshipping of snake is a predominant feature in Payyannur region. The traditional sacred groves or *kaavu* have a worshipping place specifically dedicated to serpent gods and goddesses. Feeding of the serpent with milk and turmeric powder is a very common ritual in such *kaavu*. In Payyannur area, the serpent deities are revered as theyyam. Devotees believe that these serpent gods were born in the middle of the milky ocean, from coral gardens of the serpent kingdom. There are a number of different serpent theyyam like Naagakanni, Naagarajan, Naagakandan, Naagapothi etc. Usually, Naagakanni and Naagakandan theyyam are performed by Vannan community while Naagakali and Naagabhagavathi are performed by Panan and Munnoottan community. The cult has serpent forms in their outfit. The headgear (*mudi*) of Nagabhagavathi itself is known as *nagamudi*, literally the hair of serpent or serpent crown. In addition to the resemblance of *mudi* with serpent form, other ornaments of theyyam also have snake form. There is a special facial drawing for serpent theyyam by the name *naagam-thazhthi ezhuthu*. These theyyam are mainly worshipped for fertility and the goddesses are believed to be a healer from diseases. Major shrines of serpent theyyam are Kayyath Naagam, Muyyath Naagam, Erumbaala Naagam, and Karippaala Naagam.

The Muthalaththeyyam (crocodile theyyam) is a theyyam that imitates the form of a crocodile and is considered as a tribal (*adivasi*) cult. The myth explains the incarnation of a goddess in the form of a lady from Mavila caste, turning into a crocodile and helping a Brahmin priest at a temple. The priest then joined the Mavila community and even now some group of the Mavila community acknowledges their earlier contact with the Brahmin community. Thereafter the Mavila community started worshipping the deity by performing a theyyam in the form of a crocodile. Being a community of very low social status, all the rituals and associated activities including the performance of theyyam are done entirely by the Mavila community only. No other caste group will associate with them. Similar is the case with Pulaya and Koppalar castes who are considered as very low in social status. The acts of the theyyam are an imitation of crocodile, always crawling on the floor. All the acts including the blessing of devotees are done by lying on the floor only. There are certain special features for this cult unlike other theyyam, where instead of coconut leaves, the leaves of areca nut are being used to make the dress. There will be no vocal communication (*uriyadal*) even during the

blessing time of the deity and only *elathalam* is used as the musical instrument for *thottam*. There are figures of scorpion, lizard, snake, centipede, and tortoise painted on the crown of this theyyam.

Mappila theyyam

A striking feature of the belief system in *kaliyattam* is the presence of cults which have religious identity other than that of Hinduism. As the belief is based mostly on the local society and deities were common men and women who lived in the region, deification of individuals from all different religious groups in society is also possible. Followers of Islam religion comes next to that of Hinduism in North Malabar and they form a close-knit part of the social fabric. This has its reflections in theyyam too. Muslim personalities are present either as main deity or associated characters to major deities in theyyam.

Bappiriyam theyyam is one of the important theyyam (Mappila theyyam) which is performed in association with theyyam of Marakkala devatha or Arya theyyam. There are several stories about this theyyam and the popular one says that Bappiriyam was the captain of the wooden vessel in which the Arya Devatha, who are a group of goddesses believed to have arrived at North Malabar from the far northern region of the sub-continent via the Arabian Sea. They are also called as Marakkala devatha after the wooden vessel (*marakkalam*) on which they travelled. Bappiriyam was actually the captain to the main goddess in the group named Aryappoomkanni. In the voyage the vessel met with an accident and Aryappoomkanni lost her brothers in the wreck and it was Bappiriyam who helped the lady in the trouble. Bappiriyam was astonished by the aura of the lady and he bowed before her with reverence. Later they reached a place named Thalipparamba and being considered as divine beings they got a seat of worship in Kaithakkeel shrine. While this is the story prevailing in North Malabar region the same cult has an alternate story in Kasaragod region where Bappiriyam is a Muslim trader. The celebration of the cult with Muslim identity and the mythical stories associated with it is thought to be a representation of secular notion, and Hindu–Muslim religious harmony prevailing in the northern Malabar.

Ali theyyam is another theyyam which has Muslim identity. This theyyam is performed as an associated character in the *kaliyattam* of ‘Karinchamundi theyyam’. Mythically narrated as a sorcerer who made fight with the demonic Karinchamundi, during the *kaliyattam* Karinchamundi and Ali theyyam performs acts of fierce clash.

Unlike Karinchamundi which is the main deity in the event, Ali theyyam is not being worshipped by the devotees. They have the role of an actor in the performance of the ritual¹⁵. Ummachittheyyam is still another theyyam in this category which has a complete identity of a Muslim woman. The story behind this theyyam explains the murder of a lady who was a servant in a higher caste Hindu ruling family and her rise into divinity as theyyam, followed by worship by the family to rid of their sin by appeasing her. Unlike the previous one, Ummachittheyyam is not just an actor but is a theyyam in the full sense of a goddess and people worship her.

Basic theme	Theyyam
Elements of mainstream Hinduism	Thiruvarkattu Bhagavathi, Chamundi theyyam, Kuttichathan, Baali
Caste system	Thottinkara Bhagavathi, Muchilottu Bhagavathi, Pulimaranja Thondachan, Potten theyyam, Vishnumoorthi
Family and kin relation	Maakkam, Kathivanoor Veeran
Agriculture	Kurathi, Kaalichan, Vayanattu Kulavan, Kandanar Kelan, Kothamoori
Animal worship	Pulitheyyam, Naaga devatha, Baali, Bappuran, Hanuman, Muthalatheyyam
Non-Hindu theyyam (mostly Muslim)	Bappiriyam, Ali theyyam, Ummachitheyyam

Table3.2. Typological classification of theyyam under discussion

Analysis of characters in theyyam pantheon

To understand the features of the belief system of the people on theyyam a general analysis of the characteristics of each of the groups is required. The close observation of each of the previously mentioned theyyam could reveal the general nature, differences, and specialties of each of them and how people connect these with their own religious belief and other aspects of their culture. In the large pantheon, people worship any theyyam based on different perspectives and occasions. Preferences of theyyam have different parameters and the character of the deity is one among them.

The numerical strength of the shrines and deities also becomes a major matter. One theyyam may have much popularity, a large number of shrines across the region and a large number of devotees worshipping it. On the other hand, another deity may have very few shrines and a smaller number of devotees. The theyyam like Rakthachamundi, Madayil Chamundi, Vishnumoorthi, Potten theyyam etc. are very common and we could see them in most of the shrines irrespective of the chief deity of worship in that particular shrine.

The specialty of Thiruvarkattu Bhagavathi is already discussed in the previous section and an important aspect to be noted about this theyyam is that the myth of this theyyam is the core story behind several Bhagavathi theyyam in the pantheon. In addition, various Chamundi theyyam are also connected to the Bhagavathi theyyam by sharing the myth of Lord Shiva. In this myth Kaali, Lord Shiva's daughter or the female power of Shiva, assassinate the demonic *asura* who used to make the life of people very miserable. This is the common theme behind both Bhagavathi as well as Chamundi theyyam. That is, the whole ritual event of *kaliyattam* is connected to the worship of Shiva's daughter, or more precisely to Lord Shiva himself. This is one explanation for what the ritual event of *kaliyattam* is; besides a large number of cults which are not connected to Shiva are also present.

The special significance of Thiruvarkattu Bhagavathi is again connected to the shrine of Thiruvarkattu Kaavu which is also known as Madayikkavu. Being a historically significant shrine of the Mushaka kingdom in the olden days and the later Kolathu Swaroopam, the politico-religious sovereignty is the prime aspect demonstrated in this theyyam. There are a number of shrines in the Payyannur area where this deity is worshipped as *naattu paradevatha* (village deities) symbolizing its supremacy in the pantheon. The theyyam of Bhagavathi and Chamundi are complete mythical characters. The Puthiya Bhagavathi (literally 'new goddess') was created to save people from smallpox that had made people's life miserable. The people believed that the cause for the epidemic was a malevolent goddess and 'Puthiya Bhagavathi' killed the goddess of smallpox and saved the people.

Epidemics like smallpox were rampant in the olden days and there were no proper medical facilities to tackle it and save people's life. What the people could do was to pray to god for saving their lives and they created a specific goddess as their savior from epidemics. Worshipping of the deity in the present times as theyyam is done for the similar reason of the wellbeing of people without falling to diseases. In the

olden days the procession of the Puthiya Bhagavathi theyyam from a shrine to the nearby places was the main event in the *kaliyattam*. The ritual procession (known as *maarimattal*) is performed to ward off epidemics like smallpox. The theyyam visits all households irrespective of caste and religion and give *kuri* to people. This *kuri* made with turmeric and rice flour is believed to be of special medicinal quality and as it is given by the god it has more power to ward off smallpox, according to the believers. As the health and medical facilities increased and people's belief in such supernatural curing methods decreased, and as a result, nowadays the theyyam make visits to the houses merely as part of the old custom.

Myths of Rakthachamundi, Madayil Chamundi, and Kundor Chamundi are basically the same, a goddess born to kill the *asura* who made the life of people miserable. The reason for the frequent worshipping of these cults could be attributed to the identity of them as the savior of people from the demons. In practice, the fierce acts of the cult as theyyam and the display of goddesses' power through various means like attire, act, myth etc. make a devotee finding psychological relief from whatever problems they face in their daily life. Among the different Chamundi theyyam, the Karinchamundi deserves a special attention. This cult is fiercer than any other Chamundi theyyam in its acts and it has a different myth which cut across the boundary of Hindu religion. The *kaliyattam* of this theyyam is one of the important performances that involve a Muslim character. The story of Karinchamundi brings together a Hindu goddess with a Muslim man who lived in this place with the characteristic social composition of North Malabar.

The story of the Thottinkara Bhagavathi has acceptance among the devoted believers more than a mere myth. They strongly believe that this theyyam is based on real events that had happened in the life of a lady. The core of the myth is the murder of the lady belonging to Thiyya caste by the local chief for reciting a religious text in the time of mourning after the death of her children. The fate of the lady portrays the social condition of lower caste people prevailed in the olden times in this region. There are two factors that are observable from the myth of this theyyam, one the caste injustices and second the male dominance and associated patriarchy. In the olden days it was considered as a punishable crime to read Hindu religious books by lower caste people. The higher caste Brahmins were the decision makers of all religious activities and their directions were executed by the ruling upper caste communities with their political authority and power. Secondly, the society is highly patriarchal and thus,

feminine identity was also another serious matter. A lady is supposed to live her entire life inside the house, doing household chores, working in the field like a bonded labourer to the higher caste masters. She was not allowed to come to the public or express her emotions there. The protagonist in the story violated all these norms and by hiding all her sorrow of losing her children tried to find peace in reading religious books. An act of deviation from normality made the people of higher caste angry and assassinated her. The latter part of the story is the mythical addition to it, the deification of the ill-fated lady and her revenge against the murderers and the protection of poor people from the oppressive higher caste people.

The theme of Muchilottu Bhagavathi theyyam is similar to that of Thottinkara Bhagavathi. The lead character in this myth is another lady whose knowledge and scholarship in Vedic texts and other sciences became the reason for the fate she faced from the patriarchal society. While the lady in the Thottinkara Bhagavathi myth belonged to a lower caste community of Thiyya, that of Muchilottu Bhagavathi belonged to the Brahmin community, which was considered as the doyen of all knowledge and authority in society. But it was the female identity of the lady that mattered in the whole happenings. The event that has happened is real, the ostracization of a young lady from the community by egoistic male folk shows the extreme fundamentalist character of the patriarchal society of that time. Irrespective of the caste identity, women were not allowed to acquire knowledge and enter to the mainstream in those times. Any such incidents were suppressed with extreme punishments by the men.

Muchilottu Bhagavathi is believed to be a very powerful deity and one who take care of the wellbeing of everyone. Though the lady in the myth died before marriage, the theyyam is called as *amma* (mother), for the protection and caring of a mother or grandmother ascribed over her by the people. Another synonym of the cult, '*annapoorneswary*' is the identity given to her because of the care she gives to the agricultural activities and production. The theyyam is considered as a guardian spirit to the entire region. The shrine of the deity was once the place that acted as a local court. Any dispute in the society was handled and solved before the deity. Being the *paradevatha* (tutelary goddess) of Vaniya community, in every village with a considerable number of Vaniya families, there will be a 'Muchilodu' in it. All the families are connected together with a Muchilodu as the center. This increases the solidarity among people at the community level. A *kaliyattam* at a Muchilodu is the

occasion in which all community members come together and express their togetherness. By the act of helping the lady, after the deification, she showers blessing over those who helped her, including the entire community. This special blessing makes the Vaniya community to worship Muchilottu Bhagavathi as their community Goddess. One paradoxical feature in this case is that the original caste affiliation of the protagonist was to the Namboothiri Brahmin community which has a higher rank than the Vaniya caste. This is uncommon when compared to the myths of any other community deities where they worship deities who were from the same caste as the believers in their early life.

The plot of ‘Pulimaranja Thondachan’ is also similar to those previously discussed. Here the protagonist is a lower caste man and for the higher caste people the distinctions of this person were unacceptable. They felt that Kaari will be a threat to their supremacy in knowledge and power and eventually assassinated him. Just like the lady in the myth of ‘Thottinkara Bhagavathi’, Kaari Gurukkal is also a victim of the evils of caste system that existed in the olden time. A performance of this theyyam is a remembrance of a famous person who belonged to their community and the knowledge he acquired. For the Pulaya caste people, Kaari is a hero and a personality they could boast about before their higher caste masters. The *kaliyattam* of this theyyam thus becomes a kind of expression of rebellion by the lower caste people against the higher caste.

Connected to Pulimaranja Thondachan is another cult named Potten theyyam. The most important aspect of this theyyam is the ideological conflict between two groups in society separated apart in the social hierarchy. The Potten is a Pulaya person and it is his dialogue with the Hindu religious scholar and the sage Aadi Sankara that is being demonstrated in the theyyam. The Pulaya person defeated the scholar by posing questions about the essence of the life of people of varying social statuses. According to him, all are equal and Aadi Sankara, though he is the preacher of the Hindu philosophy of *advaita*, (the ‘non-duality’) fails to pursue it in practice.

The dialogue of Potten is considered as a direct protest against the higher caste people and the supremacy in the knowledge they believe they possess. It is very common to mention Potten theyyam as a revolutionary¹⁶ for the voice he raised against the masters in support of the downtrodden and miserable. In the theyyam performance, the cult acts like a clown, actually mocking the attitude of higher caste people in treating people differently. Like the previously mentioned theyyam, the practice and

performance of Potten theyyam is also a mode of rebellion against the social inequalities prevailing even in the contemporary time. Devotees as well as non-believers in the region are well aware of this theyyam and they quote the dialogue of the theyyam even in their mundane life and in that way Potten theyyam is very much into the life of the people even beyond the religious boundaries.

Another significant matter regarding this theyyam is about the divinity ascribed to the protagonist in contemporary times. Some people believe that the myth of Potten was a real incident, a Pulaya person arguing with Aadi Sankara and defeating him. The pride of higher caste people could not accept a Brahmin declining before a common man. They forged another story that the Potten was not a common man but he was an incarnation of Lord Shiva who came to earth to test the knowledge of Adi Sankara. By creating a story like this, the higher caste people refuse to accept the failure of a Brahmin who should be always great over a lower caste man and the later always must be considered as a stupid or '*potten*', in their own views. However, a higher caste person could fail before Lord Shiva but not before a lower caste person. A higher caste Brahmin is lower only to the god and all other caste groups occupy a position below them in the caste hierarchy. This pride of caste prevents higher caste people in accepting their defeats against a Pulaya man who belong to the lowest strata. This is again a clear example of the social supremacy the higher caste people wants to enjoy in social life.

All these theyyam and their associated myths reveal the depth of caste hierarchy existing in the social sphere and the religious beliefs of the people. The above discussed theyyam are connected to certain castes or caste related aspects in one way or other. It may be in terms of being the patron deity of a particular community or performance choice by a particular community. Irrespective of this matter the commonality among all of them is the underlying caste injustice that existed in the society and the struggle against it.

In the case of Maakkam, the theyyam cannot be treated just as a mere myth or legend. Elements of the incidents mentioned in the story are believed to have happened in real life, jealousies of in-laws, family issues and the murder of a woman by her own brothers. The Kadangottu tharavadu near Payyannur is the main shrine of Maakkam performance and worshipping. The incident that followed the death of the woman cannot be believed as 'real' except that the family might have suffered fragmentation and disintegration due to the guilt and mental pain the brothers underwent after their

cruel act. Be that as it may, the core incidents depicted in the story highlights the nature of family problems existed there. The theyyam is worshipped mainly for begetting a child by the childless couple. Hundreds of couples visit the shrines of Maakkam and worship the deity for her blessing. Devotees connect fertility with the power and blessing of the goddess who was a young mother of two children in her real life. Those people who beget children after worshipping the deity are in considerable number. The positive results are believed to be connected to the blessing of the theyyam and such stories spread among the people and more and more childless couples start worshipping the Maakkam. The yearly *kaliyattam* in the shrine at Kadangottu tharavadu is now a pilgrimage for hundreds of couples. At shrines like the one in Chaala near Kannur, hundreds of devotees make vows to conduct '*maakkavum makkalum*' theyyam as an offering for the blessing of the goddess.

Apart from the belief in the power of goddess Maakkam, the *kaliyattam* of this theyyam has certain elements of drama too. The entire performance of the life story of Maakkam and her children are demonstrated before the audience in a way that is not exclusively ritualistic. There are considerable changes between the life of the characters mentioned in the story and in the *kaliyattam*. While recreating the story of the lady and children with godliness considerable modifications are made to create the godly image of characters and celestial feel before the worshippers. The son of Maakkam, Chathu was very young when got murdered. But in the *kaliyattam*, Chathu is portrayed as a hero, a young man, a skilled martial art performer with expertise in several weapons. This character is ascribed to the person to make the story and *kaliyattam* more interesting and compelling to the audience. This is also an indication of the importance of the theatrical and entertainment element embodied in the *kaliyattam* ceremony.

Logically thinking, there is no possibility to have a character of a war hero or warrior as the boy was murdered at a tender age. One possibility is the caste identity of the boy and his mother. They belonged to the Nair caste and the male members of this caste were normally experts in martial arts and did the duty of warriors helping the chiefs of the region during the feuds between neighboring chiefdoms. It could be for the exhibition of the heroic nature of Nair men that the demonstration of the martial art by the only major male actor in the myth got incorporated in the *kaliyattam*. This display of martial art also favors the purpose of entertainment of a larger audience at the event.

Similarly, the act of Mavilan as a clown is also incorporated to entertain the people. The rituals are followed in the right manner here also and the devotees

approach the theyyam towards the end of the event seeking a solution for their problems with high devotion. Now, for the devotees, the theyyam are only gods and goddesses, not entertaining characters. Thus, this particular theyyam has dual dimension of both as an entertainment program as well as a religious ritual. This could be substantiated by the incidence of the conduct of this theyyam as a *vayalthira* at a non-conventional, secular place by an Art and Sports Club of the Youth. This event needs a further explanation for its specialty. A *vayalthira* is a *kaliyattam* that is conducted at places other than the conventional shrines. The name is derived from *vayal* which is the paddy field and *thira* meaning *kaliyattam*. That is, this ritual is often conducted in paddy field during the summer time when no agricultural activity is happening in the dry field. A temporary shrine is prepared with bamboo and coconut leaves. This type of event may be organized by anyone who could manage the expenses.

One such event was observed at a village near Kuthuparamba in Kannur. This *kaliyattam* was organized by a youth organization for arts and sports. All the requirements for the ritual are followed customarily in a *vayalthira*. A priest is invited for performing the *puja* in the shrine, theyyam performers and musicians are also called upon following the custom. One of the organizing committee members informed that they used to conduct entertainment program like drama or musical events on the anniversary day of the organization every year. This time they thought of conducting Maakkam theyyam. According to him, most of the people in the village had not seen this theyyam and they, especially women, were much enthusiastic about the event. Women have much intimacy towards this theyyam religiously while others observe this for its entertainment element. Here two aspects are going together with the performance of the theyyam, i.e., as a festival for entertainment as well as an event of religious worship.

Kathivanoor Veeran is a similar theyyam which has a story that connects a real person with myths and later to god. The plot of the story of this theyyam is considered as a real incident happened generations back in Kannur. Several enthusiasts and researchers found a number of hints of the existence of the protagonist and the event. All the places mentioned in the *thottam* are real, people were able to find weapons and other material objects mentioned in the *thottam* in specific places and the shrines as explained in the story. The story has a very normal plot of the life of a man who lived in this region. His journey with merchants to the market at Virajpettai, his engagement

in agriculture and business etc. are not at all far away from a common man's life. Similar is the expertise in martial art, farming and the suffering from the family which the protagonist faced, and later the tragic death that gave him a heroic identity and also empathy. Thereafter, he attained a godly image and became a theyyam.

Everyone in the region without distinction between a devotee and a non-believer of religious cults believes that there lived a man named Mannappan in the village of Mangadu in Kannur. The heroic nature of the man and the courage and determination of him makes a believer to worship the theyyam for success in life. Kathivannoor Veeran is the best example to understand the nature of the belief system associated with theyyam and *kaliyattam*. The idea of how the life of the people and their religious worship are connected is evident from this theyyam, the essence of which is the worshipping of a common man of good character who lived and met a tragic end generation back. The theyyam is none other than someone among themselves in this region. This becomes meaningful in the context of a popular saying among the people, “*Thiyyan chathal theyyam*”. The saying means that if anyone from the Thiyya community dies, he becomes a theyyam (god). That is, the line dividing a common man from God is very narrow here, or in another way, we could say that people are worshipping themselves in this religious act.

This saying explains the outstanding importance of Thiyya caste in the belief system of theyyam. Though they are not the performers of the theyyam (which is done entirely by the people of the lowest strata) their dominance is explicit in the whole belief system and practice. The dominance is not in terms of power or authority but in number. The greatest number of shrines where theyyam worshipping happens belongs to Thiyya caste. It is very common to see shrines at every *tharavadu* of Thiyya caste. Worshipping of ancestral spirit at lineage houses is a major feature of theyyam. Thus, the number of theyyam which are connected to Thiyya caste is numerous. Several of the popular theyyam has a connection to this caste. Vayanattu Kulavan and Kathivannoor Veeran are prime examples for this. Thottinkara Bhagavathi, Kudiveeran, Karanavar theyyam etc. expands the pantheon of this caste specialization. In every *tharavadu* of Thiyya caste, there will be yearly worshipping of several of their ancestor spirits and patron deities. The belief in ancestral spirit is very common in this community though no theyyam is performed based on these spirits. Apart from the ancestral spirits and patron deities, spirits like Kuttichathan, Khandakarnan and

different Bhagavathi cults are also worshipped at the *tharavadu* shrine of Thiyya family.

For the devotees and general audience of the theyyam and *kaliyattam* their participation in it has a different dimension. According to the people, their belief in theyyam is closely associated with their life. They always make visits to shrines to worship theyyam and to receive the blessings. Theyyam has significant connection with original inhabitants of the North Malabar unlike the Brahmins and other upper caste people (Pothuval, Nambiar and so on) who are the chiefs of the region and the recent immigrants to this region. The original inhabitant like Thiyya, Vannan, Malayan, Pulayan and other communities are directly involved in theyyam worshipping rather than just owning shrines. When feudalism was prevalent in this region, the lower caste people were slaves and bonded laborers to the local chiefs. These lower caste people suffered a lot of violence and injustices from their masters. However, during the event of *kaliyattam* these lower caste untouchables becomes the divine theyyam and even their masters worship them. Most of the stories and myths of theyyam explain the revenge against the feudal lords by the lower caste people, and the injustices and exploitation they faced during their lifetime. The deities performed through theyyam are born to oppose social injustices and stand with the suffering lower caste.

Function	Theyyam
Save from epidemics and other diseases	Puthiya Bhagavathi
Spread diseases and epidemics	Khandakarnan, Thoovakkali, Thoovakkaran, Vasoormaala, Maari, Dandadevan, Cheerumba
Fertility, Child bearing and birth	Maakka Bhagavathi, Naaga bhagavathi, Uchitta
Savior, victory	Muthappan, Pottan theyyam, Kathivanoor Veeran
Agriculture and fertility	Kurathi, Kothamoori, Kaalichan

Table 3.3. Grouping of theyyam based on their functional specialisations

There will always be a fear of the deities in people's mind and even the higher caste feudal chiefs are afraid of the wrath of these gods and goddesses of lower caste people. The fear of punishment by god or their belief that they are doing some wrong deeds like torturing the lower caste people helps in maintaining social equilibrium in the society. The deity of the shrine where the lower caste people perform the theyyam acts as a locus that maintains this social equilibrium. The *kaliyattam* is an occasion in which people became free from all their problems, by revealing their problems to the deity, thereby escaping from the suppression they face from their masters.

Based on the involvement of different castes in the event and the common theme of the myths we can understand that *kaliyattam* is an event of lower castes and the oppressed. The performers are exclusively Dalits who were once the serfs and slave labourers of the land owning wealthy higher caste. The lands where the shrines are situated once belonged to the higher caste and by giving space to their serfs for religious worshipping the later got ownership of the land. By doing so the landowning communities were given the role of *koyma* of each shrine which is substantially a higher status. Members of the higher caste always had the higher status compared to the theyyam performing caste groups. Being the masters and because of the prevailing strict caste hierarchy they always enjoyed a status higher even to the 'gods of the lower castes.'

To sum up, the various underlying themes of the believes in the local deities of theyyam can be drawn as follows,

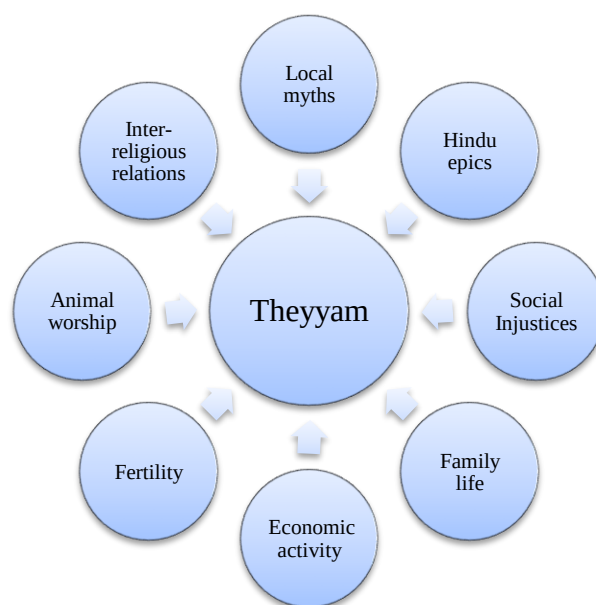


Diagram 3.2 Themes in Theyyam Belief

Conclusion

A study of various deities that are being worshipped as theyyam is the theme of this chapter and it portrays how narratives construct the local pantheon of theyyam. This gives an outline of what kind of deities are being worshipped by people at their traditional shrines and how. Each of the theyyam discussed here has a mythical story behind them and this also shows variation in its nature. When some theyyam has stories which are complete myths connected to the great tradition of mainstream Hinduism, as demons, goddesses, incarnations of supreme gods and so on, some others are local or parochial connected to the common people's life, or are considered as a normal person turned to god. Also, there are animal deities with mythical background stories worshipped with high devotion by the people. Among that theyyam with human characters as their protagonists are of chief importance. This is because of the reason that such a myth or legend in the belief system brings human and the gods closer. The gods and goddesses the people worship are the forefathers and great mothers of themselves. A direct contact with the divinities, as theyyam, a touch or a hug, and a direct conversation with them are of most significance here. Through the theyyam, people are representing themselves and the social life of individuals and communities are portrayed symbolically in the performance. For the people, it is a reality of contacting and communicating with the god and ancestors because what they are worshipping is appearing before them in life as theyyam.

In a ritual which is possibly originated as an animistic form of worship we can observe evolving patterns of socio-religious dynamics. Myths of regional deities and legends of local people are added to the later stage of the ritual system and the whole system thus got expanded and diverged. This is followed by the appropriation of the primal system which had more folk religious elements with the beliefs in mainstream Hindu pantheon. Each of the characteristics and identity of the theyyam which are created by the people through ascription of divine features is in direct relation with the larger frame of social structure and dynamics of the society involved. This account also gives an idea of the way in which how the belief behind the theyyam worship in *kaliyattam* is formed, developed and persisting.

Note

¹ Zamorin was a princely state based at present day Kozhikode (Krishna Ayyar, K.V. 1938. *The Zamorins of Calicut*). The most northern part of Kerala and adjoining part of Karnataka to this comes under *Thulunadu*, which has a unique cultural identity.

² The *vadakkan aithihamala*, *vadakkan paattukal* etc. are examples for the collection of folklore in the North Malabar. These are the ballads sung by travelling balladeers belonging to Panan caste in Kerala.

³ Popular Hinduism is equivalent to the All-India Hinduism as suggested by M. N. Srinivas and is characterized by the general features of beliefs in gods and goddesses commonly throughout the subcontinent (Srinivas: 2003)

⁴ Among the people of North Malabar there exists a considerable idea about the past of the land where Buddhism and Jainism had strong roots. People believe that several of the present-day Hindu temples once belonged to these religions.

⁵ A specific ritual system mainly practiced at the major *kaliyattam* shrine of Madayikkavu and followed by many other shrines where theyyam rituals are conducted. Emphasising on the worship of *Shakthi*, the elements of Lord Shiva, this tantric Shivite tradition includes animal sacrifice and use of liquor in the propitiating rituals which are unlike the common rituals in other Hindu temples.

⁶ Veluthat, Kesavan. 2013 [1978] *Brahman Settlements in Kerala: Historical Studies*, Cosmo Books: Thrissur

⁷ Though there is a lack of factual historical data that proves this argument local experts on the studies of this ritual suggest a history of theyyam going back to third or fourth century. Records of early European and Western travellers is the main historical source which can contribute to the reality of the matter.

⁸ Kolathu swaropam was one of the most prominent feudal chiefdoms in the present-day Malabar region.

⁹ This table is only a sample which lists a small fraction of theyyam in the whole pantheon. There are several numerous other theyyam too, even groups of theyyam which will be mentioned somewhere else in the discussion.

¹⁰ The Hindu mythology says that the Shiva is a fused form of both male and female – *ardhanareeswaran*, a god with inseparable female part.

¹¹ *daivakkaru* is the term in the vocabulary of theyyam which roughly means a divine being or a state preceding a complete status of god or goddess.

¹² *thottin-kara* means the bank of a stream and here the deity is named after it, based on the place where she attained deification.

¹³ In the month of March 2017, a group of people consisting of theyyam performers and theyyam enthusiasts made a journey which followed the same path as once Mannappan traveled. They were able to see all historical remains of the person in a ruined state and they have decided to revive the legacy of the ancient hero by constructing a new shrine and to start ritual and theyyam performance.

¹⁴ There is a mention in the *munpasthanam* (the beginning songs) that it was after the prayers of Cheyanjeriyillam Akambadi and Nariyan Korappanikkar that Vayanattu Kulavan made his journey north.

¹⁵ That is, the character of Ali is not being worshipped as ‘theyyam’ in the same manner as people worship the Karinchamundi in the event. Similar is the case with the previously discussed Mavilan of the Maakkam theyyam. Such characters have a secondary role and function in *kaliyattam*.

¹⁶ The Communist Party of India (Marxist) has high acceptance among the people of Payyannur and they frequently call Potten Theyyam as a communist revolutionary.

Chapter Four

The Ritual Performance of *Kaliyattam*: An Ethnographic Note

This section discusses about the various rituals happening at a shrine during the *kaliyattam* ceremony. The focus is on the general rituals and practices taking place at various shrines so as to get a clear picture of the religious acts. The nature and extent of the ritual and religious activities being conducted in shrines vary in large scale depending on the context, deity, nature, and type of shrine. The *kaliyattam* being a festival at the village level there will be a lot of celebratory activities going around the shrine and this is also an essential component of the event. In the ritual ceremony the rituals show varying characters on its complexity and procedure. When some rituals are performed for a short duration by a single actor (like the main priest), others have more elaborate procedures and require a larger number of players to carry out. For example, the rites performed inside the sanctorum is done by the priest only whereas a sacrificial ritual is done by the theyyam performer assisted by a group of persons including the musicians. Apart from the performance of customary rituals financial ability of the organizers plays a decisive role in the overall nature of the celebration. Whatever could be the extent of the celebration the propitiation of the theyyam deity is the main matter of concern and that too can be made in various ways.

A shrine remains silent and mostly unnoticed and vacant during most time of the year except during the *kaliyattam* time. Lighting of oil lamp at the shrine in the evening is the only daily activity being practiced at an ordinary shrine. This is done by an *anthithiriyar*, the name itself denotes the duty of the person, the one who lights the lamp in the evening. By an ordinary shrine, it means one shrine which is commonly seen around the place, distinguished from one of more popularity like Madayikkavu or Karivellur Muchilottu which are highly popular and run by management committee working year around, and also with high economic income.¹ Community owned shrines, family shrines, and publicly owned ones (*samudaya kshetram*, *taravadu kshetram* and *pothu kshetram* respectively) come under this category which are under discussion.

Organizing a *kaliyattam* festival and its conductance are a laborious task and are done by people forming various groups specialized in doing specific tasks. There will

be an organizing committee consisting of several people taking care of various duties assigned to them. Depending on the nature of the shrine the committee also varies in its composition. The organizing committee of a community shrine will be different from a shrine which has public ownership. Similarly, both of them are different when compared to a *tharavadu* shrine and so on. When the event is large obviously it requires more people to organize. For example, a *perumkaliyattam* that happens after a decade or so requires big preparations for the successful conductance. For this, the participation of people from various scores of societies is required in large number.

On the other hand, a *kaliyattam* in a community shrine will be organized by the members from the particular community to which the shrine belongs. That is, a *kaliyattam* at a Muchilodu will be organized by Vaniya community and that in a Kannangadu shrine by Maniyani community and so. In the case of a *tharavadu* shrine that owned and operated by a particular family it will be the members of that family who organizes the event. In all the different types there is no restriction for the people for joining, worshipping and making an offering to the theyyam and the participation of different specific castes in rituals are mandatory too. It is only at the level of organization and administration some restrictions exist but never in the belief and worship part, which is open to anyone in the society.

A season of *kaliyattam* starts on the 10th of Thulam month according to the *kollavarsham* (regional calendar) that comes almost in the last week of October every year. By this time, the monsoon rain might have subsided to some extent and is the time of occasional North-East monsoon known as the *thulavarsham*. A more or less pleasant climate and a time after the harvest gives a good time for the people to engage themselves in festival activities. Though the main season starts by late October it is in the summer months of March, April and May the festival activities touch its peak.

A *kaliyattam* is the main event of all the rituals at a shrine and it involves a series of rituals aimed at the propitiation of gods and goddesses and receiving of blessing. Though considered commonly as the annual celebration of dance of the theyyam and associated rituals at a shrine, there are other opinions also about the time span of conducting a *kaliyattam*.² One opinion is that an annual celebration is not actually taken as a complete *kaliyattam*, but only as a *kaal-kaliyattam* (*kaal* -quarter), and one that happens every alternate year as *ara-kaliyattam* (*ara* -half). Thus, a *kaliyattam* is that event of propitiation of the deities as theyyam which happens every four years. This account is seen very rare, only in the opinion of elderly people who have much in-depth

knowledge about the religious practices. Most commonly, nowadays '*kaliyattam*' is used to denote the yearly ceremony.

The next level is the '*perumkaliyattam*' which is the conductance of theyyam after a period of twelve years or more. Twelve being the normal gap between two consecutive *perumkaliyattam*, sometimes it may happen at a gap less than that and in most cases, it happens at a gap of more than twelve years too. There are also special cases like the *perumkaliyattam* happened after ninety-five years in a shrine of Vellarangara Bhagavathi near Payyannur, and in another after seventy-five years at Kakkattu Madom Kovilakom.

Considering the whole events happening at the shrine, '*kaliyattam*' precisely is one among the several rituals happening at a shrine and is considered as the key ceremony. There are some short rituals performed at shrines at specific times. These may be the lighting of the oil lamps in the shrine or the short rituals performed on special days of ritual significance in a calendar year. Such rituals are known as *adiyanthiram* and a ritual performed at a *sankramanam* or the 'eclipse time' is one such ritual. *Anthithiri* (evening lamp) is the daily lighting of the oil lamp at the shrine. The *anthithiriyar* who belongs to a particular community and who is also the owner of the shrine (mostly an elderly man) does this ritual. Every evening he cleans the shrine and its premises and lights the lamps that usually hangs on both sides of the door of the sanctum sanctorum. He will not open the door of the shrine where the sacred stool and weapons of the deity are kept. He lives close to the shrine, in a kind of partial exclusion, completely concentrating on his sacred duty. In case of family shrines this priest stays at his own house as the shrine is at the courtyard of the house.

The lighted oil lamp is considered very sacred and is a symbol of divinity. The *anthithiriyar* acts as the priest during the *kaliyattam* time, opens the door of the shrine and does short rituals. The main role he plays during the *kaliyattam* time is as the 'intermediary' between the *peedom* where the divine presence of the deity exists and the theyyam performer who transform into the deity itself. He hands over the *kodiyila* (banana leaf) with lighted oil wick, betel leaves, areca nut and sandal paste in it to the theyyam performer and also the sacred weapons (*thiruvayudham*) of the deity before the performance.

Propitiation of the deities by performing the theyyam is the main activity and there is a ritual act conducted instead of the theyyam on some occasion when it is difficult to conduct a *kaliyattam*. *Gurusi*, as this ritual known, is the act of pleasing the

deity by doing a symbolic sacrifice. The priest mixes lime with turmeric paste which gives rise to a red color liquid symbolizing blood. He then adds puffed rice, *chekkipoo* (jungle geranium -*Ixora coccinea*), and *tulasi* (holy basil -*Ocimum tenuiflorum*) leaves and sprinkles the *gurusi* water and finally pour it to the ground. This ritual is done in varying extent and in various contexts too. Sometimes *gurusi* ritual is performed solely by the priest, without the theyyam performer or theyyam, that is when no *kaliyattam* is conducted. During *kaliyattam* also *gurusi* is a main ritual, but in that case, it is done in a more elaborate form by the theyyam performer at the time of *thottam*. It is the ritual sacrifice done by the performer before he completely transforms into theyyam. In almost all theyyam performances this ritual is conducted as an act of pleasing the deity with proper sacrifice.

***Kaliyattam* at a community shrine**

As the *kaliyattam* is a ceremony in which a series of rituals are performed in worshipping the divinities in a shrine, there are various people who are specialized in specific roles and duties related to the rituals. Though the main role in the event is that of the *koladhari* who performs the theyyam of the deity, an array of ritual specialists is associated with this. The ritual specialists like priest, the *anthithiriyar*, and *velichappadu* (oracle) are the other main actors in the event. Apart from these, there are several roles with ascribed statuses in performing duties which are supplementing the main ritual. Depending on the community who owns and operates a shrine the entitlements vary. To get a clear picture of the different roles and their duties in a shrine and also of the ritual ceremonies performed there, one needs to take a close look into and compare the events happening in various different shrines in the study region. Though there are slight differences between the various roles in shrines based on its affiliation or ownership to particular castes or communities there are several common features too. Following is a detailed description of the roles and duties carried out by various personals in the shrine of Muchilodu of Vaniya community.

More than a religious shrine, the Muchilodu of Vaniya caste is an entity that unites all the individuals belonging to that caste in an area. Each of the family living in a village has representation in the community shrine. That is, for a Vaniya individual or family their shrine of Muchilodu is not just a place of worshipping their major deity of Muchilottu Bhagavathi, it is the locus of the community solidarity. The individuals in the community are connected to the shrine with different entitlements. Married male

members of Vaniya community who are supposed to give monetary contribution (*kaalum arayum*) to the shrine are known as *valyakkar*. A *vakyakkaran* (plural – *valyakkar*) is a male individual who had gone through a life cycle ritual at the shrine of Muchilodu when he reaches adulthood. Such a person has the complete status as a subject in the community. The *ara-valyakkar* are the unmarried male members who contribute half (*ara*) of the amount that a *valyakkar* gives. These unmarried members need to go through a life cycle ritual at the shrine to get elevated into the full individual status. The female members of the community are not considered as any type of *valyakkar* but they may have to contribute money during the *kaliyattam* time if one possesses a job with specific earnings. The money collected from such a female member is called as *vakachil sankhya*.

Kshetra koyma (or simply *koyma*) is a very important role in a shrine. The person in this role is the one who acts as the '*paramadhikari*', a person with supreme power and authority over the shrine, belonging to castes like Nair or Nambiar. This is actually a symbol of the acceptance of the lordship or mastery of a higher caste wealthy person, a feudal lord in whose land the lower caste people worked in the olden days. It will be the family of such a *koyma* that has donated land to construct the shrine. This authority and position of *koyma* as a patron of the shrine are hereditary.

In the present days, the Namboothiri Brahmins have a particular role in the shrines which was not there in the olden times. When a new shrine of theyyam worship is formed, a Namboothiri Brahmin priest (called as *thanthreeswaran*) performs necessary rituals to invite the divine spirits to the new sacred place. After the initial installation of the deity the *thanthreeswaran* is invited only on special occasions when Brahminic rituals like *brahmakalasam* are performed. The rituals in *kaliyattam* and theyyam worshipping are following a *Tantric* way, whereas the Namboothiri Brahmins perform the more Vedic type of rituals. The invitation of Brahmins to the *kaavu* is also an indication of the submissive nature of the traditional theyyam to the mainstream Hindu religious system.

Sthanikar is a group of people who have special status and role in a *kaliyattam* and these men belong to the same community as that of the owners of the shrine. *Anthithiriyar*, *komaram* (oracle), *karanavar*, *parikarmi* etc. are considered as *sthanikar* who get a special seat at the *kaliyattam* place. They have significant ritualistic roles to perform. As already discussed, an *anthithiriyar* has several duties to perform at the shrine. A *komaram* is the oracle and this person has much importance next to the

theyyam in a shrine. When a theyyam is considered as god, a *komaram* is considered as the representative of the god. Also known as *velichappadu* the *komaram* communicates between the divinity and the people by taking the role of a mediator. The elder members of the *tharavadu* or the community are considered as *karanavar* and they get special respect and status during the event. A *parikarmi* is the one who has duties of performing rituals, the *puja* at the shrine.

The *kaliyattam* involves a series of events from the initial decision making in conducting ceremony till the end of all the festivities and rituals. Most of the key events are conducted as rituals and these are done in a progressive consecutive order. The following is the case of a typical *perumkaliyattam* of Muchilottu, which has elaborate rituals compared to yearly *kaliyattam* and the procedures of it extend almost a year. The first step is obviously the decision of conducting a *kaliyattam* in which all key persons associated with the shrine and a large numbers of community members (*valyakkar* with their family members), *sthanikar*, *koyma*, and such participate. A general meeting is organized at the premise of the shrine and based on astrologer's decision (*prasnachinthaa vidhi*) the auspicious dates are decided. This happens almost a year before the date of the event.

When the people have decided to conduct the *perumkaliyattam*, the next step is the event named *kaliyattam elppikkal*. A committee is ritually entitled to conduct the *kaliyattam* ritually with the deity's consensus. The next stage is the fund collection from the people. As the event requires a huge amount of money the contribution of every family affiliated to the Muchilodu is necessary and also a considerable amount is collected from the people outside the Muchilodu group. *Bhandaram elppikkal* is the ritual related to the fund collection in which the *kshetram koyma* receives the *bhandaram* (the money vault) in the presence of the *komaram* (oracle) of Muchilottu Bhagavathi at an auspicious time by performing the ritual called '*vachuvilakku adiyanthiram*'. It is in this money vault, placed near the shrine, people make donation after prayers. In addition to this contribution, large sums are given directly to the finance committee of the organizing group of the festival by devotees.

A *perumkaliyattam* at Muchilottu is the ritual festival believed and conducted as the marriage of Muchilottu Bhagavathi who is also known as *annapoorneswari* -the deity of food and prosperity. Due to these two reasons –being the goddess of marriage and goddess of prosperity, a large-scale public feast is an essential component of the festival and is done with much ritual significance. There are several small rituals

associated with the feast and *koovam alakkal* is the event of the distribution of raw paddy in specific quantities to the female members of the community. This is done ritually in presence of *koyma* and *sthanikar*. Earlier all the rice required for the feast was husked by the ladies in the community in traditional mortars at their respective houses. These days it is a symbolic act performed in remembering the events of olden days. Nowadays the entire rice for the cooking is purchased from the market and there is no husking of paddy by women. Today, this ritual is a symbolic indication of the cooperation of community members in celebrating the event.

In the next stage, the ground for the whole event is prepared by covering the neighboring area of the shrine. The *nilampani* as it is known is the preparation of court yard and this involves the complete renovation, modification and preparation of shrine and premises for the grand event. The shrine and surroundings which was not much active for several years and covered with bushes and weeds are cleared. Floors are cleaned and plastered with cow dung which is considered as purifying. Temporary constructions are also made to accommodate various participants and this event is initiated ritually by the oracles. On a specific day, at an auspicious time (usually in the morning), the *anthithiriyar* performs rituals at the shrine and the oracles (*achanmar* as they are known at a Muchilodu) after taking ritual bath will apply cow dung on the *kanniraasi* (south-west direction) of the shrine, near to the sacred stone of *kailasakkallu*. After this event, the whole construction work starts. All works are being done by the *valyakkar* only.

As mentioned earlier, elaborate feast is an essential part of the *perumkaliyattam* of Muchilottu Bhagavathi. The kitchen and the store room of vegetables and groceries are considered very sacred and always kept pure. The deity is believed to be present in the *kannikkalavara* (a ritual store room) which is situated in the *kanniraasi* of the shrine. *Kanni* also means free from impurities and an oil lamp burns the whole time of *perumkaliyattam* at this place. Women and people who are in their *pula* or *valayama* (the impure status due to death of a family member or pollution due to menstruation) are not allowed to enter this area. If the *kannikkalavara* is a sacred place, a *kalavara* is a place where all the cooking items are stored and also cooking is done. This is also considered as a sacred and ‘pure’ place associated with the *kaliyattam*. Close to the *kannikkalavara* is the *naalilapanthal* which is the special place for dining of the key persons of the shrine like the oracles and *karanavar*. Among the nine major lineages of Vaniya community, *Onpathillam* as it is known, lineages of Muchilodan, Tacharan,

Pallikkara and Nellurillam have more significance and special recognition are given for the representatives from them. At the end of the theyyam dance, after removing the crown of the Bhagavathi, the heads of these lineages receive ‘*vettilayacharam*’ a special thanks along with betel leaves and areca nuts. A hierarchy exists between the nine lineages and is visible during the special feast given to these lineage heads as they follow a sequence as mentioned above.



Photo 4.1: Construction of hearths in kitchen and dining area at Karivellur Muchilottu

The *kannikkalavara*, *kalavara*, and *naalilapanthal* should have pillars and doors with fresh wood of *paala* (*Alstonia scholaris*) tree which is cut down after a small ritual performed by the oracle. This ritual is called as *paalakku kuriyidal*. After this the tree is cut down and a pole using this wood is erected at a specific location where the kitchen is situated. This ritual of wood cutting is done by the specialist *kuttikkaran* who belong to the carpenter (*asari*) community. In this shrine of the Vaniya people, this is a hereditary right of the *asari* community.

It is very important to inform all the villagers and the key families about the *kaliyattam* and is done in a specific manner. *Ezhunnallathu*, or *elathu* in short, is a procession visiting the important *tharavadu* and other common households to invite them. The higher caste Nair or Pothuval families having *koyma* position in the shrines are invited first and followed by lesser important families. The procession consists of a group of people, drummers, lamp bearers, temple committee members, along with

oracles of each of the theyyam in the shrine. The oracles will be dressed in red cloths and ornamented with bells, a forehead plate, ankle bells, sacred weapons etc. (*kudamani*, *nettippattam*, *chilambu* and *thiruvayudham*). This procession is thought to be the invitation ceremony of the “Bhagavathi’s marriage” or the *perumkaliyattam*. The procession usually starts by evening and ends by midnight. When the procession reaches a house the members of the house invites the group with special respect along with oil lamp and plate to seat the oracle. They give their share of money to the oracle and in return the oracle blesses the family. They also receive *prasadam* or *kuri* consisting of powdered turmeric, rice, and sandal paste. This procession starts two or three weeks before the *kaliyattam* date depending on the number of affiliated families in one muchilodu group.

Among the various preliminary rituals, *varachuvakkal* is one of the most important ritual events in a *perumkaliyattam* other than the theyyam performance. It is the ceremony in which the *koladhari* (the one who takes the *kolam* –outfit of the deity) of the Bhagavathi is being decided. Usually this event takes place seven or nine days (or sometime twelve) prior to the date of *kaliyattam* and the participants include members from performing community, astrologer, *koyma*, *sthanikar*, and devotees. The performer being selected through astrological problem needs to take exclusion from the outside world, living in the specially made hut *koochu*, eat special food (*thinakkanji*) to keep himself pure to perform the theyyam. *Pilavinu kuriyidal* is another ritual that happens mostly on the same day of *varachuvakkal* and in this event, one jackfruit tree (*Artocarpus heterophyllus*) is ritually cut down to prepare firewood. This will be used to make fire (*meleri*) during the *kaliyattam* which is used for the purification of *komaram* and *valyakkar* by running over the fire.

A couple of days before the *kaliyattam* a procession called *kalavara niraykkal* happen. This is an event associated with the feast of the *kaliyattam*. All the necessary items for the feast like rice, groceries, vegetable, coconut, banana leaves and so on are collected from the houses of devotees and carried to the shrine. This event of filling the store room is also done ritually. Two important items in the feast are ‘boiled horse gram’ and ‘rice gruel’ (*thuvarappuzhukku* and *kaayakkanji*) which will be served at least one day during the *kaliyattam*. All the cooking and associated works are done by the *valyakkar* only after purifying themselves by taking a ritual bath of *kalasam kulikkal* before entering the kitchen. There will be an endless supply of food at the temporary dining hall during the *kaliyattam* days. It is believed that the whole premise

is sacred with the deity's presence. *Deepavum thiriyum* (the lamp and oil wick) is another event of bringing sacred fire in oil lamp from a particular shrine which is higher in status to the one where *perumkaliyattam* happens, mostly from Madayikkavu. This fire will be used to light lamp at the beginning of *perumkaliyattam* and also to start cooking in the kitchen.

In a Muchilodu there will be theyyam other than Muchilottu Bhagavathi who are worshipped as *upadevatha* (sub-deities). All the rituals of such theyyam follow the general pattern similar to that in any other shrine. At the *perumkaliyattam* of Muchilottu Bhagavathi, *thirumudi nivaral* is the most important event which is not just a single ritual but a series of short rites. The event is also called as '*purappadu*' or the beginning of deity's journey. The preliminary rituals happen at the *kanni raasi* to the sanctorum of the shrine, centered by a sacred prime stone named *aadhara sila*. The performer, after completing all facial drawing and dressing, comes out of the green room and by standing at the *kanni raasi* wears the *thirumudi*, the crown of the deity, completes all paraphernalia and 'transforms' into the goddess. The theyyam starts the dance with slow steps in a circular movement. The particular dance of the Bhagavathi known as *manangiyattam* takes the devotees into an excited state. The theyyam bends forward and rotates by bringing the crown nearly touching the ground without moving the lower part of the body. The theyyam circles the sanctorum thrice and there ends one important stage of deity's dance.

During the dance there is the event of walking over the heap of fire (*meleri*) by the theyyam and is called as *meleri thakarakkal*. This is the symbolic expression of the life event of the lady, the ending of life by jumping onto fire. It also expresses the power of the deity before the devotees. *Manikkinar nottam* is another act performed by the theyyam, which means 'looking into the well' on the *eesana kon* (northeast direction) to the sanctorum of the shrine inside the compound wall. It is believed that by peeping into the well the water in the well becomes white and effervescence is developed in the water with the divine power of the goddess. As the *perumkaliyattam* of the deity is considered as the marriage event it is the *anthithiriyar* who tries to tie the sacred thread to the deity. But, just before this act, someone among the *sthanikar* shouts that the priest is 'impure' and hence he cannot marry the Bhagavathi, and thus the deity remains a virgin. This event is called as *andithiriyaru valayma* or 'impure status of *anthithiriyar*'. By this act, the main ritual of the dance of Muchilottu Bhagavathi ends and then starts the blessing of the devotees. Large numbers of people queue up before

the theyyam to receive blessing and it takes several hours to end. Though the main ritual event ends by this, there are also certain less significant rituals at the shrine which are not directly connected to the theyyam.

Associated with a *perumkaliyattam* of Muchilottu Bhagavathi on the second last day, there happens a ritual named *pandal mangalam* and *thalikettu kalyanam* of girls who did not attain puberty. In this event, a father carries their children on their shoulder and circles the shrine. On the next day the final event of *kariyadikkal* is done. This is the event of cleaning the whole premise of the shrine after the *perumkaliyattam* by removing ashes, dust and dirt that have accumulated around the shrine during these days.

A *kaliyattam* at family shrines

A family shrine or *tharavadu palliyara*, as it is called, is the worshipping place of the family gods and goddesses. In the Payyannur area it is very common to find small shrines in the compound of old houses of joint family. Irrespective of the caste there will be at least one deity being worshipped by a family traditionally. It is most common among Nair (all sub-castes included) and Thiyya families and others too having similar worshipping places. There are changes in the kind of deity being worshipped by each family but keeps some specificity in this. Families of higher castes like Pothuval and Nambiar mainly worship Bhagavathi theyyam and in the case of Thiyya, there are several other theyyam like Kathivannoor Veeran, Vayanattu Kulavan and so on, which are mythically related to the same caste. Worship of ancestors as theyyam is a specialty of Thiyya caste. Similarly, a Pulayan worship Potten theyyam or Thondachan. This is only a representation of preferred theyyam based on caste status of the family and there are a number of different deities being worshipped in each of the different caste groups in the area.

Aanidil Tharavadu is an important family of the Pothuval community in Payyannur and the Aanidil Chekkippara Bhagavathi Kshetram is the family shrine of this *tharavadu*. The entire shrine complex consists of one main shrine where the sacred stools (*peedom*) of the main deities are kept. In the front yard is the small single shrine of theyyam which are performed by Velan community. In the backyard also there is a small sacred place of *thara* where worshipping is made by different theyyam. This family conducts the *kaliyattam* festival every year at the shrine. The Chekkippara Bhagavathi being the main deity, there are a number of different gods and goddesses

which are worshipped in this family shrine during the two-day *kaliyattam*. On the very first day the performers of various communities gather by noon and set their respective resting places. The temporary *aniyara*, which is a green room cum resting place is made with wooden poles and thatched with braided coconut leaves. All the possessions of the performers and assistants are kept at this place. The preparation of decorations, facial and body painting of the *koladhari* will happen at this place. There are more than ten different theyyam being worshipped in the shrine performed by Vannan, Malayan and Velan communities.

The initial rituals are performed by all the three communities one after another. The elder member in the Malayan group starts their initial rituals of taking permission from the divinity for a successful completion of the performance. He starts beating the drum assisted by three others and initiates the prayer by reciting the names of goddesses before the main shrine. The priest at the shrine breaks a coconut by hitting it on the sacred platform or *peedom* and drops it behind him over the head, by facing the shrine. This is done to find the divine blessing of the deity for the entire event. The priest then goes to the shrine takes rice and throws it to the *peedom*. Worshipping with rice is considered as sacred and auspicious, rice indicates prosperity and is considered the best way to begin the rituals.

This is followed by the rituals at the shrine of Kurathi and Kundor Chamundi which is situated on one corner in the front yard separate from the main shrine. These two theyyam are performed by the Velan community. All materials for worshipping like rice, coconut, paddy, and puffed rice will be made ready by this time. Lamps are lighted, small fire torches are kept in oil which is required for the later rituals. There is one special priest for this shrine who is a member of the Aanidil Tharavadu. The priest took betel leaves and one piece of areca nut from a bamboo basket and gave it to two theyyam performers who are preparing to perform the Kurathi and Kundor Chamundi theyyam. The priest started the rituals and two of the experienced theyyam performers gave directions to the priest who lacks a thorough knowledge on the rituals. These priests are not specialists in the rituals and the membership in the family makes them to do the rituals as an ascribed duty. The priest then took a handful of raw rice and threw it to the *peedom* by reciting the names of the deity and sacred verses as directed by the expert in the performing group. The performers led by the first person started reciting the verses of *thottam* to invite the divine presence. The recital of verses that begins with ‘*polika*’ usually consists of names of the ancestors in the *tharavadu* shrine, names of

various theyyam in that particular shrine, and the deities in nearby shrines, especially that of Perumal of the Payyannur Subrahmaniya Swami Temple. This is recited for the blessing from the deities and for the successful conductance of the whole event.

The priest then took a plantain leaf and oil torch in one hand and in the right hand *gurusi* (an indicator of blood) in a mud pot, and went to the *gurusi thara* (sacrifice platform). After performing the *gurusi* ritual (symbolic sacrifice), the priest came back to the shrine. The singing of *thottam* continued in an elaborate manner along with reciting names of all deities and the name of the nearby major shrine. Towards the end of the initial prayer, the drum beating became fast and changed the rhythm and reached a high pitch.

The priest again took a pot with *gurusi* water, now in the left hand and few oil wicks in the right hand, rotated before the *peedom*, went to the *gurusi thara* and performed the ritual. After that he came back and washed his hands, took a handful of rice and threw at the *peedom* thrice. The drum beating ended, the whole group of theyyam performers bow before the shrine and returned to *aniyara*. Later the performers take the materials needed for the worship from the shrine to the *aniyara* and worship it with a sacred oil lamp of *kuthuvilakku*. These materials include puffed rice, raw rice, paddy, and coconuts kept on a plantain leaf. The *kolakkar* throw raw rice and then bow and touch the sacred objects like the lamp, the makeup box (*pelika*) etc. After this, the entire surrounding is purified by sprinkling with coconut water. With this the preliminary activities of Velan performers comes to an end.

It is the Vannan community who has the priority in this shrine to perform the main deity of Chakkippara Bhagavathi and they are supposed to begin the theyyam performances first. The main *kolakkaran* who has the title of *peruvannan* starts the event with the *thidangal* which is the first part of the theyyam. One man starts beating a drum in front of the shrine. The *peruvannan* comes to the scene with red cloth around his waist and ties over with a white cloth. A man walks in front of him with a torch made of coconut leaf³ from *aniyara* to the shrine. The priest offers sandal paste in banana leaf and a *kindi* (a bell metal vessel with long tube water outlet) with water. The performer gets purified by sprinkling water over his body and apply sandal paste on his body starting from forehead, cheeks, ear tips, chest, upper arms, and the back side of lower arm. The assistants take the remaining sandal and apply it on their forehead. The priest will bring lighted oil wicks on a plantain leaf and will give it to the *kolakkaran*, who receives the leaf. He then takes vermilion from the leaf and applies on his fore

head, upper arms, and chest. The *kolakkaran* will bow on the *peedom*, and throw rice on it, takes a round himself and again throw rice in four directions. He also worships the light in the leaf, move to the *gurusi thara* and do the *puja* by sprinkling rice. He leaves the plantain leaf with oil wick and rice at the *gurusi thara* and come back to the *peedom*. The priest then gives a bunch of betel leaves first to the *kalasakkaran* (the toddy carrier) and then to the *kolakkaran* from a bamboo basket. The *kolakkaran* pray before the shrine and start beating the drum and thus the *thottam* starts. After the initial prayer other drummers return to the *aniyara* except the one who assisted the *kolakkaran* in reciting the *thottam*. After sometime, two members from the group start assisting the *kolakkaran* in reciting the *thottam*. Later, as the pace of the *thottam* reciting progress, few more men join with drums and the drum beating becomes more intense. Later the *kolakkaran* stops reciting *thottam* for beginning the dance and the assistants remove the drum from the *peedom*.

There is always a hierarchy in the manner in which each community starts their performance and the Malayan community often comes next to Vannan. Vishnumoorthi and Madayil Chamundi are the two major theyyam performed by them and it is done simultaneously in most of the occasions. Two *kolakkar*⁴ in *thottam* costume come before the *peedom* that is placed in front of the shrine from the *aniyara*. One man with a fire torch walks before the *kolakkar*. Both the *kolakkar* have elaborate clothes on their waist, usually a red cloth, and both of them holds a red cloth over their head. The costumes of both of them are similar with minor differences. The rituals start with a slow beating of the drums placed on the *peedom* and reciting verses praising god. Two of them then bow all the four directions, as a symbol of taking permission from all the *devatha* in all directions. The Vishnumoorthi *kolakkar* starts dancing beginning with slows steps, progressively increasing the speed, and finally attaining fast movements. The fast steps are followed by jumping and dancing. In a similar way the theyyam of Madayil Chamundi is also performed by the second performer after the initial rituals by the priest.

In this initial ritual, the priest gives a plantain leaf with lighted oil wicks, vermilion, and raw rice. The performers take a bit of raw rice and put in to the leaf in a specific manner and receive the leaf from the priest. Then they take vermilion from the leaf and apply on the head, upper arms and chest and take a piece of leaf from it and place it on the *peedom*. A handful of rice from the leaf is sprinkled before the shrine in all four directions. This action called *ariyittuvanangal* is actually an act made to get the

blessing from different deities who are protecting everyone and everything. Both the performers then turn towards the right side and move towards the *kalasathara*. They circle the *thara* once and place the plantain leaf with oil wick on it. Standing before the *kalasathara* the assistants start the final works of the makeup. The red cloth which was held over their head previously is now tied on their head and apply vermilion on their forehead and upper cheek. A small crown is fixed on their head followed by *thalappali*. After finishing all head gear the *kolakkar* move towards the shrine, where two drums are ready on the *peedom* to start the *thottam*. These are the various preparatory steps done by the performers at the shrine until the reciting of the *thottam*. During the *thottam*, they recite verses in praising the deity in detail. This is also the occasion when the theyyam performers perform various acts like dance, martial art etc. to demonstrate the myth and stories associated with each of the cults.

On the next day from morning the complete theyyam ritual happens. All the short rituals as explained will be repeated in detail. During this time the performer will have complete costume of the theyyam and through specific ritual he wears the headgear (*mudi*) of the theyyam. At this occasion the performer completely gets transformed into the god and goddess. The priest in the shrine hands over the weapons and the theyyam performs the dance before the devotees. After the performance which includes various acts of demonstrating the divine characters, the theyyam blesses the devotees by giving *manjalkkuri*.

Another *kaliyattam* which is worth mentioning in this context is that which happened at the Kakkattu Madom Kovilakam in Nileswaram. This is a good example of how a *kaliyattam* happens at the natal house which was once the residence of the chief of a village. It was after seventy years the people of the *kovilakom* decided to conduct a *kaliyattam*. The *kovilakom* members and villagers had long wish to conduct the *kaliyattam*. Due to the detailed preparations needed for conducting thirty-nine different theyyam and the financial burden associated with it their plan got delayed and finally came to reality in 2017. It was with the generous cooperation of several people and organizations. The heirs of the royal lineage were the patrons and top members in the organizing committee. The festival committee was formed on 28th of December 2016 and gathered to discuss about the progress on every Fridays thereafter. The organizers found a *pattola* (palm leaf script) from old records that explains the theyyam and other rituals associated with the *kaliyattam* at this *kovilakom*. As the last *kaliyattam* happened

around seventy years back no much information was available from anyone from that generation.

The theyyam were performed by communities like Vannan, Malayan, Monnoottan, and Velan. In this *kaliyattam* twenty-eight different *theyyam* were performed from 11th to 13th of May 2017. On the first day by evening *thidangal* started followed by *vellattam*, *thottam* and *theyyam*⁵. On the third day, from the early morning the final theyyam performances started with Potten theyyam, Pulappottan and Pulachamundi. These three theyyam were performed as '*kolathinmel kolam*' which means all the three are performed by a single performer consecutively by making small changes to the costume. By 6 O'clock in the morning Yogyar Akambadi and Ummachitheyam were also performed as '*kolathinmel kolam*'. Here the performer first did the complete costume characteristic to the main theyyam (with a paraphernalia of male gods) and after the dance as Yogyar Akambadi (a male figure) the performer covered his head with a white cloth. With this the Yogyar Akambadi theyyam became Ummachitheyam. The white cloth over its head symbolizes the traditional clothing of Muslim women in the area. This was the last theyyam and the whole event came to a conclusion by noon.

It is interesting to note the types of theyyam conducted during this event. The various theyyam performed at this shrine can be grouped based on their identity. The large majority of theyyam, twenty-five out of the total twenty-eight are either directly or indirectly related to the myths of Lord Shiva. On the other hand, the main deities of the shrine, namely Yogyar Akambadi and Ummachitheyam are completely local deities. The last one, Vishnumoorthi is a theyyam with myth of Narasimha incarnation of Lord Vishnu. This theyyam is very common and here in this *kovilakom* it is worshipped as an *upadevatha* or sub-deity. The *kula devatha* (clan or lineage deity) of the *kovilakom* (Yogyar Akambadi and Ummachitheyam) are not connected to any mainstream Hindu pantheon or myths of great tradition. Instead both are based on the myth of people who rose to divine status after their death. Those theyyam which are connected to Lord Shiva as incarnation of Shiva, Shiva's wife Parvathi, their children, or even powerful demons born from Shiva's body. Yogyar Akambadi was actually a warrior with heroic charisma who acted as the care taker of various local chiefs in Allada swaroopam. The theyyam of this warrior is being performed in various places but here at Kakkattu Madom Kovilakom it has special significance with its association with Ummachitheyam. The myth of the Yogyar Akambadi tells the story of his

journey from Nediyrippu swaroopam in south towards north via places like Cherukunnu, with his fellow warriors like Erattu Menon, Puthuvayikkara Kammal, Panthalloor Nair, Pallikkara Kammal among others who were experts in martial arts (these Nair men served as private security to chiefs) and reached Nileswaram Thali temple. Then he started his duty at Nileswaram chiefdom as a guardian. The underlying story narrates the role of Nair warriors in various regional politics and feuds between neighboring chiefdoms. Thus, the Kakkattu Madom family, once ruling family of the region, worships a pantheon that includes gods and goddesses from both Hindu mythology and also local cults. The worship of local deities is not as ancestral gods but is actually an appeasement of dead people.

Symbolic expression of interreligious solidarity by conducting Ummachitheyyam is one of the significant elements in this *kaliyattam*. Though contradictory to the myth that tells the story of the assassination of Muslim lady by the Hindu *kovilakom* people, the lady was later accepted as divine figure and lineage deity. This *kaliyattam* was an occasion that brought together the participation of the entire village community and also played a role in reuniting the family members of the *kovilakom*.

Preparing the God or the *theyyakkolam*

The form of the theyyam is a key element in the whole ritual of the propitiation of the deity and the following blessing. The physical form of the deity in theyyam worshipping is known by different names. The term '*kolam*' is one such word and by *kolamkettal* a performer attains the complete physical form of the theyyam. This act is the making of the theyyam figure with different material costumes and facial and body paintings. When the divinity gets absorbed into this *kolam* it becomes the theyyam or the god. Thus, the material outfit of each theyyam has significance. Each of the theyyam has a form specific to itself with characteristic features. Though each and every theyyam have very unique features in form there are several similarities between theyyam which shares commonalities in their nature. For example, there are not less than half a dozen different Chamundi theyyam which have different mythical stories, but being a Chamundi they share similar structure in attire. Similarly, Bhagavathi theyyam which are mother goddesses with round shaped crown (*mudi*) are several in number and same is the case with '*valiyamudi theyyam*' which is a genre of theyyam with long crown according to local classification. The 'hero' theyyam like Kathivanoor Veeran, Kudiveeran, and Kandanarkelan shows a close similarity in their attire. That is,

we can have groups of theyyam with similar attire based on their general nature and character.

The costume of theyyam

The whole collection of material costumes that are being used in the decoration of a theyyam is known as *aniyalam*. This includes all forms of ornaments, dress, special decorations, crowns, and head gears. The four main sets of decoration items are head gears (*mudi*), waist dress (*oda*), clothes (*tunichamayam*), and ornaments. Both the costume and facial and body paintings give the identity to the theyyam based on the characteristic nature of the theyyam. When the outfit of the theyyam is easily observable to a spectator in its size, the details of facial writing are much micro in scale, and some specific features require a closer look.

As mentioned earlier, *mudi* (hair or crown), *oda*, *tunichamayam* and ornament forms the *aniyalam* of a theyyam. All these four sets of makeup items are important in giving a specific look and form to a theyyam there by giving specific nature and character to it. Some specific items in decoration are considered as more sacred compared to those simply contributing beauty to the *kolam*. *Mudi* is apparently the main object in any theyyam and the nature and form (type) of *mudi* is specific to particular groups of theyyam. Though the word *mudi* means hair, in the form it is equivalent to crown. *Valiyamudi*, *tirumudi*, *kondal*, *naagakanni mudi*, *vattamudi*, *chattamudi*, *peelimudi*, *kurangirutham* (for Thondachan theyyam), *kireedom* (crown of Baali and Sugreevan), *pookketti mudi*, *kotachamudi*, *paamudi koottam*, *thoppichamayam* and such are the major different headgears used in theyyam. Here it is interesting to note that the headgear of ‘Baali’ and ‘Sugreevan’ theyyam which are characters of Hindu epic is itself called as *kireedom* which means crown. In form, this headgear is similar to a crown and shows striking similarity with the crowns used in Kathakali. In the local terminology no headgear of any theyyam other than these are named as *kireedom* and all are termed as *mudi* believing it as the hair of the deity. The significance of the headgear of theyyam is based on the hair of the deities.

Thalappali is an important ornament worn on the forehead of *theyyam*. Except for very few theyyam which has masks, all other theyyam wear *thalappali*. This particular ornament consists of twenty-one silver pendants and is treated with very much reverence and devotion. The twenty-one pendants symbolize twenty-one different *gurukkal* (masters) who care for the whole universe. The twenty-one guru are an actual

representation of twenty-one groups of various matters that range from divine figures to philosophies to art. It is very important to have a look at each of the twenty-one elements because these are symbolically represented in one of the key ornaments of the cult.⁶

The language of ritual and theyyam

The language of the society under study is Malayalam and though it is the language of the whole state there are considerable variations in the dialect from one place to another. The form of the language shows dramatic dissimilarity with the oral language generally spoken throughout Kerala and the dialect of this region, that is the northern Malabar has certain characteristic features of its own on every social and cultural aspect. There are three possible variants of languages used in theyyam. One is the common colloquial language used during a theyyam's conversation with worshippers, the second is the language used in the *thottam* and third one is being used in ritual and other activities like the recitation of *mantra* which has considerable influence of Sanskrit because of the *sloka* (sacred hymns) present in it.

The first type of language is not much different from the spoken language of the people though the rhythm and way of speaking are different. The content also is easily understandable because it will be a conversation just like two individuals in the society. It is very common that the theyyam after the dance frequently talks with devotees about their problems. The devotees converse the theyyam in their own language and the replay by the theyyam –the gods are also in the same language. This conversation is the most distinguishing factor in the whole practice because of the same reason. In this conversation, the theyyam spoke about various matters regarding the devotees' concern and at times the philosophical tone is imparted based on the religious literature, Vedas, Hindu epics etc. All these are accompanied with certain characteristic usages and systematic calls and salutations.

In the *thottam* (also the theyyam's conversation of *vachal*) there are lots of usages typical to the theyyam. Such usages and the tone of the recitation impart varying meaning according to the context. It is only in the cultural context of the society where the performance is happening that could give the complete meaning and sense of the language of theyyam. The oration is at times complex and illegible and complexity reaches a maximum when it comes to the case of *mantra* recited by the theyyam

performer during various rituals. This is because of the fact that these *slokas* or mantras are in Sanskrit or in Malayalam which is heavily influenced by Sanskrit.

The reciting of the *thottam* and the performance associated with it are not solely a ritual to the wider audience who attends the event. The reciting will not be in a clear and legible fashion in most of the occasions and the performers sing it in parts without covering all the sections of the *thottam* entirely. One section of the audience is devoted worshippers whereas a considerable number of the spectators will be enjoying the theatrical or performance aspect of the event as an entertainment event. For them, it is not the religious aspects of the event that matters rather the entertainment one. For the devotees, on the other hand, the event is a mix of both the religious aspect as well as the entertainment.

Thottam and Vellattam

Thottam is the oral literature of theyyam rituals. The word also indicates the event of reciting the *thottam* verses and the ritual preceding the main dance of the theyyam. The nature and mode of *thottam* vary from one theyyam to another, but we can observe some common features in it. The basic content of the verses is the myths and stories of the deities and the mantra and hymns in praising the gods and goddesses. There are several stages in reciting the *thottam* (*thottam chollal*), each intending at various characters. According to the traditions of theyyam performing communities variations are there in terms of terminology as well as sections in recitation of *thottam* and it varies according to the group and region.

The basic structure consists of four main stages, namely *varavili*, *sthuthi*, *puravritha kadhanam*, and *mumbasthaanam*. At the same time there are other opinions based on which the entire recitation part is being divided in to seven sections. These are *varavili*, *neettukavi*, *thaalavriatham*, *varavilichuvakkal*, *anchadi*, *polichupaattu* and *kodeelathottam*. *Varavili* is the verses recited in inviting various divinities that are to be worshipped at the particular occasion and marks the beginning by seeking blessing from these prime divinities. The oil lamp and sacred weapons are worshipped by throwing rice while the *koladhari* recite its names in a specific tune and rhythm. In the second step, the *koladhari* recites verses that praise the deities and for the elevation of blessing, wellness and for the divine powers of the deity. The next step consists of inviting specific deity to the place of *kaliyattam*. This is one of the most important stages of *thottam* reciting. The verses of *thottam* that are being recited here are

considered as very sacred with magical powers (*manthram*). These verses that start with ‘*varikavenam...*’ [(please) come (to this place)] are specific to each deity with their names, place of origin, major shrines (*aaroda sthanam*), and other important shrines, the details of the deity like character, power and so on. The reciting is done in a very typical way with specific tone and rhythm with beating of drums. The voice and pitch of the reciting also vary with the nature of the deity like *satwik*, *raudra* (benevolent and malevolent) and such.

The next stage of *sthuthi* consists of two parts namely *neettukavi* and *thaalavaritham*. This section starts with ‘*hari maathaa pitha...*’ and it is a *sthuthi* meaning the oral worship of divinity. In the part of *neettukavi*, the emphasis is on *eenam* (tone or intonation) of the verses and in the later part emphasis is given to *thaalam* (rhythm) of the reciting. The *sthuthi* is intended to praise the deity being worshipped and that includes important Puranic deities like Ganapathi and Saraswathi who are considered as the gods and goddesses of wellness and knowledge. *Varavilichuvaykkal* is the invitation of the deity to be performed at the shrine, reverently inviting the divinity by calling the major shrines of the deity, the way to the particular shrine where *kaliyattam* is happening, and the names of the nearby shrines etc.

The costumes of the theyyam are an important aspect in the whole act and in demonstration of sacred powers of the deity under worship. It is through this visual demonstration that the devotees experience the god in a primary way in addition to the oration of the theyyam and the sounds of various musical instruments. Bloch (1974: 68) in his essay deals with the ‘communicate aspects’ in rituals and ‘traditional authority’ and problematize the relation between these two. In the present context of theyyam rituals, the oral aspects are much high. Especially the *thottam* and the *vaachal* in the performance have a high significance in the power relation existing among various communities and castes in the society. In the myth which explains the story of the life of the person who becomes the god a particular incident and context in that person's life are narrated. This will be mostly about the inequalities or injustices existed in the society, the dominance of one section of society, their power and authority in mishandling the oppressed. In such instances as in Potten theyyam, Thottinkara Bhagavathi, or Vishnumoorthi, it is this authority of the oppressor higher castes in society that is being questioned and demonstrated. It is a kind of rebellion against the authority of one group in the society by the other.

In this context intoning is of chief significance in the *thottam* and *vaachal* of theyyam, because it is an indicative of the character of the theyyam and its background. The tone of song and oration varies from one theyyam to another or more clearly from a group of theyyam with similar nature to another. It is said to be so because the theyyam's character and nature can be broadly classified into *satwik*, *madhyama*, and *tamasic*, in an increasing order from benevolence to malevolence. There are theyyam which love their devotees, benevolent in nature, beautiful and calm in attire with specific costumes and also with the body act. For example, Muchilottu Bhagavathi is an extreme form of a theyyam with the above-mentioned character and in the opposite end there are Chamundi theyyam like Karinchamundi which are highly malevolent and ferocious. Similarly, the mother and fertility theyyam, hero theyyam etc. too have characteristic intoning in their performance that justifies their nature and mode of communication with the audience.

In the *kaliyattam* of a theyyam, the performer comes before the audience twice in two different forms. In the first stage which is usually known as *thottam* or *vellattam* the performer in specific simple costume performs rituals, sing the *thottam* song, dance before the *palliyara*. In the second stage that happens two or three hours after the first the performer wears the complete costume and performs the ritual and dance. It is in the second stage a performer gets transformed into the god or goddess and blesses the devotees.

The local terminology needs little explanation since the same word stands for different things. A theyyam performer in his costume either at the *vellattam* or at the main dance is known as a *kolam*, meaning the figure or form. The *vellattam* is also a dance (*attam*) of the theyyam performer and sometimes this is also called as *ilamkolam*. This actually means a primary or junior form of the complete *kolam* or the theyyam. One special case is the Muthappan theyyam. Here the dance of the complete *kolam* of the theyyam is known as *vellattam* in Kannur region. That is, the performance of the ritual dance of Muthappan will be known by Muthappan *vellattam* rather than Muthappan *kaliyattam*.

The *thottam* also has two meanings. It means the verses and song of the theyyam which are sung during the first stage of the dance. This includes complete narration of the story about the particular god. By *thottam* it also means the event of reciting the *thottam* song and the first stage dance. It is at this time the story of the deity is elaborately sung and performed before the audience. In the second stage, the

importance is mostly given to the divine nature of the theyyam as it is in this stage the theyyam performer becomes god.

Vishnumoorthi theyyam has relatively long *thottam* (story verses) and the *thottam* (the first stage dance) usually happens during night. The theyyam performer in simple costume with red waist cloth, small crown and ornaments sing the *thottam* by standing before the shrine. This will be assisted by drummers and other members of the crew. As this theyyam is connected to the Lord Vishnu, in the *thottam* song the story of various incarnations of Vishnu is narrated. This also includes the elaboration of local myth of the Palanthayi Kannan and Karuvadan Kuruppu. The performer sings and dramatically demonstrates the various incarnations of Vishnu in the *thottam* dance. The priest of the *palliyara* hands over various weapons to the *ilamkolam*, each representing various incarnations of Vishnu. Not all the ten incarnations are demonstrated but only six. Narasimha incarnation being the main, with its connection to the local myth, is enacted in more detail. Following the myth of assassination of the *asura* of Hiranyakasipu, the *kolakkaran* acts the killing before the *palliyara*. He also sacrifices a fowl at this time representing the destruction of evils. After this drama, the performer returns to the *aniyara* and take rest till next day morning. After getting the complete makeup he performs the main theyyam. Often this *vellattam* or *thottam* reciting will be happening around midnight and the main theyyam performance will be by nine or ten in the morning. Similar is the case with theyyam like Baali, Maakkam, Kathivanoor Veeran and so on, those having lengthy *thottam*. The enactment of the drama and dance in the second stage again depends on the type of theyyam. The *thottam* of Baali usually takes about two or three hours, Maakkam about eight to nine hours and same is the case with Kathivanoor Veeran. When the *thottam* or *vellattam* is over, the performer lies at the *aniyara*, mostly sleeping and the helpers finishing the facial and body drawing that takes not less than two hours. The selection of night time and the long performance duration with much entertainment elements indicates that the *kaliyattam* is never a sole religious act of worship rather people conduct it for their entertainment too.

After getting the facial and body make up, the performer is dressed with all the clothes, ornaments and other decorations. Then he goes before the *palliyara* and wears the *mudi*. This is one of the most important occasions in the ritual as this is the time when the human theyyam performer transforms into the god. Towards the end of preparing the *kolam* by giving makeup the performer who sits on the wooden stool starts shaking the *chilanka* (the anklet). The rhythmic drumming and recitation of

aniyara thottam by the assistants changes the mood of the performer and he starts getting into a trance. When the final touch to the makeup is done the assistants place the *mudi* on the performer's head through the ritual of *thirumudi nivarai* or erecting the holy hair (crown). The performer looks at a mirror that he holds in one hand, see the image of the god and gets completely transformed into the god from the human status. This rite is known as *mukhadarshanam* or 'seeing the face'. From this time till the removal of the *mudi* the *koladhari* will be the god. To achieve this transformation the *koladhari* need to have an *ekachintha*, the singular mentation, fully dedicated in god and forgetting his worldly life as human.

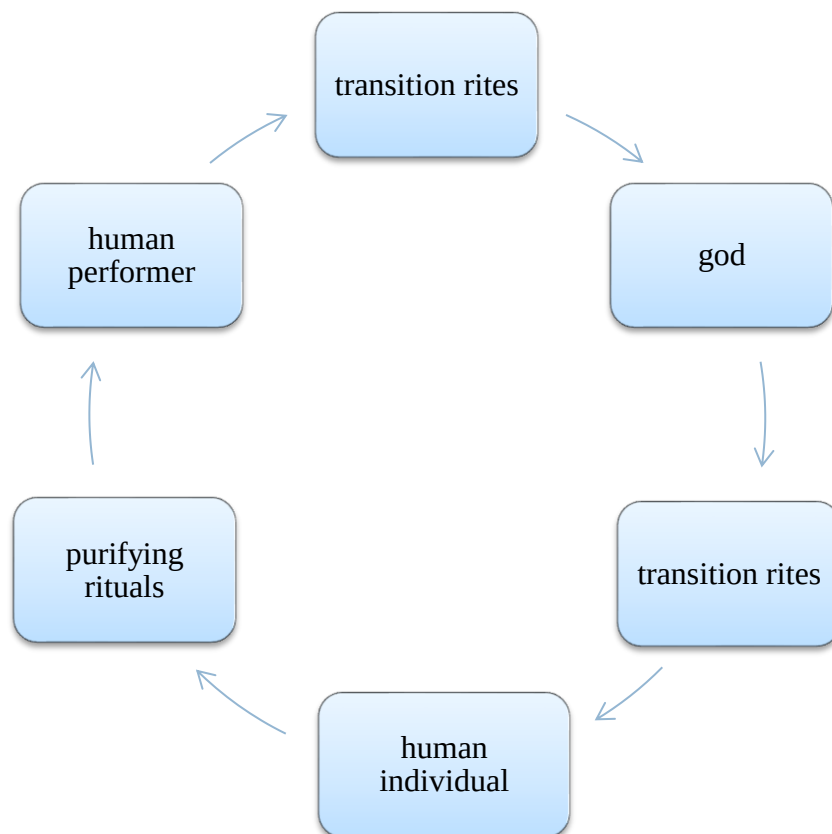


Diagram 4.1 Transformations of a theyyam performer

The theyyam suddenly makes fast steps and comes before the audience at the front yard of the *palliyara* after adorning the *mudi*. This event is known by *purappadu*

or *theyyam keeyal*. The theyyam then performs short rituals, recite certain parts of the *thottam* which are aimed at worshipping different local deities. After the dance, the theyyam starts *uriyattam*, the talking with the people around. Firstly, the theyyam call the elder members of different communities in an order and bless them. It usually starts with a higher caste Pothuval, Nambiar, or Nair member from the *tharavadu* which has connection to the shrine as *koyama*. The theyyam refer to them as '*payyannur gramam*' acknowledging their former authority and status in the olden days as chiefs and lords. After calling and blessing the *karanavar* of different Nair *tharavadu* the theyyam then calls the Thiyya community. They are called by '*ettillam*' after the eight primary lineages of Thiyya castes in North Malabar. Followed by this the theyyam calls and blesses other communities like Vaniya, Maniyani, Viswakarma, Pulaya (*pathillam*) and so on. If there are any Muslim families connected to the shrine or any devotee present, they are called by '*madayi nagare*'. After blessing the heads of major *tharavadu* in the area, the theyyam then blesses the devotees. The theyyam gives *manjalkkuri* to the devotees and converse with them and in return the devotees give small sums of money to the theyyam that ranges from ten rupees to five hundred.

During the main dance important rites are also performed by the theyyam. Several theyyam has fire torches attached to their body and the lighting of fire torches is done at the beginning of the dance. These fire torches indicate the ferocity of the deities and when the numbers of fire torches are more, the more intense and ferocious will be the nature of the deity. Theyyam like Muchilottu Bhagavathi do not have any fire torches and its character is benevolent (*satwik* nature as they say), similar is the case with different deities of Thaiparadevatha. On the other hand, theyyam like Maakkam, Puthiya Bhagavathi, Khandakarnan and such have several fire torches attached to their body. Jumping into pyre is also performed during this time in the case of Potten theyyam, Kandanar Kelan and so on.

The entire event of *kaliyattam* can may be summerised as follows. There are almost five stages in the event, each proceeding with very specific rituals and activities of various participants.

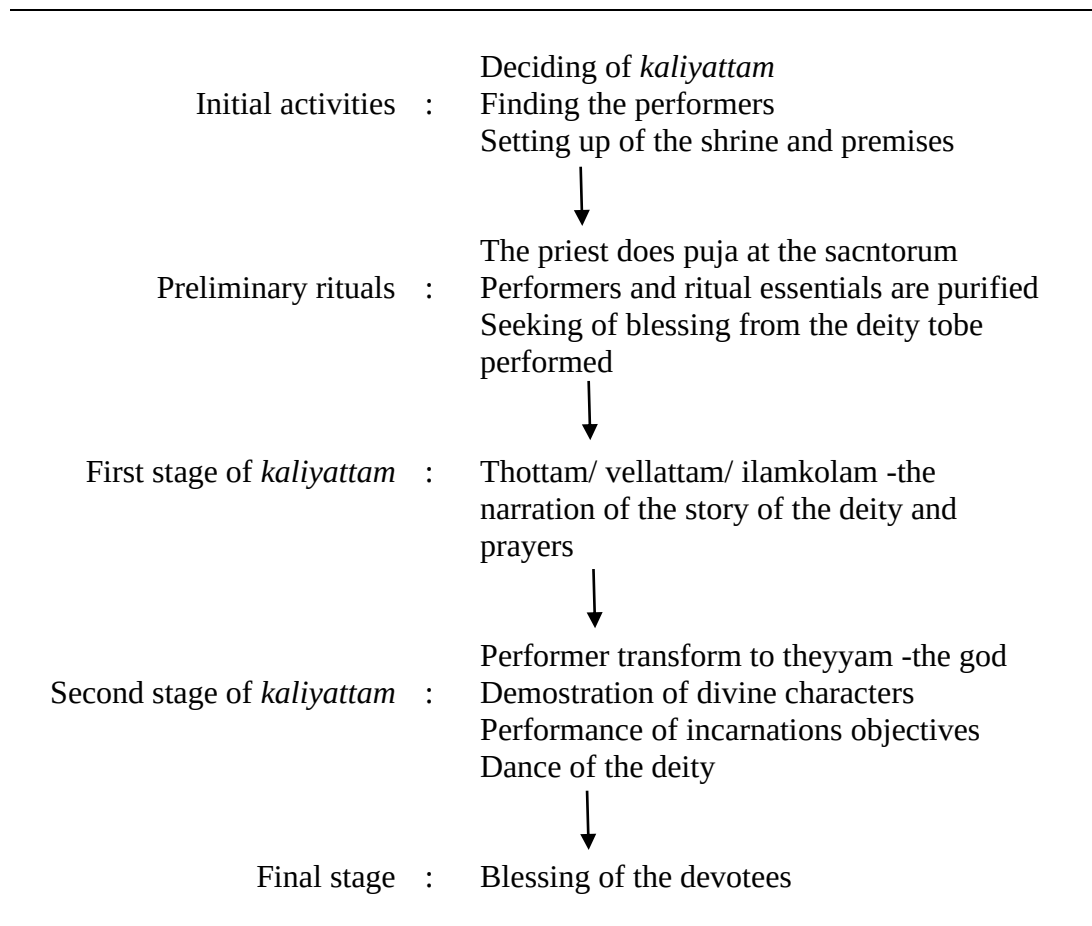


Diagram 4.2 Different stages of *kaliyattam*

The dance of the deity

The bodily movements are key part in the performance of the ritual. The demonstration of the godly characters is achieved through these bodily acts and the ‘*aattam*’ in *kaliyattam* means the dance of the deity itself. That is, the bodily movements (the dance) have the prime significance in the overall event. In other way, the complete realization or the actualization of the god’s presence before the audience is achieved through the dance. As Bloch (1974: 72) says, the “bodily movements are a kind of language and [that] symbolic signals are communicated through a variety of movements from one person to another”. Similarly, theyyam uses elaborate bodily acts in a systematic manner with both ritual as well as aesthetic values. The theyyam uses different types of acts in doing rituals (like sacrifice and blessing) and demonstrate

characters (jumping to pyre, performing martial arts) and also various entertaining activities and dance (*manangiyattam* for example in the case of Muchilottu Bhagavathi) which all together forms the complete set of communication in the event.

During the dance, the movement the performer makes with his body and with different material objects has several symbolic meanings embedded in it. These body movements can also be considered as a language that communicates different meanings among the different groups of participants through various symbols. The acts are highly stylized depending on the nature of the deity. The performer uses his entire body parts to demonstrate the characters of the god he is depicting. If it is a performance of a benevolent deity, or a motherly figure like Muchilottu Bhagavathi, the movements are slow, the steps are highly rhythmic to communicate the calmness of the goddess as a beautiful virgin lady. On the other hand, a fierce demonic theyyam of Karinchamundi, or Kuttichathan has fast movements, not at all rhythmic, and even intrude into the audience to attack them. In case of hero theyyam like Kathivanoor Veeran the movements have more emphasis on the martial art. Performance with eyes is also important in some cases like that in Vishnumoorthi theyyam. The black shade given around eyes too symbolizes the nature of the deity. Acting with bare hand is very rare as the theyyam mostly holds weapons like sword in their hand. While demonstrating activities of the theyyam he uses hand gestures elaborately like in the act of killing a demon or so. The roaring, howling and wild cries produced by the theyyam can be considered as a part of the body movement and dance rather than the oral communication discussed previously. The theyyam makes these sounds when it demonstrates particular acts while jumping or running. These sounds help in enhancing the character of theyyam.

The dance and the oration form the key part of the *kaliyattam*, both in its literal meaning and in the function. It is at this point the incarnation of the deities before the devotees happens and they communicate with each other. All these can be summarised using a diagram as follows.

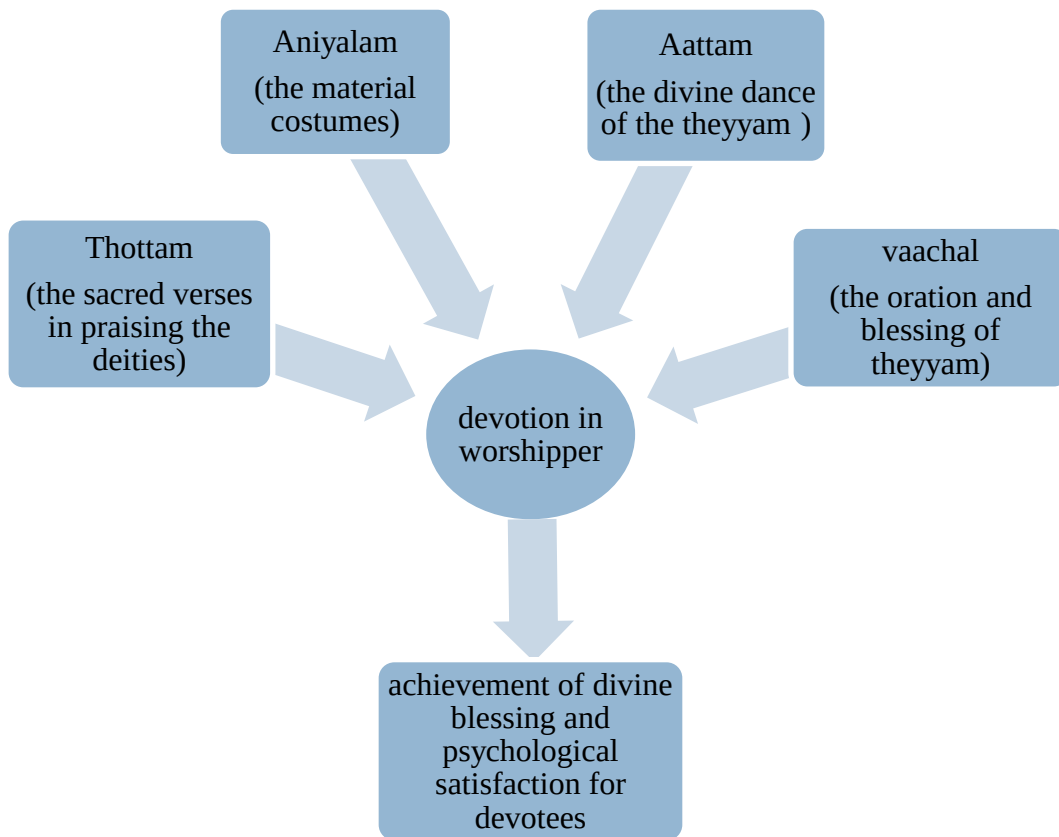


Diagram 4.3 Main communicative elements in *kaliyattam* between deities and devotees

The feasts in *kaliyattam*

More than just ceasing one's hunger and the biological need, food has multiple dimensions for man. Procurement, preparation, sharing, and eating of food is always connected to a group activity, although in the present days of market-based economy it has less significance. A communal feast, sharing and eating together at some special occasions of social and community life means more than just ceasing one's appetite. At the time of religious rituals, food or any edible substance for that matter have a specific role to play. People use food materials to make contact with god, to worship god and it plays a significant role as gift and donation. Offering of food items in the form of vegetables, grain or animals to the religious center by the worshippers and the

communal feast made out of the donation and sharing of the food among the community members has a symbolic meaning of a higher level.

On religious rituals, Durkheim (1915: 463) suggests that “rituals as the means by which collective beliefs and ideals are simultaneously generated, expressed, and affirmed as real by the community.” Occasions like religious festivals associated feasts are of much significance and this elevates the participants in the community to another level of spirituality, a ‘collective effervescence’ that has much to do with the social life of the people. Several thinkers have proposed the importance of religious rituals and the function it plays towards what typically called the ‘social solidarity.’

The *perumkaliyattam* of Muchilottu Bhagavathi, the chief goddess of the Vaniya community, needs special mention in a discussion about the feast in the religious ritual. A *perumkaliyattam* is considered to be the festival of the entire village where the shrine is situated and people from all communities participate in it. The extent of participation goes beyond the boundaries of religion with the considerable participation of people from Islam, with some families having specific ritualistic involvement in the event. The direct participation of Christian people is not that common though they get involved in the gathering in one way or another. As discussed before, the *perumkaliyattom* of the deity Muchilottu Bhagavathi is considered as the marriage of the virgin goddess and the event has a total vibe of a marriage celebrated by the whole village. Just like a feast, which is a major part of any marriage, here in this event too feast has prime importance. The deity is considered as *annapoorneswari*⁷ and on all the festival days a grand meal will be served to the devotees.

In the event, the cooking and serving of food has special significance and is done with utmost sacredness. All the essential things like rice, vegetables, firewood for cooking are gathered on a massive scale from the devotees itself. The making of the hearth and temporary kitchen is done ritually and the place of the kitchen, *kalavara* -the store room of food items, and the surroundings are treated sacredly. No chances of pollution are entertained here and only people with ritual purity are allowed inside this sacred place. This region around the shrine where cooking is carried out is considered to be virtuous with the divine presence of the deity.

The procuring of the food items like rice, vegetables, and other necessary things are ritually done at an event named *kalavara niraykkal* meaning filling up of the store room. During this event, people march to the shrine carrying vegetables and rice required for the feast. Though the collection of entire groceries is not possible through

this event, it symbolically indicates the involvement of whole villagers in the event by confirming their participation and donation to the event. Procurement of entire groceries for the feast solely by means of donation is not possible as they need to purchase provision in large quantity from the market. The money needed towards this is mainly raised through a collection or voluntary donation from the people.

During the days of *kaliyattam* from morning to midnight food will be served in particular *pandal* (a marquee) made specifically for this purpose. Food will be served separately to men and women though the entire food is cooked at the same kitchen. Devotees wait in long queue sometimes two or three hours to take the food, which is considered as '*prasadam*' the divine gift of the deity. It is considered to be auspicious and sacred to take the meal at the divine presence of the deity. The case of Karivellur Muchilottu can be taken to get a rough idea of the scale of participation, arrangements, and quantities of groceries used during a five-day *perumkaliyattam* happened in the month of January 2017. The feast was served for about five lack people, for which it took around fifty tons of rice and equivalent quantities of vegetables and other provisions.

Unlike any other *kaliyattam* feasts, the Vayanattukulavan theyyam has a specialty for being a non-vegetarian feast with the meat of wild game being ritually sacrificed at the event. Though there are several shrines of the deity both in Kannur and Kasaragod districts, the rituals in the Kasaragod district draws special attention because of the very nature of the performance of rituals and the scale of the event. In most of the shrine in Kannur district, this theyyam is performed with a lesser level of animal sacrifice, mostly fowl, or sometimes no animal sacrifice at all, in some cases even substituting animals with vegetables like ash gourd. But in Kasaragod district the event takes place in a very traditional manner with game hunting and ritual sacrifice being a prime ritual accompanying feast.

The festival of the Vayanattukulavan theyyam at Periya in Kasaragod district in the month of March 2016 was a three-day program, the second night being the main event. During this, three main theyyam are performed at a specially prepared place on a vast ground with a temporary shrine made with coconut leaves at the center. The three theyyam are Vayanattukulavan, Kandanar Kelan and Karanavar theyyam, first being the major one and the latter two are associated theyyam. Though there are several rituals in the event more focus is given here only to the particular ritual of animal sacrifice and the feast. The animal sacrifice called '*bappidal*' is done for worshipping

Kandanar Kelan, a mythical character who died of a snake bite during a forest fire, and later got raised to the status of theyyam. This sacrificial ritual consists of hunting of wild animals from the nearby forest and offering the carcass before the theyyam as a form of sacrifice. For this, the hunting was done in elaborate scale, killing whatever animal the hunting party encounter before them in the forest. The list of animals ranges from lizards and squirrels to birds and from deer to wild boar. Though hunting and poaching of wild animals is a criminal offense under the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972, the practice continued extensively until the last decade. At present, after the high extent of protests by animal protection movements, wildlife enthusiasts and other likeminded people, there is a reduction in the scale of hunting of wild animals. People gave up hunting small animals and birds and now they hunt only wild boar, even though this animal also comes under animal protection act and poaching it is a criminal offense.

Whatever may be the nature of activities behind the scene, at the ritual event several wild boars are used for the sacrifice. The theyyam symbolically cuts the throat of each animal and it is later shifted to the cooking place. Usually around twenty animals are butchered and cooked. Rice is also prepared in large quantities at the kitchen. This whole event takes place after midnight and by early morning people start to queue up at the temporarily built dining hall. In the morning itself the feast starts and people gather in thousands to take part in the feast.

A comparison of the two feasts of *perumkaliyattam* of Muchilottu Bhagavathi and that of Vayanattukulavan reveals their similarities and contrasts and also the nature of religious feast in *kaliyattam*. There are notable differences in the nature of both the deities and rituals performed. Muchilottu Bhagavathi is a female deity, benevolent and *satwik* (kind) character, whereas Vayanattukulavan is an old male figure and not considered as so kind in nature. Irrespective of the differences in the place where the shrines are situated, the ceremony of the former involves the feast, which will be definitely vegetarian, made by villagers using their own contributions. In the latter case, there are variations from place to place. In the southern region including Kannur, the ceremony of Vayanattukulavan do not have animal sacrifice in large scale, and there will be no feast served with meat. But in the case of shrines situated in the Kasaragod part, the sacrificial meat of the wild boar is served during the feast.

At a feast of Muchilottu Bhagavathi devotees take part in the feast in a calm and solemn mood. In this case there are no rituals or activities that produce any exceptional excitements. The vegetarian feast is conducted with the agriculture produces that the people themselves cultivate are offered to the shrine. Unlike this, in the case of Vayanattukulavan festival, one of the main parts of the event is the hunting of wild animals and its sacrifice. A couple of weeks before the actual *kaliyattam* several groups of hunting parties set out to the forest. Each group will consist of around ten people with one or two skilled hunters with guns. These hunters are hired by the festival organizers and they are paid fixed amounts of money, in some cases it may go up to even ten thousand rupees per game. There will be three or four such groups in each event and two or three days before the day of *kaliyattam*, they hunt boars and store it in a restricted place near the shrine. During the sacrifice ritual of *bappidal*, people bring each game tied on a long pole carried by two men to the shrine. One after another they come out of the store, running and circulate the shrine thrice and keep all the animals in line before the shrine. The drums beat in a high pitch, people start hauling and screaming with excitement. What we could observe from the crowd gathered around in thousands is not any feeling of devotion towards the theyyam present before them, but an emotion of extreme wilderness connected to the wild game hunting, killing of beasts and blood. Thus, comparing the two different feasts we can say that these two comes under two different categories of ‘*satwik*’ and ‘*tamasik*’. The feast of Muchilottu Bhagavathi is considered as a feast associated with marriage, also in which the divine ‘left over’ of the goddess (*prasadam*) is being distributed and people participate in it with such an emotional level. On the other hand, the feast at Vayanattukulavan festival is more like a communal dining with the meat they hunted from the wild. This categorization parallels with the higher caste mainstream Hinduism and folk religion of the lower caste people.

Animal sacrifice in *kaliyattam*

Animal sacrifice is an important element in the ritual of *kaliyattam*. The description of various theyyam discussed earlier gives a picture of how and to what extent killing is a feature in the event. A majority of the theyyam has their myths connected to the

assassination of demons, or legendary tales of revenge, or even killing of innocent people. Whatever mentioned in the myths is reflected in the rituals as performance. Weapons, blood colors symbolizing war, mutiny, the ferocity of deities, and animal sacrifices are very common in the event. In the entire the event, the ritual of *gurusi* is the main sacrifice. Animal sacrifice was once very common to several of the theyyam like Vayanattukulavan, Vishnumoorthi, Chamundi, to mention a few. Hunting and sacrificial offering of wild animals was once an essential part of the Vayanattukulavan theyyam (a hunter god), in association with the great festival of *Theyyamkettu Maholtsavam* in Kasaragod region. This large-scale hunting was a common event until two or three decades back. The strong campaigning against the destruction of wildlife and similar protests resulted in considerable changes in the intensity of hunting which got reduced now-a-days. Still, each year not less than a dozen *theyyamkettu* festivals are happening in various parts of Kasaragod district. All this was happening with the knowledge of government officials, politicians, police, and officials of the wild life department. No government or protest movements are able to prevent the open violation of law and the killing of wild animals. The atmosphere in the place will be highly tensed and dangerous, any protest against the event by even a single person will result in serious physical violence and fight.

With the growing concerns over the wildlife and attitude that the practice of animal hunting is of a savage type, people are giving up the direct involvement of animal sacrifice, especially in the Kannur region. They are not abandoning the ritual, but they are replacing animals with vegetables and perform the act of butchering symbolically representing animal sacrifice. The influence of mainstream Hinduism is also a chief reason for avoiding ‘blood shedding rituals’ because such activities are considered as profane and impure. This event of *theyyamkettu* festival is an occasion where groups of people of various affiliations, like environmentalists, government officials, political parties, religious believers and such come into conflict over the nature of religious practices happening. What certain groups argue is that the believers and conductors should rethink the act they are doing, which is harmfully affecting another section in society as well as the environment.

The animal sacrifice and the feast followed by it using the sacrificial meat have several implications. The wild game hunting and eating have a different meaning in different contexts in history. The cults associated with the large wild animal hunting and sacrifice are Vayanattukulavan and Kandanar Kelan and the first is of more importance though it is to the later to which the sacrifice is performed specifically. The first theyyam represents a hunter god and with his bow and arrow symbolizing the economic activity of the people in the past, that is, a slash and burn agriculture along with wild game hunting. The theyyam is considered as a protector of the agriculture activity who enjoyed wild meat. Both activities form the subsistence strategies of the people. So, when this mythical person is worshipped as god certainly wild meat becomes the favorite food and the people perform hunting and offer sacrifice to appease the god. The sacrificial animal is butchered, cooked and the devotees and the public feast on the meat as sacred food. At this instance the people are not considering the feast as an offering to the god, rather, it is a feast for the people and it is for them the feast is made.

When these events are performed before the people, the devotees and spectators who witness it get elevated into a state of mental ecstasy, not certainly of devotion but with all excitement and thrill of hunting and sacrifice of wild animals. As destruction of enemy or a bad spirit is one of the core elements in theyyam animal sacrifice has a notion of the same in addition to the reminiscence of hunting-gathering past. The overall worship and propitiation of the gods and goddesses is recreated through this ritual. The frequent animal sacrifices and the rituals of *gurusi*, the worship with sacrificial blood, are thus an unavoidable rite in the whole event.

In the simplest form, the resultants of the entire event can be summarised like the following. At one end, there are various people with specific roles, ritual as well as non-ritual. All these activities are made sure in the event of *kaliyattam*, in a very structured manner by following customs and traditions of the rituals. Such participation affirms the statuses and roles of people and their togetherness. The feast, festivities and various entertaining elements within and outside the ritual ceremony also plays a substantial role.

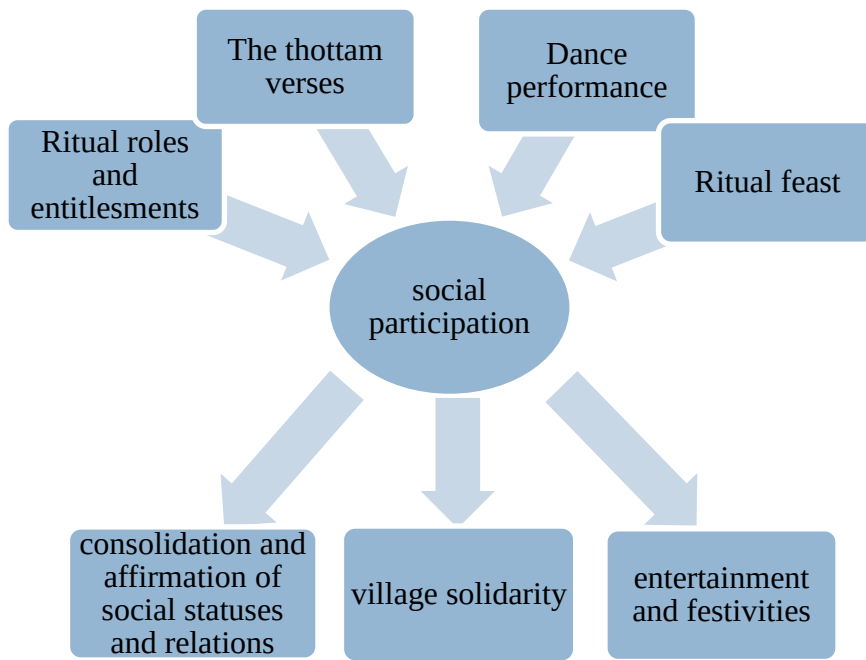


Diagram 4.4 The social dynamics in *kaliyattam*

Conclusion

A complex sequence of rituals performed at the shrine in appeasing the deity and receiving the blessing by the devotees and there by achieving a psychological satisfaction is the core element in the event of *kaliyattam*. The ritual performance of dance of the god is the center of the whole event and all the rituals conducted before and after the dances are primarily for this only. Depending on the type of *kaliyattam*, whether it is a *perumkaliyattam*, *aandukaliyattam*, or *kalppana kaliyattam*, the preparations start before the actual event. All the key ritual activities are done with high devotion in a ritualistic fashion, believing the presence of the divinity at all instances.

Though there are hundreds of different gods and goddesses which are worshipped as theyyam, the basic structure is the same. Based on the character and nature of the individual theyyam the ceremony varies and people have their favorite deity. Certain groups of theyyam are worshipped for their specialty and specificity, based on the myths which people believe. All the acts carried out by the respective entitled persons and the roles performed by individuals are completely based on the customs and practices prevalent in the region. The performance of the ritual acts has much to do with the social identity of the community to which one belongs. It is at this stage of the

ritual the entire participating community is undergoing a special social experience. There happens a reconstruction of the social situations from the history and the survivors are recreated as divine. This supernatural rebirth of the ancestors and common individuals as gods and goddesses through the religious ritual gives a new hope and pacification to their worries of life.

The pantheon that comprises of deities of mainstream Hinduism in a way widens the entire traditional worshipping pattern. The elaborate costumes, music and drama in the ritual performance draw the attention of those participants with no specific religious objectives in addition to the special experience that caters to the devotees. The feast and the animal sacrifice also reveal the way the different community members are becoming a part of the whole event. The event actually brings the people together and it is also an event that symbolizes the past life which was much relied on agriculture and farming. Other subsistence activities like slash and burn agriculture, hunting, and market based economic relations in the recent times are also demonstrated in association with theyyam during a *kaliyattam*.

Note

¹ These characteristics are already discussed in the previous chapter.

² A *kaliyattam* is also known as *kaaliyattam*, *thirayaattam*, *theyyattam*, *kolam kettu*.

³ These fire torches or flambeau are made with dry coconut leaf and it has special significance because in the olden days it was these fire torches that provided light during night time.

⁴ *Kolakkaran* is singular and *kolakkar* is plural in Malayalam.

⁵ It was in the following order the ritual performance of the different deities conducted. Kolichal Veeran (7pm), Vellakkaruvedan (7.15pm), Kolacham theyyam *vellattam* (7.30), Vadakken Vathukkal Bhagavathi (*kavilamma*) *thottam* (8pm), Attakkattu Bhagavathi *thottam* (8.15pm), Vishnumoorthi *thottam* (8.30pm), Kookkalath Chamundi (8.45pm), Pododakath Bhagavathi (9pm), Moovanthikkolam (9.30 pm), Anchadangum Bhootham (also named as Cheriya Bhagavathi) (10.30pm), Kolacham theyyam (11pm), Vellaru Vedan theyyam (11.30pm), Kalichan theyyam (12.45pm). On the next day (12th of May) morning Aaralathu Bhagavathi (9am), Pulloorali (9.30am), Koottathil Chamundi (10am), Padarkulangara Bhagavathi (11 am), Kottappurathu Chamundi

(11.30am), Vadakken Vathukkal bhagavathi (12 noon), Kookkalath Bhagavathi (12.30 pm), Attakkattu Bhagavathi (1 pm), Padinjarechamundi (1.30 pm), Vishnumoorthi (2 pm), Aaralathu Chamundi (2.30 pm), Pedodakathu Chamundi (3pm), Kaneekkulangara Bhagavathi (3.30 pm), Kaalarathri (4 pm), Dandyangattu Bhagavathi (Kammadathamma) (5 pm), Gulikan theyyam (6 pm), and *thidangal* of Yogyar Akambadi (8 pm), and Potten theyyam (9 pm).

⁶ The elements are the following, *paramporul*-the singularity –*eka swaropam*; *Shiva shakthi*; *trimoorthi* –the trinity; *Brahama*, *Vishnu* and *Shiva*; Four Vedas; *Pancha bhootha mudra*; *shad darshanas* (six philosophies –*samkhyam*, *yogam*, *nyayam*, *vaisheshikam*, *poorva* and *uthara meemamsa*); *saptha mathrukkal*; *ashtadik paalakar*; *navagraha*; *parabrahma swaroopam*; Eleven *rudra roopas*; Twelve *adityans*; Thirteen *munimar*; Fourteen *lokas*; Fifteen *pakkams*; Sixteen arts (*kalakal*); Seventeen *rajyas* (*rajyangal*); Eighteen *prabhus*; Nineteen *ragas*; Twenty *chamayas*; Twenty one gurus who includes *pancha mathakkal*, *pancha bhootha*, *pettichi*, *maathulan*, *desikan*, *sodaran*, *upanayanan*, *pithavu*, *rakshithavu*, and *anna dathavu*.

⁷ a colloquial usage which can be loosely translated as a deity who blesses devotees with food.

Chapter Five

Social and Cultural Implications and Contemporary Scenario

Beyond the matters of religious rituals there are aspects which are associated with the belief system of theyyam that has significance outside the sphere of religion and context of ritual. The belief system that consists of the diverse myths and legends associated with the theyyam and the worshipping are of primary social and cultural significance in the whole system. Though the significance of rituals is embedded in the society it is through the social life of the players and the various ritual roles they perform this significance becomes socially perceptible. Beyond the direct religious implications of the worship made by the theyyam performers there are significant elements in the social and cultural aspects of the whole society where the same ritual specialists are of significance. The religious system of the people is reflected in a number of different areas which has no direct connection to the religious system. The first level of influence is experienced in the matters of caste system, followed by politics, economy, and other cultural aspects in the society.

Three major aspects under discussion in this chapter are the social life of theyyam performers, changes and contemporary scenarios in rituals and lastly the influence of theyyam in various social and cultural matters of the people. The reflection of the religion in various cultural platforms like politics, literature, and other creative art fields is an important matter of concern in understanding the relation between religion and society in its entirety. The way in which the modern technologies, cyberspace and academic research are engaging with the religious system is another aspect of the ritual celebration that deserves special attention. Since the impacts and reflection of theyyam is so wide and extensive in the society only a selected number of arenas which have greater connection to the cults are dealt in the study.

The lives of performers

The theyyam performers being the most important group in the whole ritual event, the life stories of them could give a detailed understanding on the specific ritual events as well as its connection with the society. It is primarily through the social life of the theyyam performer belief system and the ritual based on the theyyam worshipping

becomes tangible and significant. The life of the *koladhari*¹ and other key role players in the ritual transcends the religious aspects to the society. The life histories of *koladhari* reveal great details about the general opinion on different areas of their engagements and about the religious activities they perform in society. They can also tell the real account of the changes happening to the belief and practice systems and also about the contemporary status of it.

It is these men who become the gods and goddesses in the event of *kaliyattam* and the same is the core matter in the whole religious system. A performer starts his life as a *koladhari* in his teenage years and even before that the family members try to introduce them to the basics by taking the kids with them to *kaliyattam* places. At the green room (*aniyara*) these young boys spend their time observing various activities of makeup, drumming, *thottam* verses, mantras, dance and such performed by their father, uncles and other relatives. This is how a new *koladhari* begins his life. This beginning gives the basic lessons on what theyyam is to them and how their life as a member of the theyyam performing community is connected to it, and hence to the larger group of worshippers.

The following is an account of how performers deal with various matters which come across their lives, both in the ritual sphere as well as in the public sphere. Three performers are selected as key contributors on various information in this regard and comments of a number of performers are also considered to supplement the information given by the key informants whenever and wherever required. This is actually substantiating the factuality of the information on which the observations are made.

The initiation and life cycle of performers: When a boy is ready to perform theyyam the owners of the shrine where the performers' family has hereditary right usually make necessary arrangements for it. The ritual conducting communities and shrine owners are mostly welcoming to such an initiation. According to informants, the shrine owners are happy in that one more individual is joining the group which hopefully guarantees availability of performer to perform the rituals at their shrines. There are certain initiation rituals needed to be conducted before the debut performance of an individual. At the performer's home, the novice and elders participate in the rituals worshipping ancestors and elders and followed by a small feast. It will be the father, uncle or other elderly theyyam performers in the family who conduct this ritual.

Community	Theyyam
Vannan	: Thayparadevatha, Vettakkarumakan, Kshetrapalakan, Vairajathan, Puthiyabhagavathi, Muchilottu bhagavathi, Kannangattu bhagavathi, Angakkulangara bhagavathi, Padakkethi bhagavathi, Aryappoomkanni, Kakkara bhagavathi, Baali, Cheralathu bhagavathi, Padarkulangara bhagavathi, Narambil bhagavathi, Veeran kaali, Veerabhadran, Vishkandan, Naagakandan, Kathivanoor veeran, Kandanar Kelan, Vayanattu Kulavan
Malayan	: Muttichathan, Bhairavan, Potten theyyam, Gulikan, Uchitta, Raktheswari, Rakthachamundi, Madayil chamundi, Vishnumoorthi, Kandakarnan, Panchuruli, Moovalamkuzhi chamundi, Theechamundi
Velan (Thuluelan)	: Kundorchamundi, Panchuruli, Dhumabhagavathi, Pullikkurathi, Kunjarakurathi, Chudalabhadraakaali, Bappiriyan, Kaalachamundi, Gulikan, Pullichamundi, Padinjare chamundi
Anjoottan, Munnoottan	: Thiruvarkkattu bhagavathi, Puthiya bhagavathi, Poomaruthan, Thuluveeran
Chinkathan	: Veerachamundi, Thayipparadevatha, Puthiyabhagavathi, Kammiyamma, Paraliyamma, Nagakanni
Mavilar	: Vishnumoorthi, Chamundi, Kurathi, Gulikan, Kappalathi, Pethalan, Kaattumadhantha, Manthramoorthi, Mangalachamundi, Vannathi bhagavathi, Mammiyamma, Paraaliyamma, Veerabhadran, Veerambinaaru
Koppalar (Nallikadaya)	: Kundorchamundi, Dhooma bhagavathi, Panchuruli, Annappanchuruli, Padinjare chamundi, Gulikan
Pulayar	: Pulimaranja Thondachan, Maruthiyodan Gurikkal, Pollan Kurikkal, Vattyan Polla, Bhairavan, Kurathi, Karinchamundi, Pottan theyyam, Vishnumoorthi, Kuttichathan, Thekkan Kariyathan, Pulikandan, Dharmadaivam

Table 5.1. Various theyyam performing communities and their respective theyyam

The learning process in theyyam is a never-ending task due to its vastness and the complexity of rituals and especially of the lengthy *thottam* songs which are specific

to each and every individual theyyam. A theyyam performer is required to learn about several theyyam based on their caste specialization. Usually one's father and uncles (either paternal or maternal) are the first teachers of the ritual and whenever one wants to learn more, they will approach other eminent performers in the neighborhood.

According to a ritual performer, theyyam is a typical culture of the North Malabar and none from outside this region will get clear understanding of the logic of this practice. It is not in a single day one *koladhari* attains the fame and acceptance, but it is from the society over the course of time he inherits them. The informant accepts that there is an issue of human right (violations) embedded in doing difficult and dangerous act of certain theyyam performance like that of Ottakkolam but it is the duty of each of the specific communities to do whatever the society ascribed on them to do.² According to the custom, a Brahmin has to do the *puja*, a Maniyani has to do the construction works, an *aasari* (carpenter) has to do his duty, a Vaniyan has to provide oil, a Nambiar or Nair has to play the role of *koyma* in the shrine and in the same way every community has to do their duty mandatorily and one could not deny performing their duty. The duty of the theyyam performing castes is just like the above in the social life. It is the part of one culture and is embedded in it according to the performer.

Every theyyam performers have their own attitudes towards bringing their sons to the ritual world. These days none of them wants their children to dedicate their life completely to the ritual but wants to continue their education to enter a job with regular payment. They are concerned that when a boy joins the ritual performing group and starts experiencing that life, as performer as well as assistant, he is likely to end his school education and may completely immerse into theyyam. When one section of parents wants to stand their heirs out of rituals due to various reasons, there are another group who really want to take their younger generation to the ritual sphere. One informant in particular said that he will definitely bring his son to theyyam performance because he considers it as his own duty as well as the duty of the community he belongs to. This particular performer is currently continuing the tradition that his father has transferred to him and wants to continue the tradition of heritage started by their forefathers.

The Performing group- It is often as a group the theyyam performers engage in a *kaliyattam*. One such group consists of the main performers (*koladhari*), musicians

(*vadyakkar*), make-up artists and so on. This differentiation is not absolute because everyone in the group performs different roles. The specialization happens only in certain cases. An elderly person who could not perform theyyam may do drumming, works related to the preparation of *aniyalam* and such. Usually the group consists of relatives hailing from one particular place, all related to the *janmari* through either paternal or maternal lines. There are instances when men are invited to join a group to do some specific task like preparing *aniyalam* or singing the *thottam*. Occasionally the organizers may invite a specific *koladhari* (and few of his helpers) from one place and *vadyakkar* from another group. It is based mainly on the requirement and specificity of the theyyam to be performed and the availability of performers and assistants at that time and the organizers make contextual decisions. The most important thing is that, according to one informant, whoever is involved in the event there should be a coherence and good communication among the group members otherwise it might affect the performance.

The complex rituals and associated religious activities in theyyam and *kaliyattam* are almost exclusively an affair of men. It extends from the ritual performers to priests, oracles and other various ritual roles, to members in shrine and festival management. All these key roles are played by men only. Among the several hundreds of theyyam only one is performed by women. This too is grouped separately as *devakkoothu* and there are also opinions that *devakkoothu* cannot be considered as a theyyam. The closeness of a *devakkoothu* is in terms of the structure, performance and rituals which make one to consider this as theyyam. Generally, while discussing about theyyam people consider only about those performed by men sidelining the single event of this type performed by women. Again, the shrines where *devakkoothu* happens is also rare, a couple of them if not one in North Malabar. This rarity also makes *devakkoothu* separating out from any discussion on theyyam.

Due to the heavy bias in gender it is of no necessity to explain about the key roles and the gender of each, specifically because all are performed by men. In a shrine the only role assigned to women is that of *adichuthali*, the daily cleaning of shrine and its premises. Based on the gathered information from field work, it is observable that women assist theyyam performers in two occasions. The ‘Kurathi theyyam’ and ‘Kothamooriyattam’ have women singers in their *thottam*. Again, the latter is not

completely considered as theyyam where as it comes under the common group of theyyam like performances in North Malabar.

Though participation in ritual acts are avoided during a *kaliyattam* the assistance of large number of women are incorporated mainly as labour force to the conductance of the event. Women form various committees to take care of the hospitality, kitchen assistance and such tasks towards the conductance of festivities of *kaliyattam*. Their participation is observable in the case of Muchilodu, where the *kaliyattam* is a community matter and every adult female member need to make specific amount of monetary contribution. Beyond these non-ritual roles women have no direct roles in theyyam and *kaliyattam*. They just worship the theyyam and receive blessings.

In the case of performing community, female members of the performers' family have more responsibilities and roles. They have to make preparation for their men for the theyyam performance. Preparing special food, giving small helps at the performing place, following *vritha* (penance) for the successful completion of the difficult task of theyyam performance by their men and so on are the usual jobs they do. However, when coming to the deities it is the females who have primacy. It is interesting to note that the majority of theyyam are females and the *kaliyattam* itself can be taken as a religious activity based on the worshipping of female cults or mother goddesses.

The family members have an extended role in the activities of the performers. One informant says that the most important factor for a *koladhari* in performing theyyam is his own mind. If his mind is disturbed, he will never be able to perform a theyyam successfully. If a performer's mind is disturbed with any family problems, financial problems or any other social causes he would not be able to do it in the right way. All the family members whether it is the mother, wife, sister, or daughters, will also be in the same sacred and devoted way as the theyyam performer. They stay at home with complete devotion and prayers for their relatives.

Traditional rights- According to customs there are some specific families who are entitled to perform theyyam at a particular shrine. This right is called '*janmavakasam*' meaning 'birth right' and is based on the area where one can perform theyyam. Usually one performer gets this right for doing the ritual in a specific area or at a specific shrine after the advice of the shrine owners or by the heads of prominent *tharavadu* in a

particular village. The geographical boundaries were determined in the olden days based on the families or lineages of theyyam performing community living in a village. An individual who has such a right to perform theyyam at a place is called '*janmari*'. The *janmavakasam* is an exclusive right to families and it is mandatory to follow the custom. No one is allowed to perform theyyam in shrines or even villages other than the allotted ones with *janmavakasam*. In cases where someone other than the *janmari* needs to perform due to some reason, they must seek permission from *janmari* of that particular shrine. This happens when there are no able *janmari* available in the place to perform a particular theyyam.

Though the birth right system is a norm, there are few shrines which do not follow it strictly. The organizers of the *kaliyattam* (family elders or shrine management committee members) every year decide which individual should make the performance. For this, the organizers discuss with various performers by considering their skill and abilities in performing theyyam. They will also take into consideration the general conduct of the performer, his acceptance in society, people's opinion about his performance and so on. It is a common thing that people make comments on the overall performance of the theyyam, like "it was good", "not up to the mark" and such based on the performance and the mood the *koladhari* created in the minds of the devotees. There are also instances when a performance did not satisfy devotees in terms of beauty, presentation and overall spirituality that created in the worshippers.³ This is on the matter of whose performance is the best in various aspects including ritualistic, spiritual and aesthetic elements. People make selection and preferences based on the character of the theyyam, for example, Muchilottu Bhagavathi, the most beautiful one; Kathivannoor Veeran, very emotional theyyam, and so on. All these affixes and adjectives are completely based on personal choices.

Entitlements of performers: A theyyam performer can achieve special titles based on his performance and expertise and achieves certain specific statuses. It is called as getting '*pattum-valayum*' which literally means receiving 'silk clothe' and 'golden bangle' ritually as an indication of distinction and eminence, and the nature of this rite varies according to the communities and also from place to place. A general term for this rite is '*acharapeduka*'. According to the custom it is the chief of the *nadu* who elevates the status of a theyyam performer by doing the necessary rituals. In the Kolathunadu the king at Chirakkal Kovilakom does this. Though the king is performing

the rites the recognition of a *koladhari* arrangements for the event are done by shrine management committee and the well-wishers of the place where the particular *koladhari* performs.

The entitlement is different for different communities. For Malayan it is *Perumalayan*, *Panikkar* and so on and for Vannan it is usually *Peruvannan* which varies based on the lineage (*illam*) of the individual. Though there is no specific criterion for achieving a position like this, performance of *Ottakkolam* (in case of Malayan), the overall appearance and effects a theyyam makes on devotees are some of the parameters for giving these special titles. A performance of *Ottakkolam* is considered to be an event that gives sufficient acceptance to get elevated to a status of '*Panikkar*'. It is because of the brave act of jumping into fire several times that this theyyam is considered as a very special performance. However, this is not the case always. Even though the *Theepottan* theyyam also performs jumping to *meleri* and play with fire it does not gets special status based on performance. In case of certain other theyyam, the performer is required to be qualified specially with specific titles. For example, the theyyam of Muchilottu Bhagavathi during *perumkaliyattam* can be performed only by one who has title of *Peruvannan* or similar distinction based on their lineage affiliation.

Personal views of performers towards theyyam and *kaliyattam*: Each theyyam performers hold their own specific views on what they do. One may consider it as a pure ritual, a mix of ritual and art, with entertainment elements and so on. One informant says that this is not exclusively an art but is a '*karmam*', which is the ritualistic act that is being conducted in traditional shrines. He never wants to say '*theyyam kalakaran*' (theyyam artist) but only '*theyyakkaran*' (theyyam person) or '*kolakkaran*' (the one who takes the *kolam* -the outfit of theyyam), because according to him, theyyam cannot be limited to a single art (*kala*) instead it is a sum of several arts (*kalakal*) like dance, singing, preparing decorations, make up (facial paintings), and such. Thus, according to the people, it is the only ritual act in which god directly communicates with people and is very special with the blend of both religion and art.

There are performers who thinks that everything related to theyyam are very sacred and holds the belief that a performer should not disclose and discuss many of the core aspects of the ritual or even about the deities for preserving its sanctity. According

to them only those who believe in theyyam (as a devotee) could understand what the whole religious phenomena is about. Regarding the nature of the deities also performers keep their own views. One may consider that the *kaliyattam* and theyyam are a part of folk religion and all the deities are of local origin with no direct connection with the Vedic deities. On the other hand, there are performers who strongly believe that it is a part of mainstream Hindu religion. Such people connect all the myths and stories about theyyam with the pantheon of mainstream Hinduism like Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. One informant had a specific belief that the entire theyyam cosmos is centered on Lord Vishnu and according to him everything revolves around this supreme God. From the words it was clear that his favorite theyyam is Vishnumoorthi, and for him this theyyam is the supreme one in the whole pantheon.

When discussed about the myth behind Vishnumoorthi theyyam this informant narrated the story of Palanthayi Kannan and explained that Kannan had the divine blessing of Vishnu. Though he mentioned that Kannan was a servant to the *karanavar* in a Nair *tharavadu* and the *karanavar* killed him, he added about the special divine blessing by Vishnu. The informant was trying to express that Vishnumoorthi theyyam is clearly connected with Vishnu rather than having any connection to a common man and a local folktale. This is actually a new trend of connecting all the theyyam to mainstream Hindu gods. It seems the theyyam performers like this informant are not concerned about the distinction between village deities and gods and goddesses associated with temples of Vedic Hinduism. For them, all are connected and village deities are only representation of mainstream deities. What is observable from this is that the belief system of theyyam is spread across based on individual perspectives and an extended form of Hinduisation is visible here.

Personal specialization of performers: Though one *koladhari* should not take any specialization or selection in performing theyyam according to custom, it is common that one may focus more on certain theyyam. It is based on the expertise one has in performing one particular theyyam, his knowledge in that theyyam and also his physical abilities that becomes major factors in this. One informant from Payyannur said that he selects certain theyyam for performances more preferentially out of personal interest. This person is a young and healthy man and has expertise in martial arts like *kalari payattu*. With this expertise he focuses on hero theyyam like Kathivanoor Veeran, Kudiveeran, and others which demonstrate martial art like Chathu

in Makkavum Makkalum, Kandamar Kelan and so on. Of all the theyyam performed by him, Kathivanoor Veeran and Kandamar Kelan are most popular and it draws much attention from the villagers. This performer keeps an emotional connection to Kathivanoor Veeran theyyam and always keeps the story of this theyyam fresh in his mind. It is with much passion and devotion this theyyam performer shared his views on the Kathivanoor Veeran theyyam and it indicates his dedication to the rituals and gods he performs. In a second incident, another theyyam performer from Vannan community performed twenty-eight Kathivanoor Veeran theyyam in a single ritual season. This number is unusually large and it is because of the fame this performer has in doing this theyyam and also the demand for him from devotees.

Payment system in *kaliyattam*: All the players and performers in the ceremony are paid after the event. The payment is made with money and with materials. The transaction system of the olden days is visible in this traditional ritual as most of the time the payment involves something in kind other than money. Rice is one such item by which the payment is made to the performers and *mundu* (waist dress) is always an essential part in the payment. Everyone is given with a *mundu* after their performance. In this area (also in other parts of Kerala) giving of *mundu* is considered as a respectful act and is mostly done in felicitating or honouring one individual. The performers have a right to take whatever items which are used in the ritual as offering to the deity. This may be rice, paddy or even vegetables. Whenever fowl (mostly roosters) sacrifice is involved in the ritual the fowl after sacrifice belong to the performer.

Apart from all material items which are distributed as payment or gift, there is also the payment made in cash. The payment system reveals the social relations based on caste and the bondage each community have with others. The performance of the ritual is also considered as a caste bound duty and the payment system reflects the nature of power relations and economic transactions existed in the olden feudal days, which mostly mistreat the lower caste theyyam performers.

In the olden days the theyyam performers believed that they are doing a divine duty of performing as ‘gods’ and ‘goddesses’ and blessing devotees and it is not a good etiquette to take any payment for this sacred duty. The higher caste shrine owners took advantage of this belief and made a chance of exploiting the belief of theyyam performers. The *koodali rekhakal*, which is a note on palm leaf at a Nair *tharavadu*

explains about the payment system and the kind of exploitation existed in the olden days⁴. Earlier, the payment was made with '*panam*' and the amounts to be paid to each of the *koladhari* were noted in this script. A sum like twenty *panam* (equivalent to four rupees roughly) was the normal amount paid to a *koladhari* for their performance. Later it was increased to eight rupees. At that time an agriculture laborer who works in the paddy field had a wage of twelve rupees (four to five decades before) and what a theyyam performer received for a complete *kaliyattam*, which often extends to three or four days, was lesser than the wage of an agriculture labourer's half day payment.

The nature of remuneration varies from one place to another and from one group to another. In a group one member should be present at the shrine from beginning to end of the *kaliyattam* to get a full payment for his work. The payment they receive in *kalppana kaliyattam* which are being conducted every year on specific days at specific shrines (eg. on Thulam 10th) is a very small amount. In such shrines, there will be a specific amount that is fixed as payment for each particular theyyam and the performers carry out the ritual based on their birth right (*janmavakasam*) at specific shrines and villages. But there are occasions in which *koladhari* receives satisfactory amount.

In *tharavadu* shrines, *kolakkar* actually demands the amount they expect from the organisers and there usually happens an argument over it and receives a decent amount unlike those in *kalppana kaliyattam* where sometime the main *koladhari*, the *janmavakashi*, has to take his own money to give wage to the helpers in their group. Being a religious sacred activity, a performer may consider his duty as divine and, in such cases, he may think that remuneration is only secondary and it is the theyyam which has primacy in their life. The first objective of such a *kolakkaran* is how he can make the best in performance, dressing, oration, makeup and further to satisfy the devotees. Though informants are hesitant to reveal the actual amounts paid to each of the group members for their activities they gave a rough idea about the nature of money distribution within a group. The assistants and drummers (*vadyakkar*) receive a fixed amount of money sometimes less than thousand rupees per day for their work. The *kolu* or the customary payment given by the festival conductors is divided and given to every member. Those who perform the theyyam get a larger share compared to helpers who does only the decoration works.

Works are not divided in any specific manner in the group normally except that of main theyyam performer. Everyone does whatever job is there at a particular time. This may be flower work (*pooppuni*), makeup (*chamayam*), preparation of headgear (*mudi*) and so on and whenever needed they do the drumming too. Regarding the same issue, one informant from Kunhimangalam village told that he brings the necessary decoration items (*aniyalam*) for any performance and gets a rent for that too which is around three thousand rupees for *aniyalam* of one particular theyyam. In addition, he joins other preparatory activities and receives a payment for that too.

Parallel occupations of theyyam performers: During the *kaliyattam* season that extends for nearly six months these people will be engaged in *kaliyattam* activities and find earnings from it. Though there are several hundreds of shrines where *kaliyattam* happens every year there is no promise that a person would get job throughout the season. Even in the ‘*kaliyattam* season’ there will be days with no performance. In such situations a theyyam specialist will be engaged in another job. There are very few individuals who takes theyyam ritual as their sole source of income, who are popular and eminent enough to get a large number of performances in a season which can fetch a decent sum of earnings and savings.

Performers belonging Malayan community will be engaged in activities like sorcery and black magic which are another caste occupation of this community next to theyyam. As Malayan people are experts in drumming, music and art related activities many of them tries to find a living from those activities too. Majority of them tries to find their living by doing jobs like agriculture activities, daily labour in construction fields, taxi driving and so on. The younger generation who are educated are successful in getting jobs in teaching and other government sectors or even does business when there is no ritual to be performed. In the olden days when the caste-based occupation specialization was prevailing people were not able to find a decent living and poverty was common but in the present days no such scenario exists.

A performer’s acceptance in society: The status of a theyyam performer is a matter of concern because they are considered as a social servant of religious activities. It is a common concern among theyyam performers, especially among veteran people that no one cares about the life of a performer after the theyyam ritual. The life of Thekkumkara Karnamoorthi is an example of one such ill-fated miserable life after

meeting with an accident. No one will take care of a retired veteran *koladhari*. People will approach and care about a performer during the performance and continue to felicitate, congratulate and acknowledge him for a short period and after some time no one will notice him and no one will try to enquire about the life of the performer. Theyyam ritual specialists assert that it is the need of the society to conduct a theyyam but not to protect a performer.

Prevailing caste conflicts: Comments on caste related issues in theyyam are very frequent in conversations on this religious activity. Caste based inequalities, injustices and inhumane treatment of theyyam performing communities are few of the serious problems existing here. Theyyam performers usually are not open about the problems they face but there are people who express the hidden realities of caste injustices in this religious ritual. One informant while discussing about *kaliyattam* in general said that the caste difference is a truth and it still exists in one way or other. According to him, in the earlier days the caste restrictions were so strong even among untouchable castes and a Vannan performer did not talk or share anything with Malayan or even go to other's *aniyara*. That is, if one group is short of any ornament or drum the other will not provide it though they are performing rituals in one shrine.

Nowadays, caste based inequalities are not so rigid like that and one may borrow drum from another group or even assist in drumming but there is a consciousness existing in their mind about their caste identity. The Pulaya caste people are more often the victims of untouchability than any other castes and even now no other theyyam performing castes like the Malayan or Vannan associate with Pulaya performers who fall in the lowest strata in caste hierarchy among the whole theyyam performing communities. All the rituals and associated activities at a shrine of Pulaya are done only by themselves. Thiyya caste people who are entitled to bring *kalasam* to a *kaliyattam* do not perform this at the shrines of Pulaya caste. Similarly, while conducting a *kaliyattam* (especially in *perumkaliyattam*) the *valyakkar* of the shrines need to go to nearby houses to invite them and is a custom. But no one from the organizing caste people will ever go to the house of an individual belonging to a caste which falls in the lower strata compared to their own.

Another informant who is a teacher shared his observations regarding caste related matters associated with theyyam.⁵ He shared about the caste discriminations and

the still prevalent untouchability giving the example of Vishakandan theyyam in one shrine. At one shrine in Payyannur, the theyyam would not sit on the *peedom* that is ritually allotted to it because the Brahmin Namboothiri will be present at that place. An untouchable lower caste person still retains the identity or status his ancestors had as bonded laborer to those Namboothiri. Even when he is in the theyyam costume, as ‘god’ itself, he would not sit before them. This indicates that though the Namboothiri and other higher caste people may worship theyyam, it will not affect their higher social status and identity in front of their ‘slaves’ in god’s attire. In the case of the Vishakandan theyyam, instead of sitting on the stool, which may have ritual significance, the theyyam touches the stool with his sword which symbolically express as the theyyam sitting on it.

A similar incident in which caste status of theyyam performers and conductors came into play happened at Payyannur when the Baali theyyam from Vellarangara Bhagavathi Kshetram visited the deity Payyannur Perumal⁶ at Subrahmanya Swami temple. This is a ritualistic demonstration of the acceptance of the lordship of the Brahmins, the latter being a major shrine of Brahmins. The theyyam is not allowed to go inside the temple instead required to keep a specific distance from the sanctum sanctorum. Also, the theyyam made a visit to the nearby Pothuval’s house to make blessings who has the status of *koyma* of Vellarangara temple. Normally the devotees go to the theyyam to get blessing but here it is the ‘god’ who goes to the Pothuval’s place to bless them which clearly indicates the social hierarchies reflecting in the ritual space. Though this is the case, there are some changes happening in the present days. Earlier the Baali theyyam was not allowed even to enter into the courtyard of Pothuval’s house due to untouchability but now the theyyam is allowed to enter into the court yard, decreasing the social distance between the two groups.

Kaliyattam and the ‘inhumane’ practices: The ritual festival of *kaliyattam* has a negative image among one section of the people, including a group of devotees. It is about the nature of certain ritual and practices in it like animal sacrifices, self-torment with fire and weapons. The Ottakkolam which is also known by Theechamundi is a famous theyyam with a play with fire involved in it and is a matter of discussion and debate in society because of the same reason. In the ritual of this theyyam who is believed as the Narasimha incarnation of Lord Vishnu, the Malayan theyyam performer is required to jump in to the huge pyre called *meleri*. This dangerous act is being

performed to show the virtues and powers of Vishnu who is believed as superior even to fire. Most of the time, this performance ends with very serious burns in the body of the *koladhari* and also to the supporting assistants. The sparks of fire and small pieces of burning coal often result in serious burns. The intense heat from the pyre cause damage even to internal organs and others sensitive parts of the performer's body.

As the jumping into fire is an act to display the power of god, even when the *koladhari* meets with serious burns or even when he is exhausted, sometimes after ten or twenty jumps, the assistants do not allow him to stop. There are instances, where the *kolam* started saying “*agniyodu kalikkano?*” “*ningalkku truptiyayille?*” and such (do you people want to play with fire? aren't you satisfied?) in the characteristic tone of theyyam. However, often it is due to the severe burns that he has met with. The shrine owners and the oracle will never listen to the performer and never tell the performer to stop the jumping onto the fire. At the extreme cases the ritual heads of the shrine may forcefully push the performer to the pyre. At one occasion even the *koladhari*'s father who was present there did not want to stop and that person had to jump several times resulting in serious injuries.

The *kolam* will have to make at least hundred jumps (108 to be specific, this number being religiously special according to belief) to satisfy the shrine authority and the audience. It is not just the devotees of the theyyam that join in the event whereas a larger audience who want to see the jumping of a human into fire too. People enjoy and amuse with the event of man entering into fire. Performing an Ottakkolam gives one performer a kind of special position and achievement. Nowadays, most of the times after jumping hundred or more times the *koladhari* are felicitated ritually by giving a *vala* (golden bangle) and a ritual entitlement. In the present days a considerable number of people including devotees in the region strongly oppose this tradition saying it as ‘inhumane’ and ‘primitive’ that put the life of the performer at risk.

Similar is the case with ‘Khandakarnan’ in which several oil torches are attached to the body of the performer. This is a very dangerous *kolam* for performers and usually ends up with serious burns. There was an incident when the inappropriate interference of spectators and festival organizers by mishandling of the fire the oil torches went wrong which resulted in an accident and the *koladhari* became handicapped. ‘Kaara Gulikan’ is another such dangerous theyyam which is supposed to

play with the thorns of the plant *kaaramullu* (*Canthium coromandelicum*). Similarly, 'Kaithachaamundi' also play with thorny bushes of pandanus plant. There are several theyyam (like Kaithachaamundi) which kills fowl with teeth, drink blood and eat raw flesh of the fowl. Such practices are so 'barbaric' according to the villagers and even according to one section of believers.

All these theyyam are being criticized by the general public due to the serious injuries it makes to the performer. One section of devotees is suggestive of reducing the intensity of practices like this. It is mainly the ritual organizers and shrine owners who want to stick to the dangerous practices. According to them, it is a custom and tradition to perform all these acts and lapse of which results in an incomplete ritual. In front of the authority and directions of the higher caste people the performers could not act based on their own wish by avoiding difficult acts even in the present times. The organizers and shrine authorities try to make the event a success by conducting the most difficult and distinguished ritual performances as a spectacular show at the cost of the health and life of the lower caste theyyam performers. The performance of the ritual at a shrine being a hereditary and ascribed duty the performers could not resist the decisions of the authorities. This is also an implication of the rigid caste system and injustices related to the system that is still prevailing in the society.

One informant who is an advocate says that in these times of advanced technologies, modernization and social awareness of human rights, changes should be made in theyyam and other religious practices which have such cruel and inhumane acts. He continues that nowadays in several shrines no fowl sacrifices are conducted instead they just act like sacrificing the animal using vegetables like ash gourd. Similarly, the theyyam and the believers should try to bring favorable changes that will not affect the religious sentiments. Another informant who is an academic by profession also made comments on these aspects.⁷ According to him, outsiders cannot justify rituals and beliefs of theyyam in a rational way. One cannot solve all the problems existing in and around this religious practice solely by giving more money to the performer. He asserts that until and unless the theyyam performing communities cope up with the social capital factors in the society there cannot happen any radical and pervasive change. There are several cases of people getting into government employments and have achieved higher statuses in society, but still this is not enough to achieve an overall progress of those communities engaged in theyyam performance. It

is not the economic factors, rather it is the social and cultural capital of the people that should be emphasized. The informant also comments that there exists a conflict between the rationalities of modernity and the rationality of the belief system related to theyyam. It is the values of the pre-modern society that is existing in theyyam system even in the present modern context.

Changing trends in rituals

Changes are happening to the way in which *kaliyattam* are being conducted and also to theyyam in its appearance, belief and rituals. The way by which people treat the whole religious matter is also being influenced by various factors. Such a change can be rightly understood with the account of how one devotee observes it. According to one young devotee, theyyam is a special art form and is a ritual-performing art which should be done with traditional rites and customs with a mind completely dedicated to divinity. The informant says that the whole northern Malabar people can boast about this ritual art for what it is. In his view, at this ritual, a man turns to god and god turns to the man and it is an expression of all abilities man could achieve by continuous practices in dance, music, songs, sculpturing, painting, martial art, literature, debate and so on, which are all part of theyyam and *kaliyattam*. Just like any art form (also ritual), changes have happened to *kaliyattam* too and to a certain extent these changes are acceptable. The informant views that the pioneering masters and gurus of theyyam had made all the above mentioned aspects in a very balanced way and in the contemporary times it seems like there is a shift from this balance. Nowadays, those aspects of ritual practices which should be emphasized significantly are given less attention and more importance is giving to the art and aesthetic aspects. The *kalaasam* (the final dance of the deity) is very important and for every theyyam there is specificity in conducting it and since the attitude of giving more importance to the dance aspect (the performative display), even those dedicated and expert *koladhari* are not considering the *kalaasam* with required attention in a ritual manner. The whole ritual is shifting to just a performance that could satisfy the audience, not the devotees and believers.

Similar is the case with music too. The drumming and other music have specific structures to each of the theyyam which are designed by the pioneering gurus. But as the ritual is becoming an event to entertain people the musicians have to perform their *vadyam* in a way which could attract more people as audience rather than devotee. They

are being forced to make the dance of the deity (*urachil*) more attractive and as a result the whole event becomes chaotic. A theyyam that should be performed with three or four drummers are done with a larger number of drummers and then the theyyam has to dance according to the drumming. This is leading to a state in which more attention given to the drummers who are deliberately invited for drumming, who do not belong to the specific theyyam performing group. Rather than the musicians, here it is the religious cult of theyyam which is supposed to be the locus of the whole event.

Another important aspect is the *thottam paattu* which is also being influenced by the changes happening around and is becoming less significant in the whole event and less cared for its ritual value. The original makers of theyyam had made *thottam* songs in *manipravalam* (an old script) and in the language of common man and they used simple language carefully for the understanding of people from the lowest strata in the society. The complete recitation of the verses is necessary for a righteous ritual. Nowadays the organizing committee asks the theyyam performers to recite the *thottam* by adjusting the time to finish it early by skipping several parts to complete the ritual events fast so that they can conduct the entertainment programs which are becoming an essential part in the festivities associated with *kaliyattam* in shrines.

As little care and importance being given to *thottam* by the organizers new performers are not dedicating their effort in studying *thottam* in detail. Sometimes no *aniyara thottam* which is supposed to recite during the time of putting makeup at the green room are recited. At the time of the main theyyam performance too it will not be the *koladhari* who sings, instead other group members who know it well do it. It is not uncommon to find specialized *thottam* singers who were invited for *kaliyattam* these days. For example, in the *kaliyattam* of Kadamkottu Maakkam, Kathivannoor Veeran etc. which have very long *thottam*, special singers join the theyyam performing group exclusively for reciting it. The *thottam* of every theyyam has much significance as the stories, myths and legends and even explanations of rituals are the matters embedded in it. The informants say that when the significance and attention paid to *thottam* are decreasing it actually results in the loss of a key aspect of the entire belief and practice in the universe of theyyam.

Facial and body painting is another important element that makes a theyyam performer transform into god. In the olden times all the items used for the facial and

body paintings and the whole makeup materials for that matter was made from naturally available materials. Due to the scarcity of natural materials and the requirement to adjust with the intense electrical lights, performers in the present days use artificial paints and sometimes this leads to health problems too.

Ideally a *koladhari* is an expert in language, literature, Vedas, astrology, debate, science, epics and such and what they convey to the devotees are the godly words and thus these words should be of divine touch and knowledgeable. People who do theyyam ritual as their only activity (to find a living) is decreasing nowadays and this is a reason for the lesser understanding on theyyam by such performers. As the performer uses English and other languages in their daily life it is not uncommon that even in the *vaachal* such words are coming from the theyyam.

In the present time a *koladhari* gets more importance than the theyyam itself and it is due to the more emphasize given to the 'performance' aspect rather than the ritual or belief part. People attend *kaliyattam* by checking who the *koladhari* is. The ability to perform martial arts and dances of the *koladhari* gets more attention than other rituals or *thottam* they recite. This has led to a situation that the theyyam became only '*thattum- theyyam*' meaning a kind of attacking cult, where the theyyam interfere with the audience during the dance physically. The performers are being forced to do so before the audience and the organizers because it is the ability of the performer to impress the audience which matters much. Failing which, the *koladhari* may not even get a chance to perform the theyyam in the next year. According to informants, this trend may destroy what theyyam is and finds that everyone is responsible for any loss happening to it.

The attitude of shrine owners and festival organizers are also a matter of concern. In *perumkaliyattam* which extends for five or six days, the *koladhari* who should be treated with respect and special attention but are usually mistreated without even proper resting place arranged for them. The lack of proper rest, sleep, and food puts the performers' health in bad condition. The young generation of theyyam performers will eventually start hating their duties as they witness the only miserable life of their elders.

Remuneration is another factor to be noted here. When two or three hours of stage performance by an artist in musical or any other such stage programmes

happening during the festivities of *kaliyattam* fetch them a remuneration of hundreds of thousands of rupees, a *koladhari* who perform for hours as ‘god’ is given a very less, may be a few hundreds of rupees and also ‘insult and mistreatment’. The case of *kalpana kaliyattam*, which is ritually performed every year at specific shrines where performers have traditional rights, can be taken as a special case. In most of the shrines which are traditionally owned by families the conductors may not have financial ability to pay big amounts. Even at *prumkaliyattam* and other big *kaliyattam* which are conducted with huge expenditure, often the main *koladhari* are given a meager amount. This is a condemnable matter even according to the devotees. The ‘*kolu*’ system is now changed to ‘*kooli*’ the wage system and after giving individual wages to helpers and other group members the main *koladhari* ends up with nothing, but poverty. Due to this situation, there happens a competition among performers, to get a performance at a leading shrine or at *perumkaliyattam* so that they can get a decent amount at least once in their life time.

For this a *koladhari* need to have a formal title of the *acharapperu* and for getting that title also there is a competition among performers who may be family members as brothers and relatives. This competition is leading to a situation where a right person may not get a chance due to lobbying and the ritual of *varachuvakkal* has become just a mock event and drama. The organizers and one group of performers make preplans and decide the main *koladhari* and then conduct the *varachuvakkal* by inviting several performers and after a mock astrological work announces the name of the performer, which was already fixed at the back stage. The astrologer makes comments like “less divine blessing”, “would not be able to finish the theyyam”, “will get sick during performance”, and so on and on other candidates to neglect them. These types of incidents have led to a situation where there is a growing rivalry even among brothers. Though these are some realities happening in and around the domain of theyyam there are a lot of performers who keep theyyam close to their heart, without any adulteration in traditions and customs.

Another matter which draws criticism is related to the performance of theyyam in non-religious places. A number of performers these days perform theyyam on stages for various cultural events and meetings of political parties far away from all its ritual contexts, just as a drama or art performance. Based on the villagers’ view, it is a sad

situation that even some of the elder masters of theyyam are also in support of this. In the view of one devotee, it is like selling theyyam in the market with specific price tags. In a similar way, a conductance of Muthappan has become a status symbol and even foreign liquor is adding a new flavor to this event. The bad and negative things associated with *kaliyattam* are well masked from outsiders. The large-scale animal sacrifice in Vayanattukulavan theyyam festival is one such. What the worshippers says is that people are making *anushtanam* to *anacharam* here (that is custom to malpractice). One group of devotees appeals all the people, of temple and shrine, *koyma*, and associates of temples and community authorities to come forward to protect the culture, traditions, heritage and the divine art of theyyam.

Though theyyam is primarily a religious ritual its importance is not limited exclusively to the religious worshipping or to the sacred places of *kaavu* or the theyyam or even to the devotees during the *kaliyattam*. The theyyam has much broader space of existence beyond the sacred place. A *kaliyattam* is not just the event of conducting the religious ritual, rather it has dimensions beyond that in several ways in today's day to day life. Different groups of people focus their interest on *kaliyattam*, theyyam, and other rituals in the shrine and events happening during the *kaliyattam* and also depending on their specific interests they become a part of it. Such groups have varying extent of involvement in ritual and non-ritual part of the entire event of *kaliyattam*.

The shrine owners, administrative committees, *kaliyattam* organizers and community members (if it is a community shrine) are one such groups. A second group consists of the priest, oracles, *anthithiriyar*, *thanthri*, *kaniyan*, and other key actors of rituals depending on the nature of shrine and the type of theyyam performance. This group forms the ritual specialists. Now there are the devotees, the large group consisting of people belonging to the wider society irrespective of their religion, caste or gender identity. They worship the theyyam, pray before them and try to achieve peace of mind. These three categories of people form the core participants in a *kaliyattam*. Apart from these, there are several other people who get engaged with the event. The various communities which contribute their occupational specialization are also part of the complex. A *kollan* is the blacksmith and he make the weapons of the theyyam. Similarly, a *moosari* is the specialist in brass and he makes various ornaments of the theyyam.

Theyyam in non-religious, non-ritual contexts

The use of theyyam in non-religious spheres often draws heated debates and criticisms. One such incident happened when a government associated organization conducted a tourism festival in Kannur. In the event where several non-Keralites also attended, one theyyam in its complete costume (the *kolam*) was presented to welcome the guests. This incident was an occasion for the people who are aware of theyyam to think loudly on the significance, use and misuse of the ritual cult and the artistic elements in it. The discussions dealt with various aspects of theyyam, *kaliyattam*, belief, involvement of political parties and non-religious organizations of governmental as well as non-governmental bodies.

One of the main platforms of this discussion was social media in the internet and this resulted in a quick and serious participation of people. One informant wrote about this incident in his page with photographs and videos and he was expressing his concern over such an incident including the necessity of rethinking about the whole concept of social relevance of theyyam and for the preservation of its originality. He said, for some people theyyam is an art and for some others it is a ritual and posed questions on this and clearly expressed his refutation in considering theyyam exclusively as an art by neglecting its religious values.

According to the informant it is the responsibility of everyone to preserve theyyam in its purity which is handed over to them by their forefathers. For the people of North Malabar theyyam is a ritual that resisted social inequalities from the time of its emergence because in the olden times there was strong hierarchy and injustices prevalent in the society in terms of caste. Earlier, *kaliyattam* was an occasion when higher caste people came before the lower caste people who becomes gods in the ritual. Over the course of time the ritual achieved the current status and state. Though caste discrimination is not completely removed, in the present day there is a drastic change compared to the olden days.

The informant observes that there is no worshipping system that stands so closely to the heart of the devotees which are comparable to theyyam. The forefathers had made the worshipping system and shrines well connected and in a way that resonates with the ecology and environment. But what the contemporary society is doing to it is not justifiable. The people are making theyyam as ‘clowns’ and display before some

random audience by calling it as the symbol of culture. Since it is a traditional art form with lot of values embedded in it, one should view it in that way. What we must have done is to invite the enthusiasts or tourists in traditional Keralite way and took them to the shrine where the ritual events are happening in real life and one must gather rich information about it instead of displaying some performers in random theyyam costume outside its space.⁸

Organizers of the event argue that the theyyam performers are living a life in poverty and a performance in the stage will fetch them a good sum of money. But the informant says that it is only to satisfy the ego of the organizers they conduct such events. A few of them are of the opinion that the ritual specialists who perform theyyam in places other than religious space should think about the place they have in the minds of the devotees. Theyyam are in the hands of the performers and the ancestors have given the theyyam in the right hand and never forget about the tradition and values of the same. On the contrary, one group of people argue that earlier also men performed theyyam in non-ritual contexts and there is nothing wrong in the recent incidents. Whenever one did such an act it is a fault only and exception is there if they did not make the performance into a commodity. If people are looking at theyyam as a commodity and a way of making money, one should be careful about theyyam from not going beyond the religious space. If it does so, then theyyam will also have a fate like Kathakali (though it is not a ritual) which got completely modified into an entirely new form of art for the entertainment of tourists.

Similarly, an organization named *Kshetram Anushtana Theyyam Kettiyatta Sanghatana*, which is a cultural organization actively engaged in various matters of theyyam, made a move regarding the same issue. Kozhikode district executive committee of the organization once decided to approach the court to take necessary actions to prevent conducting of theyyam on stage, in demonstrations and marches of political parties and meetings of cultural organizations. There is a growing concern over the use of the religious figures like theyyam in such a manner among the believers and enthusiasts for reasons of hurting their religious belief and emotions. The committee also decided to meet the state level leaders of all political parties to discuss this matter.

People strongly express their anger by commenting that it is a great insult to the whole theyyam universe when even the famous and eminent theyyam specialists

themselves are performing theyyam in venues other than religious shrines. According to them, it is just for the sake of money they are doing it and feel ashamed of this attitude of *koladhari* who were highly respected by the devotees. It is an injustice and insult to the devotees by such performers, and such a person should not be entertained in conducting theyyam as pure ritual at religious shrines. Informants appeal all the believers to make serious note on this matter and also criticizes the governmental body of Folklore Academy in Kannur for recognizing and felicitating *kanaladi* who perform theyyam outside ritual sphere which is a total absurdity.

Political parties and *kaliyattam*

In recent scenario political parties in Kerala have developed an affinity towards religion and religious organizations and they often indulge in activities of religious organizations for various political gains. Here, the regional political parties and organizations try to make use of the religious events associated with theyyam for their own agendas. Among the several political parties, it is significant to note here that the Communist Party of India (Marxist) -CPI(M) which has prominence in political power in North Malabar display a deeper engagement with theyyam. Payyannur is a strong hold of the CPI(M) and they play a considerable role in the religious matters of the society in general. The political party uses the images of theyyam and the ritual events in its political discourses. The event of *kaliyattam* is also being used as an avenue to express the presence and to demonstrate the strength of the party in a particular region.

It is not uncommon to see the statues of theyyam and images in posters and other publicity advertisements of political programs like conferences, protest marches and also in cultural events in the region. It should be remembered that these engagements are not only in the case of one particular political party but almost all the parties in the region does this. When a village gets ready to celebrate a *kaliyattam* in a shrine members of the party in the area also starts their own preparation in their own ways. They paint the nearby roads to the shrine with party names (CPI(M)) and its associated organizations and graffiti of revolutionaries will be displayed along the shrine premise.

The secretary of CPI(M) in the Payyannur area shared the views of his organization regarding the ritual and the *kaliyattam* event. He observes that in the olden days the theyyam rituals were an occasion when the downtrodden people gathered to

escape from their miserable life and later this transformed into a form of resistance and an upsurge against their oppressors. They were trying to achieve a mental tranquility by performing and participating in the rituals which has much artistic elements too. In those times, during the political mobilization of people and movements for social changes, political parties made use of the space of *kaliyattam* and various cultural programs were performed with specific propaganda.

The special interest taken by the CPI(M) in the present times is also a matter to look at. Earlier, at one point of time, the party was not much involved in the religious matters of *kaliyattam* particularly. Then Hindutva ideology following political parties tried to grab their presence in the shrines. Such groups had the objective of installing mainstream Hindu belief and practices in the traditional shrines of *kaavu* by using the Brahmanical ritual means, according to the left leaning parties. This in a way lead to the Sanskritization of shrines and the removal of all lower caste people from the shrines. By realizing the attempts of the Hindutva political agenda, Communist Party started to get engaged in various matters of *kaliyattam* shrines. According to the same informant, the right-wing parties and the higher caste people are trying to convert the *kaliyattam* shrines into Brahminic *kshetram* with daily worshipping unlike the *kaliyattam* shrines. More and more shrines are adopting Brahmanical or mainstream Hindu methods of worshipping which according to the informant are dangerous in consideration with the caste equations and other religious and politics equations. There is a submissive attitude among the lower caste shrine owners towards the higher caste Brahmanical practices.

The party is actually trying to resist the casteism and other such antisocial elements associated with the religious practices. They consider the Dalit theyyam performing communities as a 'class' according to their ideology. Organizations like 'Pattikajathi Kshema Samithi' and 'Adivasi Kshema Samithi' are part of the party organization which are aimed at the social progress of the downtrodden communities. A good majority of the performers are followers of the left politics and they often communicate with the party authorities regarding various problems they face in their day to day life. In the present days the party considers the event as a festival of the entire village irrespective of the religious boundaries and they associate with it for the successful conductance. Except the higher-ranking members of the party maximum participation of party members and followers with their family is made sure in the event.

The informant also says that the event of *kaliyattam* and theyyam plays a crucial role in bringing a solidarity and togetherness among the people, especially at the village level. As the villagers take the event as a festival of their own all of them try to make it a grand success by catering their support in whatever means they can. The feasts associated with the event are one such occasion that marks the togetherness of the people. The participation of people across their caste and religious identities are notable here. Even in *tharavadu* shrines, which are the matter of concern to a specific family, the villagers participate very actively. Though it is a fact that the festival at community shrines contributes towards the growth of community consciousness as a whole, the event brings a positive result in the society.

The publication of a book on *kaliyattam* and theyyam under the initiative of the CPI(M) and its publication department is an example for its engagement with the religious matters. The book release was done at a large public gathering in an open auditorium in the Payyannur town. Top members of the party like the district secretary, chief editor of the local newspaper and several local leaders participated in the event. An eminent scholar and folklorist M. V. Vishnunamboothiri, who did several studies on theyyam was a special guest. In the event, the organizers also did an elaborate function of felicitation of around thirty veteran theyyam artists. This was done by the party district chief by giving a *mundu* in honoring them, a commemorative inscription plaque and also a copy of the newly released book.

The content of the event was well indicative of the way the organizers deal with the religious ritual of theyyam. The event highlighted the contributions of the media company in giving special consideration and importance to the ritual art of theyyam by publishing a book exclusively on it and their venture to felicitate the veteran artists, most of whom are being neglected by the society forgetting all their life spent in performing theyyam ritual for the society. Since the veteran artists are facing a serious avoidance by the society, most often being forgotten by the people, it is very important to felicitate these people for the contribution they made to the society.

The chief editor of the newspaper reiterated the significant role of the event *kaliyattam* and theyyam has in the society. His comments were an indication of the manner in which the left leaning political party and their press deals with theyyam in North Malabar. The editor narrated that the political stand of the communist parties is

based on the class conflicts and the resistance against the exploitation of the lower class by the property-owning upper class. The class system in North Malabar parallels with the caste system and the lower caste people are always being exploited and crucified by the upper caste people. Whenever may be the Communist Party comments about theyyam their main emphasis will be on the caste related conflicts, exploitation and the resistance by the lower caste – lower class people against their masters. Theyyam as a ritual art form itself is a product of the feudal system prevailed in the olden days, against all injustices, untouchability and caste exploitations and theyyam is a mode of protest to them. One can observe several hints regarding the evil system existed in the society at that time in the *thottam* songs of theyyam which could be understood as forms based on the happenings during “feudal lord-slave” system.



Photo 5.1: The book release event

Some informants refer to the close relationship between the class struggles of the left and the theyyam by sighting a few specific theyyam which always come into picture while dealing with the caste conflicts. The Potten theyyam has the most significance in this aspect and the CPI(M) emphasize heavily on this theyyam whose mythical story explains the resistance and revolt between a Pulaya man and Aadi Sankara, or in other way between a lower caste person and an upper caste Brahmin. This myth is often quoted as a clear resistance and protest against the upper caste Hindu

sect, which puts one section of the society in the lowest strata, rejecting all human rights and needs. A similar theyyam is that of Muthappan, sometimes even called as ‘*sakhavu-muthappan*’ (comrade Muthappan) by the politically left leaning people. This is to indicate the highest level of closeness and attachment of certain theyyam to the common people. This particular theyyam rejects all forms of mainstream Hindu belief and ritual systems, eats meat and drink liquor and communicate very closely with people regardless of their caste, religious, or class statuses. Also, there are several cults which represent the Muslims of the region, which indicates the togetherness and solidarity between the various religious groups in the region.

The party organization is keenly concerned about the present-day happenings in the ritual. According to their view, though the theyyam was originated as a conflict with the dominant mainstream Hinduism and associated caste practices, including belief and ritual system now a days this is undergoing a drastic change. The shrines where the theyyam are being conducted and performed by people of lower caste were once completely differentiated from the mainstream Hindu religious practices. The belief system and rituals including the structure and practice of worship were entirely different. A striking characteristic worth mentioning in this regard is the difference between the worship activities at the shrines of the two groups. In the shrines of the mainstream Hindu community the god is believed to be seated in the sanctorum, the priest acts as a mediator between the god and the devotees, and the priest even avoid touching the devotees. In contrast, at the shrines where theyyam is performed, the theyyam itself is the god and the devotees can touch the deity and usually the deity blesses the worshippers by holding their hands. This has a huge significance in the minds of the people by demarking the differences between the two types of belief systems, and the acceptance and status an individual from lower strata gets from the theyyam is incomparable with that of the mainstream Hindu religious system.

The influence of the mainstream Hindu practices is percolating into the universe of *kaliyattam* too. People tend to adopt the practices of the Hindu system to an increasing level, which is clear from various aspects. The shrines are changing its structure from simple natural abode like a *kaavu*, a tree or a simple *thara* to well-built structure just like a temple with sanctorum and compound wall. The traditional shrines tend to accept the dominance of the regional Brahminic temples by taking ritual

permission to start the *kaliyattam* (for example the event of bringing oil lamp from Subrahmanya Swami temple of Payyannur) and even doing Brahminic rituals like *ganapathi homam*, *sudhikalasam* (purification ritual) before and after *kaliyattam*. This symbolizes that the practices of *kaliyattam* is not as pure as that of the mainstream Brahminic Hindu practices. The Communist Party strongly condemns this act because the entire ritual and practice of *kaliyattam* has emerged as a protest against the dominance of Brahminic religious system which once excluded the major section of society by ascribing them with lower caste status. Now they themselves are trying to adopt the dominance of the system that once excluded them.

Theyyam in media

Unlike in the olden times, nowadays when it is time for a *kaliyattam*, the organizers usually make an advertisement poster that gives information about the event. It includes the information about various theyyam going to be performed in the event, different rituals and also about the entertainment programs happening during the festival. The time and date of each of the events are given clearly. Sometime organisers make small booklets for this purpose and in addition to the schedule of various rituals and programs they give a short history and myths associated with the shrine, history of the family in case the family shrine and even photographs of various organizing committee members and major money contributors. Influence of market is also clearly visible here. There will be advertisements of various shops and businesses in the nearby area in it. These advertisements are a form of money sponsoring towards the *kaliyattam* event.

Major event like *perumkaliyattam* will have much elaborate publications like books in addition to notices which is published in association with the event. Apart from the above-mentioned contents, small booklets also get released during a normal *kaliyattam*. The *smaranika* as they are called are souvenirs of *perumkaliyattam* are large in terms of its content and size. A souvenir committee is formed which take the charge of the publication. This committee is headed by an editor, usually an eminent writer or academic scholar hailing from the region who is well aware of *kaliyattam*. As content, a souvenir consists of letters of several key persons in the region, chief minister of state, other ministers of state, opposition leader, members of parliament, members of legislative assembly and such. After this, there will be a note by *thanthri*

and key priests. The souvenir consists of essays and descriptions of theyyam, *kaliyattam*, belief system and such by experts in the field as well as regional writers. There will be short stories and poems with themes related to theyyam. Description about the organizing committee and their contributions are given and photographs of all key committee members as well as all the general committees are also given. Publicity of *kaliyattam* is a major aim of this. The souvenir published is sold to the public and people buy this and keep as a memoir of the *perumkaliyattam* which happens rarely. A souvenir is also a matter of pride to the organizers. In addition to the advertisements and publicity campaigns by posters and notices, internet also becomes a platform in this regard. The organizers of the *perumkaliyattam* at Payyannur Muchilodu recently released a dedicated software application that deal with various information about the shrine and the event.

Theyyam in audio-visual media: People in the area shares their opinion and views on the way theyyam is represented in various types of media. Theyyam has become a cultural symbol and a direct image of cultural heritage of North Malabar. This event has become world famous through the cyber media and just like any other art forms theyyam is also influenced positively and negatively by the television and other visual media. Some of the informants are of opinion that though it is good for the people outside North Malabar region to use such media for the understanding of the event as an art form, wrong information often leads to serious misunderstandings.

In the earlier days All India Radio used to air the songs of *thottam paattu*. Though it was difficult for some senior *koladhari* to accept it, this was a mode to keep a record of *thottam paattu* which can be used as reference for the emerging theyyam performers and also for studies and research. But business minded people started to misuse these recordings for making money by selling the recordings and it has become a matter of major concern. These days, there is no radio broadcast except one local channel airing the *thottam* of Potten theyyam by keeping all its beauty and authenticity. According to the informants one should think seriously about the consequences of the use of ritual events like theyyam in such media.

In the television media, the state owned Doordarshan channel aired theyyam in the segment of 'Regional folk art presentation' but it was not a complete ritual rather a

performance specifically made for a channel show. In a studio, the theyyam performers performed dances of various deities in thirty-minutes. In reality, this definitely gives a wrong understanding on theyyam and *kaliyattam* to audience beyond the North Malabar. The informant says that instead of such performances if it was a documentary on theyyam it would have been good for getting some understanding to the audience. That is, the context, the content and the way of presentation is a significant factor in dealing things like theyyam in media. In the present day it is very common to see the live telecasting of theyyam and *perumkaliyattam* in regional channels with vocal narration. Even this attempt fails to achieve a realistic and promising telecasting. Lack of enough time and less interest in dealing with traditional religious rituals like this are also reasons for the diminishing quality of such attempts.

Works in the documentary category requires much effort in studying and making the content and in the present days several documentaries are being produced. Making of documentaries on theyyam actually started with the piece titled “*Gotra Samskaram – The First Culture*” by M. A. Rahman. The director himself is a scholar and author and what he was dealing in this work was the famous Vayanattukulavan Theyyamkettu Mahotsavam in Kasaragod district. He represented the cult as a tribal hero in a very realistic manner and this work is very important as it might be the only one authentic video documentation of animal sacrifices associated with the otherwise notorious Vayanattukulavan theyyam festival.

The documentary named ‘*Meleri*’ is one such piece of work by the director named V. K. Anilkumar. He collected information and videos very carefully and with precision specifically on the ottakkolam theyyam, depicting the rituals, the experience of *koladhari* and their miserable life. The same director also made two more documentaries named ‘*Daivakkaru*’ which deals with the Kathivannoor Veeran Theyyam and ‘*Kanaladi*’ based on Muchilottu Bhagavathi theyyam. These three documentary films are incomparable with any other such attempts in terms of the clarity of the matter.

Drama is another important media to know about theyyam. Kadangottu Maakkam, Muchilottu Bhagavathi, Kathivannoor Veeran etc. came as drama before the people and it is an unforgettable experience for them. According to villagers, it is a

good trend and of much anticipation that even today such dramas are happening. The recent making of a drama based on the myth of Palanthayi Kannan of Vishnumoorthi Theyyam is one such work. Commercial cinema industry also deals with theyyam but until now no movies were able to present before the audience the ritual and life around *kaliyattam* in a complete form. The movie '*Kaliyattam*' that narrated the story of a *koladhari*'s life and '*Chayilyam*' that dealt with the resistance of a lady in the society are major movies that had a theme of theyyam. In few other movies the cults were represented in a very 'ridiculous' manner as displays in songs and such and these lead to a high criticism by the devotees.

With the digital revolution in photography, a huge number of professional as well as amateur photographers started to follow and capture theyyam, mainly because of the spectacular visual experience it creates. This has resulted in negative impacts too due to the unthoughtful and intruding nature of photographers. In several occasions *koladhari* had to stand in front of the photographers and it is a sad moment and it often decreases the affection and respect to the *koladhari* for a common devotee. In a general opinion of the people, theyyam lover will definitely welcome any favorable change to theyyam but definitely none will accept any approach that will ruin the theyyam. The well documented works with clear studies are available in the internet but amateur video clips which are edited improperly are resulting in 'mis-understanding' among the audience, criticizes devotees.

Theyyam in cyberspace: The growth and spread of internet and popularity of social networking technologies in cyberspace has considerable influence in religious space too. *Kaliyattam* and theyyam information spread across the globe through the online platforms. The participation of the non-residential Keralites of northern Kerala is vast in various terms. This diasporic community maintain their contact with their culture and practices in their homeland through various social medias in the internet. There are websites active for larger shrines and dedicated pages and groups in the social media. The followers of such websites, groups and pages in social media platforms are countless. While the website of shrines gives information regarding the myth of the shrine, its history, the *kaliyattam*, theyyam in the shrine and such it is the websites those work generally on theyyam that gives more diverse information regarding

theyyam universe. In the present time a complete analysis of the presence of theyyam in cyberspace is difficult. An attempt to look into the general features and nature of theyyam and associated religious engagements in cyberspace is made by selecting a few of the popular groups and pages.

One such website is operated by a tourism promotion organization named Travel Kannur in the same name. This website (www.travelkannur.com) is one of the popular of any such and has the largest extent of information on theyyam and shrines in the form of text, photographs, and videos. The promoters of this website are very much involved in theyyam related activities with high dedication and enthusiasm. One of the persons behind the initiative is an employee working in the Middle East and the other is a differently abled person from Kannur taking care of various matters of their organization. Both of them are neither performers of theyyam nor owners of any shrine. The Facebook page of the organization share lot of information regarding theyyam but it is the WhatsApp group that is of much interest here. There are more than five groups named 'Theyyakkazhchakal' by the organization which altogether has strength of more than fifteen hundred people. In the group there are representatives from various scores of societies across religion. There are theyyam performers, enthusiasts, photographers, shrine owners, and researchers being part of the group. Frequent sharing of information regarding *kaliyattam* and theyyam are the main activity in the group. Members share photographs, videos, audios, news and so on.

Group members are informed about *kaliyattam* at various shrines, places, time and theyyam happening there in the group. Most important of all the activities of the group is the active discussions the members conduct in this cyberspace. The members are highly vigilant about theyyam and the cultural heritage of it and the social importance of theyyam, *kaliyattam* and shrine to the society. Well-wishers in the group are also very generous to give their helping hand to veteran theyyam performers and to renovate the ruined shrines. They were able to gather a huge sum of money to help a theyyam performer who met with an accident during a *kaliyattam*. It was the group members' decision and active involvement that resulted in the renewal of Aryakkara Kottam.



Photo 5.2: Aryakkara Kottam before renewal

Literature

Theyyam is a matter of literature too and the myths and stories of theyyam are of first line writings on theyyam as it is a part of the ritual performance and religious life of the people in the region. There are various literary works like novels, short stories, poems etc. which has theme of theyyam. As theyyam, *kaliyattam* and the beliefs associated with it are a part of the life of the people in the region of North Malabar, it is obvious that these will have certain influence in the literature and art of the people. Short stories and poems with theme of theyyam and people involved in it are a common sight in the souvenirs published during *kaliyattam* and also in various literary publications in the regional language. The themes of the works are sometimes directly connected to particular theyyam and sometimes to the general belief on theyyam. Poems like ‘*Vadakkathi Bhagavathi*’ by Sreedharan Master of Kunhimangalam, ‘*Baali Daivam*’ by Madhu V. Madayi, ‘*Thondachan*’ by Sureshkrishna Vellikoth and such are of few examples that have theyyam as main theme. Ambikasuthan Mangad is a prominent writer from the Kasaragod district and he had published several works related to theyyam. ‘*Vithachathu*’ is a short story and ‘*Marakkappile Theyyungal*’ is a novel by the author related to theyyam.

Kaliyattam: From ritual to entertainment

A *kaliyattam* is firstly and foremost a religious ritual event. But it is not exclusively contained with rituals, religious acts and rites performed by priests, oracles and theyyam but there are other events also happening around the religious rituals in *kaliyattam* space. It is true in the case of *tharavadu* shrines where most of the events are related to religious rituals, where as in large community shrines or public ownership the practice is different. At a family shrine, conducting a yearly *kaliyattam* or *kalpana kaliyattam* is a customary affair which is being practiced by the family members traditionally over generations. The family is supposed to conduct the ritual to appease the gods and goddesses of their *tharavadu* every year on specific day and they cannot fail in this. In such an occasion, though the event requires considerable financial backup, sometimes a hard task for a low earning family, they conduct the event in the completely ritual way by doing essential rituals to finish their ritual duty. They would not be able to expand the event into a festival beyond the ritual domain of theyyam performance.

In the case of community shrines and publicly owned shrines the event of *kaliyattam* is far from just a religious ritual. The organizers take the event from mere ritual performance to a festival celebration. Though they try to give primacy to the rituals generally there are instances in which the main ritual of theyyam get sidelined into the shadows. This eventually resulted in the increasing trend of making the *kaliyattam* into festivals. A *kaliyattam* has become an occasion where a village festival is celebrated at the shrine. Apart from the theyyam performance and other religious rituals happening in and around the shrine, a large market, business and various entertainment programs are also happening which is associated with it. Market has become an essential part of *kaliyattam* and entertainment programs and on-stage performances also became a main part of it. A market is an essential part of a festival event and *kaliyattam* is one such. In the olden times it was the occasion in which people from different places gather together. People bring various produces like vegetables, earthen pots, and textiles etc., each by particular communities who are specialized in making it and sell them in the temporary market forming around the *kaliyattam* place. The traditional sellers of vegetables and homemade sweets are now rare to find but not completely vanished. During the *kaliyattam* at Kadangottu Tharavadu, farmers bring their vegetable produces and sell there. Except very few such examples, the traditional

products and sellers have given way to more professional sellers of toys, sweets, household utensils and so on.

It is now common to spend huge amount of money collected from public as donation on entertainment programs. The organizers arrange entertainment programs like drama, dance, musical events etc. and invite eminent artists, singers and film stars to perform. Associated with *perumkaliyattam* there will be cultural programs every night in which well-known scholars, academics, politicians, orators, and social activists are participated.

The increasing interest and attention given to the entertainment programs by the general public and mainly by the organizers are making serious negative influence to the associated religious rituals and theyyam. The rituals are often disturbed by the noise of such programs running parallel to the rituals close to the shrine. The theyyam performers are sometimes being directed by the *kaliyattam* organizers to adjust the time of rituals to make entertainment programs more successful with large participation of general public. Due to this, theyyam performers fail to do the rituals properly and completely. This even has a big psychological impact to them who dedicate their life to the religious rituals they perform as well as to sincere devotees of theyyam. They are helpless to counter the directions of the event organizers and authorities of shrines who are mostly unaware of the rituals and its importance. This is one of the main negative aspects happening in the present day associated with theyyam and *kaliyattam* and to the whole belief and practice system associated with this religious performance.

Conclusion

In *kaliyattam* it is not just the religious rites which are happening rather it is an occasion in which diverse social and cultural aspects of people's life are becoming visible. The people involved in the religious event are connected to the general public and the society in which they live in terms of political, economic and socio-cultural aspects. The power relations and economic matters are active within and outside the ritual sphere of *kaliyattam*. The caste relations, economic transactions between different participating groups, involvement of people of the other religion in this dominantly Hindu religious practice are the key aspects which are of concern here. The power relations are not restricted in terms of caste and community status only but it is also in terms of economic as well as gender. We have discussed here in this chapter about the

aspects of engagements of an individual as a member of the society in the religious ritual and the associated festivities.

The event of *kaliyattam* cannot be restricted to an identity of a religious ritual completely. There are aspects other than pure religious rites associated with it and are beyond the complex of belief system of religious cults. The duties performed by each person having specific role in the ritual event and it should be remembered that each of those persons are part of a larger society and has different identities and roles outside the ritual sphere. The event is not just a mere performance of religious rites, rather it is an occasion of a festival for the people. As the people connected to the event are not solely in terms of religious beliefs the event becomes more general to the public. Though not directly connected to the religious rituals happening in the sacred shrines, the belief and practice systems connected with in theyyam and *kaliyattam* are a matter of concern to a wider audience.

To a wider audience of non-believers and also for believers this event is special in several ways. It is essentially a cultural activity for the people in this region and it is embedded in the social life of the people in a way which is not much religious. The environmental-ecological aspects of the belief system, especially the sacred shrines and its original form of *kaavu* (the sacred groves), had and still having significance in this way. These are aspects not so much in terms of religion. The theyyam influence the literature and artistic creativities of the people. It has become a matter of academic research in various matters from its artistic and cultural features to significance in society. In the contemporary times, conducting of *kaliyattam* is becoming a secular matter other than religious worshipping. It is an occasion of celebration and festivities and people try to make their festival to a grand level, in most cases frequently departing away from the core element of the whole event of religious worshipping.

Notes

¹ the *theyyam* performer is also known by the name *kanaladi* meaning the one who dance on fire, another name is *koladhari* meaning the one who wear the outfit –*kolam* of the *theyyam*.

² Sajesh has performed six *ottakkolam* (*theechamundi*) in his life and he received his *acharapperu* of Panikkar by performing *ottakkolam*.

³ One such incident the researcher observed directly was associated with the performance of the Uchitta *theyyam* by Madhu Panikkar or Annoor. The incident happened at Kannuveedu Kadappuram shrine. It was the first time Madhu Panikkar performed Uchitta theyya. Though an eminent performer who did several *theyyam* and received much recognition from society, the Uchitta *theyyam* did not satisfied the devotees and enthusiasts. The main criticism was about the voice of the *theyyam*, being a female deity, it had to be in female voice. Due to the lack of experience in doing this, the voice became more masculine and people objected it.

⁴ As explained by Y. V. Kannan, a veteran theyyam performer who was also a school teacher.

⁵ Nandakumar, whom the researcher met at various *kaliyattam* places and observed *theyyam* together, is a college teacher and a researcher specializing on the caste aspects of *theyyam*.

⁶ This ritual event is named as '*payyannur perumale thozhan*', in which a worshipping of the deity in the shrine is made by the theyyam as a token of tribute to the sovereign deity in the area.

⁷ Dinesan is an academic researcher comes from Payyannur who observe *theyyam* in very close manner, often very critically.

⁸ A special news article published in The Hindu newspaper illustrates the extent to which the 'commercialisation' is happening in theyyam. (Sajith, C.P. *When Theyyam breaks bounds of sacred grove*. The Hindu, Tuesday, November 19, 2019).

Chapter Six

***Kaliyattam* and the Socio-religious Dynamics**

Having discussed about most of the key aspects of the *kaliyattam* and theyyam in its religious and non-religious contexts it is now the time to understand how each of these aspects are interconnected to form a religious system in its totality. The periodic observance of the ritual, most often annually, is an occasion of wide range of happenings. The ceremony goes from the conductance of various rituals in worship of the deity, its propitiation and receiving of the blessing to satisfy a psychological need of the devotees. The conductance of the ceremony involves participation and performance of actors of varying caste affiliations which is directly connected to the social system and organization characteristic to the North Malabar. From the ethnography so far dealt, it is clear that the performance of the rituals in the ceremony of *kaliyattam* is carried out in an elaborate manner which goes beyond mere religious act to artistic features. This actually broadens the scope of the ritual event to a festival with much aesthetic and entertainment values. Such features are taken up by a wider audience which has nothing to do directly with religious system of *kaliyattam*. The social implications of the event that includes both statics and dynamic elements are of utmost significance in an anthropological perspective. The two-way influences of ritual over society and society over ritual is a continuous process and there also exists a conflict between tradition and novelties.

The ritual in statics and in action

The place of worship of the theyyam deities is the nexus of a multitude of aspects. From the ecological significance it gets into economic and political aspects in society. The basic form of the sacred shrine of *kaavu* is fundamentally a part of the nature, the trees forming the locus. The people of the North Malabar consider several trees as sacred and gives special importance. The trees like peepal and banyan (*Ficus religiosa* and *Ficus benghalensis*) which are common in all India level and those like *paala* and *koovalam* (*Alstonia scholaris* and *Aegle marmelos*) which are special regionally in Kerala are present here too associated with sacred groves. These trees are connected to the Hindu mythologies and the regional religious worship. The distinguished one in

case of North Malabar is that of *kanjiram* (*Strychnos nux-vomica*) and it is through the ecological significance it becomes a part of the religious cosmos. This tree with its special efficiency in purifying water bodies in the particular environment of the region becomes sacred to the people. The sacred groves are common to entire Kerala and is connected to the nature worship which in turn plays a major role in protection of ecology and its maintenance.

The main material element in the system is the sacred places of worship and they have specific identity not only in terms of physical features but also regarding its social background. The material structure of the shrines gives a glimpse into the basic features of the religious belief and worship of the engaging communities. We have already seen that the oldest and simplest sacred place often constitute of a crude rock placed at the base of tree in the sacred groves. The next level is the *thara*, which is again a simple structure made usually with red laterite bricks. Further, the worship places are those consisting of well-constructed shrines, the *palliyara*. This scheme has considerable relation with the economic wealth, land ownership and inter-caste relations. In the present days the nature of the shrine can also be related with religious philosophies of great tradition. The principal worshippers of several of the theyyam are those communities in the lowest strata and based on their capabilities the shrines were built with simplest material coherent with the nature in the past. However, the complex structures require land and money, both facilitated by the land-owning higher caste people and in return they get the authority over the shrine and also special status and role in the rituals. That is, the theyyam worshipping places are interrelated with dimensions of nature and social system. Though every shrine has community (caste) ownership, based on the deity being worshipped these are places where different communities join together. The influence of the mainstream Hinduism has also created a tremendous change in the structure of the shrine.

In *kaliyattam* a series of events are happening in which the social relations are reconstructed¹, rearranged, enacted, and finally revert to a normal phase. The ritual dance is an occasion of reconstruction and demonstration of a social situation of the people of North Malabar from the past. The gods and goddesses who were once common human beings who lived there and faced a tragic end are worshipped as gods and goddesses in this ritual. People believe that those who met with a tragic end become divine beings and take revenge over their cursors and protect the common people. Through this the people are trying to find a savior and also a good hope to end

their miserable life. The worshipping of deities who has origin in great tradition also goes in parallel with that of the local cults. People experience the divinities directly at their close vicinity during the ritual.

The *aattam* (play or dramatic dance) is an essential part in the *kaliyattam* and is a distinguishing feature. The stories of the gods and goddesses are narrated and enacted before the devotees through the ritual and this enactment creates special moods in the mind of devotees. The intense colors on the body and the facial drawings, unique clothing, fire, smoke and the crying of the theyyam - the total frenzied atmosphere takes the devotees to an ‘otherworldly’ experience. At the same time those theyyam which has elaborate stories of much human nature gives a spectacular entertainment for a wider audience.

The whole religious complex associated with the worship of theyyam can be demonstrated in Table 6.1. Here the intangible aspects of the religion that comprise of the myths and belief are connected to the tangible ritual performances and the society. In the process, the myths are developed from the society which are a reflection of the dynamics of the society the people live. These myths form the base of the religious belief and people make the tangible constructs of ‘god’. That is, the basic underlying stories behind each theyyam are actually the abstractions of happenings in the social life of the people. It is through the ‘theyyam’ that the people reconstruct the world they live in, both past and present. The rituals thus are the material construct through which people see themselves and also represent their values and emotions.

III	Ethereal/ cosmic realm	Belief	Narratives	theyyam
II	Performance realm	Ritual	Re-enactment (deities)	Reflection and reconstruction
I	Natural/ realistic realm	Society A	<i>kaliyattam</i>	Society B

Table 6.1 Interconnectedness of ritual and society

Arranged into rows and columns the whole system incorporates society, rituals and religion. There are three states in it which are taken as three realms, the natural realm being the real society, both in the past and present. This is the base of the system. At the top is the ethereal or the cosmic realm which can be equated with the religion or is supernatural in contrast to the basic natural realm. In between the two is the performance realm which is characterized by the ritual. In each of the three levels (realms) there are corresponding statics and dynamics. From left to right, it is the dimension of time, of both the ceremony and history. The progression of the whole event is from Society A, which represents the past, moving upward to ritual and the development of belief system. The belief is translated into narratives, which form large array of associated myths, legends, folktales and epics. The enactment of the deities (*kaliyattam*) then actually becomes the re-enactment of past. The theyyam which is a complex system of symbols reflects the ideals from the past and acts to stand with the society in the present (society B).

Following Turner (1969: 94-97) we can elaborate this relation by using 'liminality' and 'communitas'. The liminal *personae* (original emphasis) here is the ritual performer who becomes the theyyam. This identity can be elaborated to the whole symbolic complex of the theyyam (in its complete attire and guise on) and the identity as the 'god' (or 'goddess') or 'theyyam' as a state of liminality. The liminality is not in strict terms as Turner says as in a state of 'betwixt and between', rather it is relative. In the *kaliyattam*, the performers raise to a state which is mentioned as ethereal or cosmic realm which is for the human worshippers something other worldly. The whole event of *kaliyattam* in which the participants feels the divine presence thus forms the communitas. The equations of social relations among various castes are in a frozen state here.

For example, during the ritual the past life of the divinities as human beings are reconstructed and demonstrated before the people. In the case of Maakkam, the tragic death of the lady is enacted with high drama. When the fire torches attached to the theyyam are lit, the theyyam makes sounds as it is weeping and the drumming and trumpet (*cheenikkuzhal*) produce a melancholy music, all creating an atmosphere that gives an experience to the devotees as they themselves are going through what the protagonist in the theyyam once experienced as a person. In the case of Vishnumoorthi, it is the assassination of the cruel Nair *karanavar*, and in Potten theyyam it is the power of the downtrodden Pulaya man that are being demonstrated elaborately during the

ritual. Thus, each and every theyyam during their dance demonstrates the life and character of themselves. All these events have significant element of acting using the entire body of the performer. Acting is done with eyes, facial expressions, gestures with hands and body and also by making sounds in addition to elaborate makeup and decorative costumes. Another important factor is the status change of various participants in the ritual. The higher caste individuals also worship the theyyam which is performed by a lower caste person. It is only during this time a theyyam performer of Vannan, Malayan or Pulaya of the lowest strata in society get some elevation in social status. But this is only for a short duration of time because after removing the *mudi*, the theyyam performer returns to his normal status and no one recognizes him as distinctive and divine.

The primacy of ritual and belief

The study of theyyam and the *kaliyattam* ritual in North Malabar also sheds light into the debate on the primacy of belief and ritual in the study on religion. Robertson-Smith (1889) suggests that ritual and traditional usages were prior to belief, and E.B. Tylor (1881) on the other hand, puts belief before the ritual. Here, in the case of theyyam, based on the available knowledge, this can happen in both ways. For example, in Kadangottu Makkam theyyam, the story already existed, the people recognize some special importance of the tragically murdered lady and her children (the belief part), and later the society asserts that she become *daivakkaru*, and later into theyyam as a form of ritual propitiation of the divinity. In the present day, worshipping of Makkam theyyam by the childless couple is based on the belief that the blessing of the deity will bring fertility to them. Similarly, Kathivannoor Veeran as a symbol of truth is worshiped as a symbol of winning truth especially when it is related to land disputes, court cases etc.

The ‘belief first, ritual second’ or the other way proposals are limiting the phenomena to two possibilities, either R-to-B, or B-to-R (R and B representing belief and ritual respectively). This approach had its drawback of not explaining the process extending to a longer period. During the course of time, belief and ritual can repeat several times (R→B→R→ or B→R→B→). But more possibility is for the first one, based on the case of theyyam ritual in North Malabar. It is only through a repetition of the two aspects belief and ritual, that there can be development and growth on the

performance. The changes in belief and ritual happen through additions and oppositions depending on the social context and social situation.

Thus, we can make a broad evolutionary scheme rather than a linear progression of ‘Ritual’ to ‘Belief’; each point of divergence and growth as a particular juncture of change and development. By focusing on one specific theyyam, one can find how a particular theyyam is worshipped differently in various family shrines by giving their own name (for example, Maavila Chaamundi). Earlier there was one Chamundi and later various families (*tharavadu*) erected shrines and installed their own Chamundi after their *tharavadu* name. In a second case, one can look at the formation of an actual invention by people at specific instance to meet a need or purpose of new theyyam. Thus, for a particular theyyam, imposing or adding new belief of some specific quality (Makkam → fertility; Kathivannoor Veeran → success etc.) becomes a key element in the whole system. This process has several underlying factors like caste relations, economic and political reasons, beyond the single cause of religious belief and worship.

The communication: meaning and relations

Following the model of Bloch (1974), symbols in religious rituals needed to be analyzed by distinguishing it relative to one another based on the medium. Thus, in this ritual of *kaliyattam* different aspects shall be observed separately, like the material costume and surroundings, physical acts of the performer and the assistants or the singing and dancing style of the performers. Each of the different units has its own communicative characteristics and meaning.

According to Bloch ‘Ritual is an occasion where syntactic and other linguistic freedoms are reduced because ritual makes special use of language: characteristically stylized speech and singing. Ritual is therefore a place where, because the ordinary forms of linguistic communication are changed, we cannot assume the semantic places of more ordinary communication’ (Bloch 1974: 56).

As Bloch observes about the religious rituals, *kaliyattam* also possesses a reduced use of the ordinary language and uses a stylized speech and singing. In the ritual there are three major parts of oral communication happening between the actors which comprise of priest, oracle, performer and the assisting singers and the group of audience that comprise of devotees and non-devotee enthusiasts.

In the first part, there is a recitation of hymns and verses praising the divinities and it also includes prayers. These verses are a set of linguistic communication between

the priest and the performer with their gods and are intended in bringing the divine presence to the ritual and also to bring blessings to the performer. During this time the devotees and the enthusiastic non-devoted masses has no direct participation in it except standing there and observing the happenings. Mostly the recitation of mantras and prayers will be illegible to the audience and often the theyyam performer recites it in a murmuring style.

In the second part, the theyyam start reciting the *thottam* song assisted by co-singers and musicians. The *thottam* essentially has two parts, the prayers and the praising verses of the main deity to be propitiated and also of the sub deities in the shrine. The narration of the story and myth of the deity and its divine activities form another part here. During this stage the audience has more participation compared to the first stage as it is the occasion in which they listen to the divine and superhuman characters of the deity. This verses and enactment of the performer also bring the attention of the ‘non-devotees’ to the drama and entertainment elements. The priest and oracles of the shrine have fewer roles to perform at this stage and the communication happens mainly between the theyyam and the audience.

It is in the third stage of *vaachal* that the special features of the whole event of *kaliyattam* come into play. Here the human performer becomes the ‘god’ and make direct communication with the devotees. The effect of verbal communication between the god and the devotees is enhanced by the proximity between the two and the physical contact between them. The devotees who are now at the receiving end of the divine blessing realize the actual effect of the whole ritual of propitiation of deity and theyyam.

The conversation with the theyyam is same like talking to the god by the devotees. This conversation between theyyam and devotees is in a legible way though the performer uses specific tone and rhythm during oration. This actually comes under the category of the performative force of language (Bloch 1974: 67; Austin 1962: 234) in which the language is used to influence people rather than reporting facts. That is, the conversation between the theyyam and the devotee is in the least formal way, except the tune of rhythm, in contrast to the use of language in the first and second stages of the ritual. As the ritual proceeds, the performer gets into formal communication with the god, praises and appeases the god, make contact between the god and the devotees, and finally communicate with the devotee as god himself.

Theyyam and the element of Hinduism

The co-existence of local myths, legends and stories associated with great tradition in theyyam worshipping is an example for what Srinivas calls as the fusion of Sanskritic and non-Sanskritic systems (Srinivas 2003[1952]: 213). What is special about *kaliyattam* is that the core event is based on the conductance of theyyam having a belief system associated with it which is completely local in origin (a little tradition). The presence of mainstream gods and goddesses in the pantheon are a later addition in the history into this ritual that had only regional heroes and local myths as fundamental base in the beginning. The additions are happening both to the belief as well as practice as these are visible from the changes in the structure of the shrines and the rituals. The influence of mainstream Hinduism in theyyam based on caste specialization is also distinguishable to some extent. The popular theyyam in the pantheon and those of higher castes are undergoing Sanskritization process at a higher pace than the remaining which however, shows a slower changing trend.

An analysis of various theyyam reveals that the belief system of the people revolving around theyyam is a complex system of different types of basic forms. In the context of the belief system of Hinduism, the theyyam belief shows its presence in both the ends of the spectrum. At one end of the myths there is the All-India Hinduism and at the other the practices associated with the local Hindu caste groups as emphasized by M. N. Srinivas (2003[1952]). That is, the theyyam is a ritual performance of the different deities in the pantheon of the Hinduism. The deities of the mainstream Hinduism have a considerable place in theyyam and in several myths are directly linked to the local context.

This can be seen as a process of parochialization happening to the rituals. The theyyam like Chamundi, Puthiya Bhgavathi, Baali, and Thiruvarkattu Bhagavathi have their myths directly taken from the *puranas*, *upanishad* and epics of Hinduism. This being the first set of theyyam, in the second group, there are the deities who have an origin in a very restricted location of North Malabar or in Srinivas' term the 'local Hinduism.' The basic myths and stories of the deities are purely and exclusively originated in the local context. The themes of the divine characters and lives of such theyyam are related to the different socio-cultural aspects of North Malabar. The caste system and untouchability, household issues and gender violence etc. are the core themes of local deities. The myths of Thottinkara Bhagavathi, Muchilottu Bhagavathi,

Potten theyyam etc., to mention a few are cases of the above-mentioned process. In the case of deities from mainstream Hinduism, the core theme is mostly the assassination of demons by the Shaivite elements, while in the local cults it is purely based on the social context of the North Malabar.

Intermediate to these two above mentioned groups, there is the third group of theyyam which has characteristics of both the two. More clearly, these are the cults which are in transition. It is a frequent process in the present situation where one local theyyam which was once considered as completely native gets associated with characters of a higher Hindu god or goddess. The Muchilottu Bhagavathi theyyam is being considered as an incarnation of Lakshmi who is the wife of Lord Vishnu. Similarly, Kathivanoor Veeran as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, and Potten theyyam that of Shiva, and so on. Ascribing identity of Shaivite characters to local village deities is common since long time and application of Vaishnavite element is a clear indication of the Sanskritization process happening in their belief system in the recent times.

The presences of Muslim theyyam like Ali theyyam, Ummachitheyyam etc. are examples for the worship of extreme local deities. Such deities cannot be seen anywhere else in Hinduism. The myths are connected to the social life and special demography of the North Malabar region where a considerable Muslim population exists for centuries. The belief system also includes worshipping of animals and nature, the various activities involving in agriculture etc. Such aspects are common everywhere and the distinguishing aspect here is that the worship is done through the performance of theyyam.

Caste and belief system

In the North Malabar region, there are a number of caste groups coming under the Hindu religious fold having certain characteristic belief systems by worshipping of specific regional deities. Each of these communities often has particular deity as their major god and often associated with an origin myth. These communities which are synonymous with castes had an occupational specialization in the olden days. The subsistence activity is one of the major parameters that gives a distinctive identity to them. Also, there is a kind of hierarchy among the caste group, which attained a definite structure with the coming of Brahmanism and with the establishment of settlements and temples that acted as centre of power, economy and land property. The religious belief system of the newcomers was also successful in achieving a superior

status compared to the folk religious system so far prevailed. Thus, the caste system as we know presently had emerged with the coming of Brahmin communities here. This grouping of different Hindu castes and their inter-relations has considerable influence in the whole system of religious activities associated with *kaliyattam*.

There are several groups of communities specialized with certain economic activities such as agricultural laborers, artisan and craft people. Communities were specialized in occupations like fishing, weaving, toddy tapping besides other works. Those communities who were specialized in occupations like washing, music and sorcery, astrology, local medicine etc. formed another set of caste group. The significance of all these occupational specialisations and community consciousness is directly reflected in the religious sphere also. The ritual roles were arising out of their livelihood activities to a great extent. There were also people who maintained close contacts with the Brahmins who were at the highest level in socio-religious matters. Such communities acted as the intermediary between communities in the uppermost and lower strata in the caste hierarchy. This group of castes who are also affluent in economic wealth and political power were the main directors of the socio-religious life of the remaining communities.

Each of these communities irrespective of their position has their own gods and goddesses mostly as their tutelary deity. In this instance it should be noted that all these communities are considered to be having characteristic structures well organized and structured similar to tribal societies, mainly in terms of kinship. This is most frequently seen in the myths and in the songs of theyyam and also in other folk stories. Thiyya community, apparently the dominant community in the region whose traditional occupation was associated with toddy making, palm climbing, and other related activities is the best example to quote. This community (presently taken as a caste group) is mentioned as '*ettillam*' in theyyam and other folk literature. *Ettillam* means eight *illam* which are considered as major *tharavadu*. This could be similar to clans (and not to lineages as there is no genealogical connection to some particular known ancestor). Similar is the case with other communities also, based on the number of clans (or major lineages) each of them having grouping numbering six, nine, ten etc.

The social relations in *kaliyattam*

Caste is a visible and clear reality in Indian society and plays a major role in designing the fabric of the social system in various ways. An attempt in understanding the Indian

society without considering caste system is rather incomplete and less fruitful especially in the study of religion. Though there are several sub-groupings like castes in most of the major religions like Islam or Christianity in India the caste is generally considered as a characteristic of Hindu religion.

The belief systems in the Hindu religion is so broad that one could not find one or a set of specific trait or reason to define or limit the religiosity of the people coming under what is represented by the Hindu religion. The colonial administration in the pre-independent times had considerable role in assigning the religious status to a large group of society whose belief had nothing to deal with that of the mainstream Hindu religious system or the group that followed a Vedic tradition in their belief. A number of discrete communities living in various parts of the subcontinent and following a folk type of belief system and practices so far characteristic to their own suddenly got a religious status of the Hindu religion. Such communities came under various hierarchically arranged grouping of castes which are ascribed on them by those in the upper strata of the religious universe.

Though there are several theories by scholars of Indian society in defining what a caste is and how does a group of various castes work as a whole, occupational hypothesis proposed by Nesfield (1885) is a concept more suitable in dealing with the topic in the present discussion. The occupational specialization is one among the different parameters which are required in understanding the caste and their inter-relations. Other parameters like economy (class), political power, and religious practices are also playing a crucial role in this matter. In this case we are dealing with a society which is marked by both class and caste.

The hereditary rights the lower caste people have in the event of *kaliyattam* ritual gives them a specific place in the society which is otherwise difficult to achieve through any other means of economic or political uplift. That is, the people of the lower strata of caste hierarchy achieved their place in society through the means of religious activities and belief system, that is, with their specialization in theyyam ritual. We could not generalize this idea and apply to all the castes engaged in the ritual in the same way because of the considerable internal variation existing among the group of lower castes itself. For example, while considering the performing castes there is a clear distinction between the Harijan² (synonymous to untouchables) and others. Those castes which are considered as Harijan still feel clear discrimination in society and they form the lowest strata of the whole system. The other performing castes like Vannan,

Malayan or Velan have a much higher place in the society when compared to the former group of Harijan which consists mainly of Pulaya, Koppalar, Mavilar etc. Though in the basic line the religious activities done by the two groups are similar with regard to the social status both the groups have considerable variation. The religious activities have contributed differently towards achieving a status in society for both the groups. The forward castes and those in the middle of the hierarchy also enjoy a status of their own. Roughly we can make a grouping of all the Hindu castes based on their relation and engagement with *theyyam* (see Table 6.2). Based on the *varna* classification of the Vedic Hinduism we can find a rough elevation of status, though not absolute, down the line (Nath Bhat, 1954; Jha, 1997; Shah, 2007).

Category One	: Pulayan, Maavilan, Koppalan.
Category Two	: Vannan, Malayan, Velan (Anjoottan, Munnoottan), Thuluvelan, Chinkathan.
Category Three	: Backward castes: Thiyya, Maniyani, Vaniya, Nankuvarna (Aasari, Moosari, Thattan, Kollan)
Category Four	: Forward castes: Namboothiri, Nair, Nambiar, Pothuval etc.

Table 6.2: The four categories of castes participating in *kaliyattam*

The above table gives a rough idea of the various castes and its grouping in the increasing order of social status downwards. We can find grouping of castes into four based on their varying social status and roles in social life as well as in religious practices. The grouping is directly connected to the economic status or the class nature. Ownership of land, the means of production, and nature of economic activity etc. defines the status and role of each castes and the group they belong.

Here the discussion will focus more on characteristics at the group level rather than focusing specifically on each caste, for reason that any such attempt will make the discussion too lengthy and difficult to analyze. The first group as mentioned above consists of castes like Pulaya, Maavilan and Koppalan³. Together these castes are called as Harijan, as mentioned above, and they are the most downtrodden group in this region. Traditionally their occupation is mainly agriculture labour and were bound to

the upper caste land owners and under the dominance of other backward caste (actually the Other Backward Classes or OBCs) which comes in the third group.

The second group of Vannan, Malayan and Velan are castes with specific occupational specializations in society. Their economic activities are also traditional and hereditary and have specific rights entitled to them regarding their duties and obligations. Vannan is the washer men community in the area, working for specific families and castes. There are specializations in terms of gender too, that means men and women of this caste serve different communities. When male members of the community wash the clothes of higher castes the women work for backward castes like Thiyya. There are people from this caste who are specialized in local medicine that gives them special status and respect in society. The Malayan also plays significant role in the society. Malayan people are the major musicians in North Malabar endowed with great skills of singing and playing musical instruments. Though this is not an occupational specialization this ability makes them important in the society. The prime activity of Malayan people is related to magic and other associated activities like sorcery etc. They perform magic and sorcery of various types wherever their help is sought for by any community except that of Harijan who are lower in status to Malayan. The magic is usually aimed at warding off evil spirits, to save from diseases etc., and in addition they perform black magic and contagious magic too and there are clients from various section of the society.

These above mentioned two groups form the performing communities of theyyam and they are called as *kanaladi*, colloquially meaning those who perform theyyam. Again, there is a classification within these performing communities in line of the above said two groups. The second group consisting of Vannan, Malayan and Velan are the major performers in the successive order in terms of numerical strength as well as number of theyyam performed. In other words, Vannan and Malayan form the dominant group among all theyyam performing castes and have highest rank among them. These two, with Velan consisting of two subdivisions named Munnoottan and Anjoottan perform the ritual in shrines owned by the same caste as well as that of other castes which are superior to them in the caste hierarchy, but never at the shrines of communities whose status is lower than them.

Coming to the third group of castes, it consists mainly of Thiyya, Maniyani, Vaniyar, and a group named Nankuvarna which consists of four castes namely Kollan, Thattan, Aasari and Moosari. These communities come under the Other Backward

Classes group in the official government list and their place is in between those of Scheduled Castes in the lower line and forward general castes in the upper line. With minimal rights over possession of land they were more independent when compared to the previously mentioned groups. These communities also have their traditional specialization in skilled occupations. Thiyya caste people are traditionally associated with small scale cultivation, coconut palm related economic activities like toddy tapping, coconut production and other associated jobs. Maniyani (also sometimes referred to as the Yadavas, though their connection with the Yadavas in Northern India is difficult to elucidate) has specialization associated with construction work using laterite brick, and its production by mining. The main occupation of Vaniyar is oil production. The last one, which is a group of four castes named as colloquially called as *nankuvarna* is the craftsmen in the society. Each of the castes is specialized in their traditional occupation. Kollan is blacksmith, Thattan does ornament making, especially with gold, Aasari is the carpenter and Moosari works with brass, like making of pots, sculptures etc. Regarding the last group consisting of the forward castes and their socio-economic positions, we have had a discussion in the earlier chapters. This is how the regional religious system based on theyyam creates and make divisions in society on caste line in North Malabar.

Status reversals in the ritual

A general character of religious belief system is the hierarchy existing between the worshipper and the worshipped. Those who worship occupy the lower position and the one who is being worshipped has the higher position. In the worshipping process the devotees pray before the supreme power or the one with special virtues who is more than human (the theyyam) and tries to find solutions to whatever problems the devotee faces. That is, there forms two group, the worshippers and the ritual specialists. Both these two groups play their respective roles during the *kaliyattam*. The belief system and practices usually do not have any influence or concerns outside the relation between the worshipper and the divinity. Their space of activities is among the two above mentioned groups only. The matter of concern here is that whether this belief system including various ritual practices has any significance outside this dyadic relationship as far as the entire society is concerned.

In a largely caste-based society with variation in religious activities and roles there exists a clear hierarchy in various roles associated with shrines and worshipping.

While the temples that follow mainstream Vedic Hindu rituals have practices synonymous with Namboothiri Brahmin having authority and primacy. But, the *kaavu* or other shrines of similar folk religious type follow a rather different practice. When the former is mostly common to all communities of Hindu religious fold with authority vested with Brahmins and other upper castes the later type is mostly community-based worshipping places where one particular community has authority and power. However, it does not mean that such shrines are exclusively for that particular community but a number of other communities also play specific roles entitled on them in certain activities.

The main point of discussion here is with regard to the status relation among various groups associated with religious activities in shrines. In the mainstream temples which follow Vedic worshipping tradition, there is nothing related to ‘changes in status or roles’ of the ritual specialists and it has a permanent relation. Here the ritual specialist is often a Namboothiri Brahmin who does the puja and the divinity is situated in the sanctorum of the temple. The worshippers without any distinction stay at a specific distance from both the sanctorum and the priest. What the ritual relation reflects is same as what is observed in the society, more specifically, the hierarchy based on caste and the norms of purity and pollution. There are no changes happening to it at any time or during any kind of ritual activities. On the other hand, in the *kaliyattam* shrines the equations are different. There happen transformations in the status of the individuals who are engaging in the ritual. Most importantly with the theyyam performer, who is the key person in the whole event.

Roles and statuses in *kaliyattam* ritual

Turner (1969: 166-68) has discussed two aspects of rituals with regard to the status of the ritual subject or novice. In the first type, those seen in the life cycle rituals the subject goes from a lower status to a higher status. In the second type, at some point of time in the ritual, only the status of the subjects is changed. After the ritual the subject returns to their original status and this is associated with cyclic or calendrical rituals. Turner classifies the former as ‘rituals of status elevation’ and the later as ‘rituals of status reversal’. We can see that the change in status is permanent in the first case and in the second it is temporary and exists for a short period of time, during the ritual only.

The *kaliyattam* ritual falls in the second category, that of cyclic or calendrical rituals. The novice or the subject in the ritual can be equated to the theyyam performer.

Though there are a number of specialists in the ritual doing specific hereditary and caste bound tasks (and hence with marked status), it is exclusively with regard to the performer any kind of changes in status occurs. During the ritual, when the performer becomes the god, he gets a higher status compared to any individual or community participating in the event and it is only in the religious sphere this happens. That means, at this particular time there exists a state what Turner says as ‘*communitas*’.

What makes the people to stay together outside the religious sphere is the economic relations existing between them. The different castes in the region were occupationally specialized communities and were interconnected in economic terms. This system to a great extent is an exploitative one arising from the boundedness and ‘master-serf’ system with the strong class hierarchies embedded in it. During the event of *kaliyattam* when the lower caste performs the theyyam it is often realized that to a certain extent the equations of status relations are changing. During the divine dance of the deity the normal social identity of the *koladhari* as a lower caste person get masked. Those communities standing above them bow before the *koladhari* with devotion and reverence and get blessing and advice from them who are now treated as god. As devotees the higher caste people of Nair as well as Namboothiri Brahmins too follow this.

The case of roles in the rituals is a different story. In a shrine the *koyma* role is played by higher caste Nair males and these people do not go to the theyyam to get blessing, rather they stay at the specific place assigned to them in the entrance to the shrine’s courtyard and the theyyam go to them to bless. The status reversal in the ritual context is a fact existing only in the ritual space and it never extend to the general social sphere. Outside this at a normal time and space the social identities of each of the individuals are based on their community or caste affiliation.

Conflict and solidarity

In his work ‘Custom and Conflict in Africa’ Gluckman proposes that ‘a community is always elaborately divided and cross-divided by customary allegiances; and the elaboration is aggravated by what is most specifically a production of man in society: his religion and his ritual (Gluckman 1956: 1).

When taken this as a hypothesis and observed in connection with the case of the rituals in *kaliyattam* the result will be in line with what Gluckman proposes. The conductance of rituals is actually a product of human action and this can be made clear

by considering the case of theyyam like Kathivanoor Veeran. The formation of new theyyam which are not seen earlier in the pantheon is also an example of the creation of beliefs and rituals by people. The comment made by an informant that one day there may form a theyyam of major political leaders who made several agitations and protests against the oppressor classes for commoners is another example for the same. This basic idea that a person protesting for certain right of a section of society against an oppressive 'other' is validating the divisions existing in society both in class as well as in caste terms. When a new theyyam is being formed it is associated with clear caste and community roles too and once again such identities of the participating groups are emphasized through rituals in religious system of the society.

There exists a conflict among the communities in terms of economic, political, and ritual inequalities and one oppresses the other and the later protest against the first. The myths of several theyyam are supportive of this observation. Though there is a conflict and continuing demonstration of rebellion in the performance in the event of both ritual and as a non-ritual act, all these aspects are happening inside the limits of the specific group (of believers of a specific religious matter) formed by all the communities with different identities occurring through 'master-serf,' 'oppressor and oppressed' relationship. In this way this religious ritual event gives a platform in producing cohesion amongst the various communities involved as Gluckman proposes about the re-establishment of social cohesion (Gluckman 1956: 2).

Though the ritual event can bring cohesion and integrity between groups it does not mean that there forms an equilibrium among different groups in status or role. The ritual never removes any kind of social hierarchy completely from the society, neither it creates an egalitarian community. The status in social strata and the power and authority deposited in each group and the customary and hereditary duties on each of them persists. The number of higher caste groups who are usually the organizers often enjoys the power in determining the nature of economic transactions, more precisely the payment for the performers belonging to the lower caste groups. The nature of transactions existing between the groups in terms of political, economic and ritual aspects however remain the same essentially.

Gluckman's proposal with emphasis on the conflicts is the best tool to elaborate the situation existing in *kaliyattam* ritual. According to Gluckman,

'how men quarrel in terms of certain of their customary allegiances, but are restrained from violence through other conflicting allegiances which are also

enjoined on them by custom. The result is that conflicts in one set of relationships, over a wide range of society or through a longer period of time, lead to the re-establishment of social cohesion. Conflicts are a part of social life and custom appears to exacerbate these conflicts: but in doing so customs also restrains the conflicts from destroying the wider social order.’ (Gluckman 1956: 2)

According to Gluckman, aspects of conflict expressed in the ritual domain could give a new understanding of the social relations of various hierarchically organized communities. The caste system existing in the society and its dynamics itself is a conflicting system and hierarchies of castes based on their status are that which produce the conflict. The economic and political relations existing between various caste groups that are engaged in the event of religious ritual have specific structure. This system of various caste groups which performs various roles in the event is in parallel with the economic relations between the communities and it is the political as well as economic power that guides the various participating communities to play whatever specific role that are being ascribed on them traditionally. Victor Turner (1996[1957]: 288-89) also sees the role the social structure has in producing social cohesion. The rituals as social dramas play a crucial role in reducing conflicts and contradictions within the society according to him.

Coming to the caste identities, two of the major performing communities namely Vannan and Malayan were once keeping the strong caste based purity and pollution norms. In the caste hierarchy the Vannan is higher in position than the Malayan and both kept specific distancing between them in the normal daily life as well as in the ritual place. This practice existed in those shrines where both the two communities perform theyyam. They refuse to join together or exchange any items used in the event.⁴ For example, the drums (which is the main musical instrument) has never been shared by these groups. A group of Vannan performers always keep and play their own drums so does other communities. But in the recent times there is a relaxation in this and people started to exchange their materials.

Whatever conflicts and incompatibilities existed between various communities are becoming reduced in the recent times. An important point to be noted here is that it is not the product of any religious ritual event that made the once distant communities come together going beyond the customs. A Durkheimian proposal of collectiveness and solidarity is never achieved through the ritual event alone, rather it is the social

dynamics as a whole that produced the change in caste relations.⁵ In the particular context of North Malabar, the factors are numerous and it can be traced from the political and economic history. The new education system introduced by the British government and the social movements headed by both spiritual as well as political leaders were instrumental in bringing changes in the social relations. The purity-pollution concepts and untouchability so far prevailed which were the significant reasons in the social division started to get diminished in the twentieth century. The abolition of untouchability by the government and the framework of the constitution also played a crucial role in the changes. The secularism guaranteed by the state added much to the same. The processes of westernization, modernization, and industrialization etc. together brought substantial backup to reduce the social inequalities which in turn created a society with less differences (Houtart and Lemercinier 1978 a&b; Osella and Osella 2000; Sreejith 2013; Sanal 2015).

Following the two opposing ideas embedded in the whole event of *kaliyattam*, the demonstrations of the protests by the lower caste people about their sufferings against the higher authorities and the collectiveness across different communities of varying social status at the ritual, *kaliyattam* becomes actually an arena where the 'rituals of rebellion' actually realizes (Gluckman 1955: 28). As suggested by Gluckman, these rituals do not question any type of authority of the higher section in the society, they actually demonstrate a rebellion against the system, which always persists. Through these religious events the performing groups can never achieve a change to the political equations which could be achieved only by a revolution.

The power positions or authorities in the context of theyyam are accumulated with the higher caste people. Associated with the higher position in the caste system they also have the social status, economic status as well as the political positions. It is not the power of a particular person like landlord or local chief that is being challenged by the theyyam but the entire group of higher castes altogether. The myths and stories associated with theyyam (especially that of Potten theyyam, or Palanthayi Kannan in Vishnumoorthi theyyam) are direct representation of the rebellions. If at all there happened an incident like a lower caste person standing against his or her higher caste master, and when it becomes a folktale or myth, transformed and get converted as a form of rebellions of one section of society against another.

Regarding social order there are two sides. When the higher caste people bow before the theyyam performed by a lower caste person at the event the former always

possess a privilege of his higher caste status. The *koyma* position in a shrine is the clear expression of the status of higher caste people, their authority and the role they play at the event which parallels with their position in society. No higher caste group is being portrayed or displayed with lower status or in a bad way at any point of time in the performance. The preferences in blessing by the theyyam are also an expression of the maintenance of the caste based social relations. The higher status of the *koyma* is being expressed here, however the theyyam performed by a lower caste person (Vannan, Malayan etc.) at a shrine of lower caste community (Thiyya, Vaniyan etc.) is less even compared to the status of a higher caste person. Also, it should be noted that it is the privilege of a higher caste person (Nair, Pothuval etc.) in their *koyma* role. The status disparity is also in terms of gender other than social status and power. The power and status the *koyma* enjoy is by virtue of their forefathers donating a plot of land (economic aspect) to their serving family (Thiyya, Maniyani, Pulaya etc.).

The people are not able to express their refutations against their masters in the real world and they always take the help of superhuman or supernatural powers to question the dominance of their lords. The high power of the higher caste people was accepted by the lower caste people who worked for the former and being exploited. The various kinds of exploitations and dominance are themed in several theyyam. No lower caste people were able to fight for their justice against their masters or feudal lords directly and their resistances were depicted in the stories they made and expressed through supernatural powers personified as individuals, male as well as females. They imparted divine characters to such individuals as heroes and gods and by worshipping them satisfied their quest for resistance against the evils of these lords.

In the modern scenario, any oppositions and resistance made by people against the exploitation of the feudal lords and their authorities were realized through the mass mobilization of people during the independent movements mostly under the patronage of political parties. Various socialist movements and the later communist parties played a significant role in bringing social change in the society by organizing protests and resistance movements against the exploitation of feudal lords and landlords.

One of the key informants, who is a scholar and a veteran theyyam performer made a comment that, “in the future there are chances of having cults like ‘AKG’ theyyam, or for that matter ‘EMS’ or ‘Nayanar’ theyyam.” This single comment is very significant in the understanding of what is a theyyam cult to the people in this region ultimately. A.K. Gopalan, popularly known as AKG was one of the most vibrant

revolutionaries of the Communist party in Kerala and he was called as '*paavangalude padathalavan*' captain of the downtrodden. Similar is the case with the first chief minister of Kerala, E.M.S. Namboodiripad (again known by the initials as EMS), and E.K. Nayanar (a popular leader and also a chief minister), both belonging to the same political party and having had a strong relation with the people. The people believe that they can remember and worship someone who actually made certain significant real changes in society through the ritual.

Thus, whoever stands with the downtrodden in the society or whoever shows a significant role in the social life and making impact in the society is considered as special to the people and the people tries to make them godly figure. The process of becoming *daivakkaru* is the occasion in which a common individual is raised to divinity and thereafter is being worshipped as theyyam. This is one aspect for a specific category of cults. Female theyyam has stories of gender violence and yet another will have their magical abilities to fight against natural calamities, epidemics like smallpox etc. and hence such theyyam after them.

Emphasizing caste and community identities

The *kaliyattam* is an arena where caste system is becoming overtly expressed and it is the common occasion in which the schisms existing in society in terms of caste becomes clear. In such situations, the society is actually getting divided into several parts based on their community affiliations. Each of the participating community has roles assigned on them to perform in the event and it is static. A Vannan or Malayan who is a performer (the *koladhar*) can never perform the role of a Thiyyan who is in charge of bringing '*kalasam*' (toddy) to the event. Similarly, a Vaniyan can perform his duty of supplying oil, a *kollan* makes weapons, and so on. No one can exchange their roles. The role each community performs is connected to the job they do or did in the olden times as caste occupation. When one individual performs that role during the event, it is the identity of that person in terms of caste that is being expressed. In the present day, a Vannan *kanaladi* may be a school teacher or an IT professional and a Thiyyan may be a government officer, if they are involved in the ritual event, they will perform their caste duty only, as a *koladhari* and as a *kalasakkaran* respectively. This is how caste becomes prominent and lively with a *kaliyattam* ceremony in society.

As a result of the division in society reemerges, the hierarchy and social inequalities also become large with it. It is the differences which are being expressed in

the event though there is a collectivity forming during the event. The collectivity is not in a clearly uniform fashion, but it is a collectivity of different groups of varying statuses and roles. Individuals are not equal in the whole collective but equal within the group only and each group has differing status from one another. Obviously, the people are sharing the religious belief and practices which are enacted in the occasion, each one getting their expectation and aspirations fulfilled through the ceremony. The psychological satisfaction attained through the devotion to theyyam is the common and central factor that spread equally across participating individuals. But as a group of different communities with specific roles entitled on them get whatever ascribed on them by the system.

Thus, as opined by Radcliffe-Brown (1952:165) the institution of religion through its ritual actions and performance functions in the development of a social order. The social order in this society or the section of society who are participating in it (mainly the Hindu religious followers) is based again on their community affiliation and their roles. During *kaliyattam* people gather together following the tradition and custom and perform their roles. This performance of particular action ascribed over them as roles, customarily, is the order here. This order is always maintained. In a way, through this we can understand the function of religion in maintaining a system of social relations.

Political and religious inequalities

We have already seen that there exists a considerable differences and hierarchy among the participating castes. Emerging from the religious philosophies of Vedic Hinduism it is extended to economic and political matters too. According to Godelier (1975), such inequalities are followed by and consolidated through the ritual. The ownership of the material property, the land being the prime, is accumulated on either the local chief of higher caste or on the religious head –the *kazhakanaadhan*, which in turn linked to the supremacy of Brahmins. In the first case, the authority and status of the higher caste people (who have given the land) is acknowledged by attributing the role of *koyma* enjoying high status in the ritual, and in the later the ritual sovereignty is acknowledged by virtue of performing the initial prayer or by bringing light to begin the *kaliyattam* from the major shrine.

According to Godelier (1979: 110), in the pre-colonial India, religion acted as a general framework of the relationship between individuals and groups. In the present context too celebration and conductance of religious events like *kaliyattam* and the

rituals in it affirms the proposal of Godelier. The general framework of society lies in the caste system and in the duties assigned to each caste group and the customary practice of those duties, which makes structure. As Godelier opines, in the case of societies like communist China where politics shapes the society, it will be yet other cultural or social parameter that designs and regulate the system of other social groups in the same area, like say for example kinship organization⁶.

For Godelier, ‘the real content of the divine, sacred, consists in the hidden articulation of social relations, including the conditions for the reproduction of the social system within a natural environment. Or at least it inheres in the representation of that articulation which, immanent in the system, appears in the form of a cause that is assumed to be transcendent to the society. More precisely that articulation, an unintentional reality, is represented in the form of a personified cause to which is attributed a consciousness, a will, and an intention –an anthropological reality, a god’ (1975: 83). When we observe and compare the rituals in *kaliyattam*, it is in tandem with what Godelier comments about religion in his Marxist interpretation of religion. It is the social relations and social system that is being articulated and represented during the ritual. As an example, take the case of Kathivanoor Veeran. As the theyyam is related to familial relations and marriage is an important theme in the performance, at one point of time in the performance when the performer deals with the marriage of the protagonist the whole surrounding is treated as a place where the wedding happens. The participants are also treated likewise. Similarly, in the *kaliyattam* of Potten theyyam or Vishnumoorthi theyyam for that matter, a public discourse is recreated and reenacted in the ritual space. Here, it is the social relations in which the caste system and its related customs are the core theme of demonstration. It is a stage of both remembrance of the past and resistance against the defective system.

According to Bloch, ‘religious-like phenomena in general are inseparable part of a key adaptation unique to modern humans. This is the capacity to imagine other worlds, an adaptation that I shall argue is the very foundation of the society of modern human society. This neurological adaptation occurred most probably fully developed only around the time of the Upper Paleolithic revolution.’ (Bloch 2008: 2055-2056) Continuing this remark Bloch says that, ‘what the transcendental social requires is the ability to live very largely in imagination. We often act towards elders, kings, mothers, etc., not in terms of how they appear to the senses at any particular moment but as if they were something else: essential transcendental beings’ (Bloch, 2008: 60).

These two opinions Bloch makes on religion while explaining how religion becomes a central aspect of human society could be used to extend the religious practice we have discussed here on this society in North Malabar. The people who are devoted worshippers of the cults in this religious cosmos is actually trying to attain a self-psychological satisfaction. It is the imagination of the individual believers in general and the groups in particular. The experiences one feels by being a part of the rites is of significance here and it is what people are realizing from their imagination of good and evil in the society they live. The narratives in theyyam are actually a product of human imagination. The society creates stories based on their experiences and are imparted with imagination of ethereal level. The deification of human and creation of mythical characters are the foundation of the theyyam belief system. Following Bloch, we can see that people transcend the ordinary human to godly beings. When a Nair lady meets with a miserable demise the people recreates her with an added divine character to save themselves from similar miseries. Similar is the case with most of the theyyam in the pantheon. The extent of imagination increases in theyyam which have complete mythical or epic nature.

Stromberg (1979: 209) also finds similar argument in his essay on Marxism and religion that ‘the human spirit, man’s own self-consciousness, is the source of religion, God being a projection of human needs and wishes.’ This ‘projection’ of needs and wishes are clearly observable in theyyam cults, in the resistance by the theyyam against oppressors, revenge against cruel people, and destruction of evils.

In *kaliyattam* the worshipping of various types of theyyam is happening and essentially it is not the specific nature of a particular theyyam that matters rather the outcome of the ritual or performance of the theyyam and the influence it makes in the worshipper and others. The character of the theyyam does matters in the event (particularly in the ritual performance) which can influence the aspirations of a devotee or his or her special belief in one particular theyyam or the specific aspect associated with it according to the myths and belief.

A performance often results in varying outcomes. Sometimes a ritual may function as an integrative event but at the same time it may result in conflict also. An incident happened during a *kaliyattam* of Kaithachamundi theyyam is one such case. This particular theyyam, well-known for the violent actions by demonstrating the ferocious nature during the performance, often enter into clash with the audience. The theyyam attacked people with the sacred sword it holds in hand, and the incident

resulted in serious injuries to the devotees and it drew lots of criticism on such ritual performances. When the shrine authorities and devotees took a stand saying that it was the ‘god’ that attacked people, a larger section of publics took an opposite stand arguing about the ‘stupidity’ of conducting ‘irrational rituals’ in the name of religious belief which even threatens the life of human. This incident got a state wide attention.

The efficacy and entertainment in religion

The study on the belief and practice systems associated with the theyyam in north Kerala reveals several striking features of ritual performance in society. Religion is a part of social system and it always communicate with the wider space beyond the boundaries of ‘belief and practice’. Both these aspects have two different implications with in the religious sphere and outside the rituals. Upon an analysis of this, the two major divisions observable are the ritual and non-ritual parts of the whole event. The primary function is the worshipping of the deities by devotees and this is the base of the entire event. The second part consists of all the happenings outside the ritual or worshipping and the devotees. Within the ritual also there are two different aspects and it can be observable using the idea of efficacy and entertainment proposed by Richard Schechner (1974).

By the ritual part in theyyam it actually means the ‘religious’ part associated with theyyam. In an abstract sense the whole event of *kaliyattam* consists of worshipping the divinities by the believers –which is the very fundamental idea of any religion worldwide. The peculiarities in this particular system is linked to several aspects that ranges from its place in Hinduism, the nature of the deities, nature of worshipping places and most importantly the relation between the deity and the worshipper.

The whole belief and practices associated with theyyam is a part of Hinduism. According to M.N. Srinivas, the Hinduism is divided into four types- All-India Hinduism, Peninsular Hinduism, Regional Hinduism and Local Hinduism (Srinivas 1952: 214-215). Based on the distinctive features of the basic aspects of theyyam we can understand that this comes under Local Hinduism. This is because the particular type of practice is exclusively restricted in a specific area of North Malabar⁷. The region here is the landmass isolated by the Arabian sea and western Ghats in west and east and the rivers of Tejaswini and Korappuzha in north and south respectively. Based on the type of Hinduism in the pantheon there are two groups of theyyam. One group

consists of divinities which have a story that connect their past to the particular local area or the people who once lived here, and the second is the group of deities which have stories connected to the greater Hindu tradition. In the theyyam both the two exists together and people worship them without differentiation.

The process of Sanskritization is very visible and extensive in the whole belief system in *kaliyattam*. It is not just restricted to the changes to the belief and myths of theyyam by adding new narratives based on the mainstream Hindu pantheon. The influence is wider which affects the practices as well as the physical context and space of the theyyam worship, the *kaliyattam kaavu*. Apart from the purely mainstream pantheon based theyyam (like Baali and blended cults of Chamundi or Bhagavathi), both these groups having myths connected to the Bhadrakali of great Hindu tradition, ascribing identity of Hindu gods and goddesses to local cult is the contemporary trend. In this Hinduization process, the Palanathayi Kannan became an incarnation of Vishnu, Potten theyyam as that of Shiva and so on. The newest among all these additions is that of Kathivanoor Veeran to which the identity of Sri Rama being attributed.

The root of these changes is multicausal as the theyyam performers, devotees and the shrine owners are playing a major role towards it. The result of this change is that the entire belief system of theyyam is slowly transforming from the folk nature towards the nature of a great tradition. The higher castes often keep the notion that the characteristics of the Hinduism is purer and more refined than the ‘crude’ worshipping of the folk deities by the lower caste groups. The structure of shrines and mode of worshipping are also undergoing changes. As already discussed in the previous sections the increased pace of conversion of *kaavu* to *kshetram* is one of the striking features of the contemporary change. The traditional *kaavu* or the sacred grove are becoming lesser as all get converted to *kshetram*. The micro forests associated with the *kaavu* are very rare now in North Malabar area.

The basic element of *kaliyattam* as an indigenous religious practice is rooted in cults of ancestor worship. However, the ancestors are fictive in nature representing the entire community of an entire region and lacking any direct genealogical link between the people and the god, but rather a putative link is traced. Thus, by worshipping Kathivanoor Veeran the people are actually worshipping one man who belonged to the Thiyya community. This caste identity is clearly depicted in the story of the theyyam and portrayed neatly in the *thottam*. Though the theyyam is associated with the Thiyya caste, it is not exclusive to them and anyone who believe in the theyyam can worship it.

That is, when a man is elevated to the status of a god, he loses his identity as a member of a particular community or caste. Thus, the larger society includes devotees of different castes embracing the god in the pantheon. In the case of Potten theyyam also this similar situation exists. Here the god is linked to the Pulaya community. Pulimaranja Thondachan is another theyyam very closely associated with the above community and it has a hero image among the devotees. All these three gods transformed to their present status as theyyam by the 'outstanding life' they lived in the society. These characters gave the communities who are downtrodden in the society a different status and also a pride. The case of Muchilottu Bhagavathi, Thottinkara Bhagavathi, or Ashtamachal Bhagavathi is also not much different from the above. The stories reflect the humiliation and injustices faced by the females in the olden days. Element of revenge is a key aspect of these theyyam including that of Maakkam. The devotees find their psychological and emotional relaxation by worshipping these cults as they are the symbols of resistance and power to counter the injustices. Theyyam like Urppazhassi, Kshetrapalan, Vettakkarumakan, Vairajathan were all Nair warriors who helped the Chirakkal Kovilakom to conquer Nileswaram. These Nair warriors then became gods and even replaced the traditional deities of Nileswaram which explains how religious system is closely connected to that of political institutions.

Notes

¹ Damodaran (2008) has extensively used the term 'reconstruction' in the context of analysis of theyyam based on its background. On a historical line, Damodaran opines that theyyam can be used to 'reconstruct the history of North Malabar' as it clearly portrays the socio-cultural and economic life of the people. The same work is also a useful one for its ethnographic detailing about theyyam.

² Originally proposed by Mahatma Gandhi, by 'Harijan' he meant all the Untouchable communities in India and by which he tried to represent all of them as the heirs of Hari or Lord Vishnu. This particular word is being used here as it is the same word used by the people in their daily life to call the castes in the lowest strata namely, Pulayan, Koppalar, Chinkathan, etc. The same word is used intentionally so that it could represent the intensity of caste system existing among the people even in the

contemporary times. However, the term is less preferred and often considered as insulting by the Dalit activists.

³ Sometimes the names like Pulayar, Maavilar or Koppalar are used, which specifically means the people of the caste group and the former usage indicate the name of the caste.

⁴ Interdependencies among various castes is a highly discussed matter in the case of caste as well as village studies in India. Many of them suggest that there exists a very specific interrelations and interdependence, mostly pertaining to the economic organization through occupational specialization and other organizational and institutional aspects like political office or roles in religious events (Nesfield 1885, McKim Marriott 1955, Srinivas 2003, Dumont 1970). What we are discussing here is that though various castes in the region have interconnectedness, when it comes to direct contact and cooperation, any two castes (for example Vannan and Malayan here) may not cooperated due to the status imbalances and the customary 'purity-pollution' they are practicing.

⁵ A group of anthropologists who emphasized on structural and functional aspects of social organizations and institutions often suggested about the overall cohesive function of rituals in various ways (from Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown, Gluckman to Victor Turner). This is true to a great extent when applied to even communities having internal divisions (say for example, the cases discussed by Evans-Pritchard and Mayer Fortes 1940). In the case of India, even though there exists a common identity under the religion (Hinduism), the caste system is more solid with customary practices which prevents a cohesion beyond certain limit, in which 'caste purity' becomes a decisive factor.

⁶ In societies where production (reproduction) of human beings itself is of chief importance than of tools or other means of production.

⁷ Srinivas observes that the Coorg, Canara and north Malabar together can be taken as a region and Coorg particular as a local area. Though there are similar worship existing in region further north of North Malabar (the Tulu region of south Canara), theyyam is peculiar to the North Malabar and is even different from the *thira* in the southern part of Malabar.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion

The main aim of this study was to understand the interrelation between religion and society from an anthropological perspective focusing on the ritual performance and its associated beliefs in society. The study emphasises on various social organisations and institutions in the society in doing this. Studies on religion and its various elements like beliefs and practices are subject of debate for anthropologists in the whole history of the discipline. The scholars in this field have tried to understand the dynamics of religion in society and is continuing with greater breadth and depth in the present days also. In such a context, the present study makes an attempt to understand the essential role of religion in society by focusing on one particular religious ceremony called *kaliyattam* and its key aspect of theyyam.

The thesis is organized into seven chapters. The first chapter gives the introduction to the whole work and it includes discussion on such aspects as the anthropology of religion and ritual, theories and perspectives on the studies on religion and ritual. This chapter also deals with methodological aspects of the study. The second chapter deals with the profile of the study area and the sacred places where the rituals are happening.

The study had three main objectives and the subsequent chapters are prepared based on these objectives. The third chapter is titled as ‘Myths, narratives and the belief system in *kaliyattam*’ and evidently it dealt with the belief system in theyyam and through which an exploration of the social organisation and institutions are also made. The fourth chapter, titled as ‘The ritual performance of *kaliyattam*: an ethnographic note’, dealt with the process of organisation and conduction of *kaliyattam* in shrines and this is where the various rites and roles of ritual specialists are analysed. The fifth chapter ‘Social and cultural implications and contemporary scenario’, is dedicated to the study of various social and cultural aspects of *kaliyattam*. The changes happening to the rituals in the contemporary times and the use of theyyam in non-conventional spaces are also analysed in this chapter. The fifth chapter titled as ‘*Kaliyattam* and the socio-religious dynamics’ deals specifically with the continuity and changes in religion in relation with *kaliyattam*. This section closely looks into the connection between belief, ritual, the performance,

and the social system. The analysis in it reflects upon the caste system, status, group solidarity and conflicts.

The study is carried out in a multi-caste setting in North Malabar. The caste differentiation existing in the society acted as the base of all the social relations, economic and political organisations and the institution of religion. This caste based social relations and the hierarchically placed social differences are quite strong in the present days also. At the same time, changes brought about by various factors from the colonial times has made impacts in matters of power and economy to a great extent. The abolition of the feudal type economy and redistribution of economic resources, mainly land, is a major factor that brought changes in social relations. Irrespective of the changes occurred in the society in terms of economic and socio-political aspects, in the domain of religion, there are no considerable changes to be seen even now. In the present time also there exists a strong and complete status differentiation and role specialisation based on caste and is almost unchanged over the years. The festival of *kaliyattam* and the performance of the main ritual of theyyam is an example for the prevailing old-style caste relations and dynamics in North Malabar. That is, through the ritual practices the tradition is continuing by following the customs which are otherwise not altering the traditional authority of the higher caste communities.

With regard to *kaliyattam* and its central facet of theyyam, the role of ritual performers has not undergone any major change. Those communities which are traditionally engaged in theyyam dance continue their hereditary duty in present days too. Similar is the case with other ritual participating castes like the Thiyya, Vaniya, Viswakarma (the artisan communities) etc. who continue to contribute their share of work. Unlike certain roles which are more technical and which do not influence any power relations (like that of the role of a theyyam performer), there are few roles which had undergone changes. The role of astrologer is the main aspect which has undergone a remarkable change. This is one of the significant changes in the whole system through which the entire authority over the religious belief and ritual practice were taken over by the upper caste Hindus. It is through these players the interests of the upper castes and the ideologies and practices of Brahminic Hinduism is percolating into the original folk religion associated with *kaliyattam*. The upper caste people, who have considerable economic and political status in society, plays a key role in almost all the theyyam shrines irrespective of their caste affiliation and imposes their objectives very easily. At the same

time, we can also see that the status of the communities engaged in the theyyam performance is lowest among all those involved in the ritual and this particular role is of least interest to the upper caste communities for any appropriation.

The *kaliyattam* involves demonstration of rebellion against various forms of social oppressions. Though this is the case, such rebellions through ritual do not effectively produce long lasting change in social relations or status. On the contrary, the ritual actually affirms the particular pattern of interrelation between castes which are a part of the social system. The repeated conduction of the ritual over years produces a kind of affirmative function in society. Whatever specific roles and status a caste had in the past remain immutable. Changes in either the status in caste hierarchy or role of any of the actively participating castes does not happen. That is, the internal mobility of caste and associated dynamics in the absolute sense is not visible here. The major observable changes in the caste roles are related to such cases like that of the astrologer and Namboothiri Brahmin. The increasing tendency of people to rely on astrologers of higher caste like Pothuval and the role of Namboothiri Brahmins performing rituals of Vedic Hindu in certain occasion are linked to the phenomena of Hinduization. On the one hand, the caste group which was entitled to do a particular role has been removed from the ritual system and on the other hand, a new tradition is being developed thereby a new caste or community is being absorbed into the ritual system. At the same time the remaining roles, those which are fundamental in the ritual like that of the performers or the assistants remain unchanged. In the process of Hinduization these roles are of less interest to the upper caste Hindus. These roles are highly embedded in the lives of those specialized performing castes and are hereditary and hence it is difficult to take up by any other groups with vested interests. The considerably lower status of the performers with least authority on rituals and customs also contributes to this. That is, the whole ritual complex is connected with the overall social fabric in terms of economy and power beyond its religious significances. The peculiarities of the Hindu caste system and its ideologies not only influences the participating communities, but it also reflects the growing interrelations between politics and religion.

The conversion of traditional shrines which were known by different specific names indicative of the identity of owning communities are now getting unified into a single title of '*kshetram*' with a common singular identity which is equal to that of temple of mainstream Hinduism with complete Vedic backing. Being the chiefs and landlords

by holding the political and economic powers, the higher caste used the such privileges to control and convert the religious system of the downtrodden masses by using the ritual of *kaliyattam* as major tool. The exchange between little and great traditions is also visible here regarding the folktales, myths, legends and the belief on different theyyam. The presence of theyyam with complete identity of Vedic gods in the pantheon and the changing identity of the local deities to that of Vedic gods and goddesses are evidence of this. More number of village deities and regional cults are being ascribed with identity of gods and goddesses in the ‘All-India Hinduism.’

There are several Civil society organizations which are emphasizing on theyyam, especially on its cultural values, and they often have their own political biases too. Most visible are those which are associate with the right-wing political parties with Hindutva ideologies in one end and the left leaning political groups on the other. The first one always takes position of ‘protecting and preserving’ theyyam as pure religious rituals and sacred, and oppose any move to commercialize or perform in unconventional and non-ritual spaces. In actual practice the objective is little more than that. By proposing such stand, they also try to affirm that theyyam is a part of the Hindu religion, or more specifically close to the Hindu pantheon. The second group of organisations on the other hand tries to oppose the agendas of the first. Claiming of authority over religious places is one objective in this move. A kind of an attempt to patronize the whole religious beliefs and practices is happening in a way. Associations and Societies of theyyam performers, differentiated on caste lines are also growing. Such organizations in line of ‘protection’ of heritage and traditional culture tries to play substantial role in the whole religious system.

As we have seen in the preceding chapter, *kaliyattam* and theyyam consists of symbolic expression of social dynamics of the region, especially at village levels. To be specific, *kaliyattam* can be considered as an event, which is sacred and superior than the normal happening at the sacred place of a shrine. Similarly, a theyyam is a divine sacred symbol of individuals and social conditions. The sacred venue and the event are characterised with symbolic constructs of social organisations -the economic statuses and roles, authority arising from hierarchical social divisions in the region. Gender, familial and kinship relations are also being expressed, predominantly through the myths and narratives in the belief system associated with theyyam. In this way, when the artistic,

aesthetic and entertainment elements are attributed to the beliefs, *kaliyattam* becomes an all-encompassing symbol of the society and culture of the region or the village life itself.

That is, the ritual associated with theyyam becomes more complex and its scope widens in the context of *kaliyattam* as the latter is more of a festival kind of event. Beyond the ritual, the worship is also an occasion of the remembrance of the social life of the people in the past. It is here the aspect of caste relations, kinship, family life and even inter-religious relations in the society are expressed. The entertainment aspect parallels the festivities and it is clear from the elaborate preparations made for the event. Dance, music, costumes, martial arts etc. are used with utmost importance to bring together the audience, both devotees and non-devotees, to the religious cosmos. The entertainment elements are in much balance with the ritual efficacy. The value of artistic elements of the theyyam took itself out of the religious ritual context these days.

Highly decorative figurines of theyyam is always an essential component in the display of culture of the region. The district of Kannur is synonymous with theyyam in the contemporary times. The influence of market and different elements of entertainment and leisure are the main players in this matter. Representation of the land and culture of North Malabar generally, and Kannur specifically made through various symbolic expressions of theyyam and tourism industry is one of the prime arenas here. The artistic and cultural value of theyyam is an inspiration for contemporary literature, theatre and even movies. Thus, theyyam now becomes a secular symbol of the region of North Malabar itself, especially that of Kannur.

The extensive growth of new communication technologies helped the spread of the rituals to a much wider audience whose interest lies more on the aesthetics and market driven economy rather than religious. Contemporary politics also made use of this religious practices and for them theyyam is one of the best ways to communicate with the people about their political views and agenda as theyyam itself is a representation of social life of the people. That is, *kaliyattam* and the social life of the people are in a give and take relationship.

The *kaliyattam* can also be used as an example for the general understanding of the multidimensionality of religion too. For this we need to take a look into the religious phenomena as an integrated system in its entirety. That is, we can understand the religious cosmos by correlating the real society with the ceremony of *kaliyattam* and the belief in

theyyam. The proposal of Clifford Geertz (1973) is a best frame for this which uses a perspective that can deal with the aspects of society, religion, ritual and culture in an all-encompassing way.

Geertz defines religion as ‘a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic’ (Geertz, 1973: 90). Based on these five points Geertz relying in defining religion we can make an attempt to mirror the present context, at least as an example. The theyyam in its all features and manifestations rightly acts as a symbol, of not only individuals but the society itself and the *kaliyattam* as a whole in which the dance of the deity as prime produces powerful moods among the devotees. The ‘order’ the event creates is different one, and for the devotees the ‘moods and motivations’ are realistic and through the ritual they try to realise their objectives or try to solve the problems in their daily life. In another level, the economic and political institutions in the contemporary society also make use of the ritual for their realistic objectives. That is, in the contemporary social scenario this particular religious practice is more than an ‘aura’, it is the reflection of society itself.

The changing dimensions of rituals

According to Eric Miller (1954), the solidarity and the internal relationship between caste groups tend to remain intact until there is a fixity in the territorial parameter. When there occurs a greater mobility of castes from outside the restricted territory the relations and solidarity will start to diminish. The religious practices of *kaliyattam*, which is very much localized, goes in tandem with the solidarity, interdependence and determinacies of the caste system. Whenever the ritual moves beyond the restricted geography, the social relations and the social system will also be affected with the changes. Such changes are emerging in the present days through various modes of representation when theyyam is taken out of the ritual context of North Malabar. Factors like tourism, literature, media, increased communication facilities including internet, academic research etc. plays a major role in bringing the ritual out of the original context.

Politics in the contemporary times is a powerful factor that influence the religious matters and ritual tradition. The ideologies of the right leaning political parties plays a major role in inducing changes to the traditional religious practices which are local and

having features of folk system into a general frame of the Vedic Hindu religious sphere. The use of religious means to achieve political gain by the right leaning political parties are being resisted by the left leaning political parties. The role of the left leaning parties is in the matters of resistance against the right-wing political parties and regarding various novelties, customs and practices in the rituals which are considered to be not suitable for a progressive society.

The cause of the heated debate associated with the formation of a new folklore museum can be taken as an example to understand the conflicts in opinion, agenda and politics that are strongly linked to *kaliyattam* and theyyam in the contemporary time. Obviously, one can see a dual grouping of the people in this regard, one supporting such an initiative and a second who opposes it. However, there is an effort from a section of society in preserving the original identity and the traditional mode of practicing the rituals. The dichotomy of ritual versus art which is expounded to such dimensions as sacred and pure, profane and impure, is mostly associated with the conduction of the event at religious and non-religious events as part of tourism festivities or in processions of political parties. The base line of all such discourse and conflicts is the religious sentiments associated with the traditional rituals. People try to assert their beliefs and even political ideologies during this time.

Debating on the ritual

The contemporary socio-religious scenario associated with *kaliyattam* consists of four dimensions, viz. religious belief, caste system and its associated authority and power structure, politics and lastly the economic aspect. A clash of 'tradition' versus modernity can be seen in these debates. It should be noted that all these are interconnected with strong threads directly connected to the society and its dynamics. As discussed previously, a single deity often gets associated with a second mythical story in addition to the earlier folk one, to connect with the greater tradition of mainstream Hinduism. This produces a clash in opinion among the closely related participants in terms of worshipper and as ritual specialists. That is, there exists differentiations among the participants as owners of the shrine, as performers and as devotees. One group trying to hold together the system of beliefs and practices and the other who tries to embrace new additions to the theyyam, which most obviously leads to a complete assimilation to the mainstream Hindu pantheon. A third group also can be identified which takes a position between the

above two, which positively accept the new additions and changes while still strongly holding the believes in the older traditions.

The economy of the society is a fundamental factor in designing, maintaining and perpetuating all types of social and cultural dynamics and hence, obviously religious too. In the olden days all the castes, chiefly the performing ones, were connected to this religious system as their primary subsistence, not exclusively though, because no devoted performer will accept that they are doing it for money as it is a divine duty for them. This has changed a lot in the present days. The higher ranking castes who are the owners of the main economic means like agricultural land, at the same time provided a space for the religious activities of their serfs and dependants. They also gave money to the later for their ritual duties when performed at the shrines in their ancestral home.

Two fundamental threads that binds together different castes are economic and ritual. The economic relations, where one group forms the owners of the means of production, primarily the land, and second those who depends on the first group for the livelihood, were very much basic in the past. This type of economic relations was instrumental in forming the particular ritual relations in the socio-religious sphere. In the present times, though the old type of economic relations has no much significance, its ritual counterpart survives in a much stronger way. Rajesh Komath (2013) in his autoethnographical study on economic aspects of theyyam has portrayed the details of this shift. Once a livelihood for the performing communities, in the present times the ritual roles and duties fetch no substantial living to the performing group.

Diminishing economic capabilities can be considered as one of the reasons for traditional *kaliyattam* shrines being pushed back into a forgotten stage about two to three generations back. However, when the migration to gulf countries happened, especially after 1990s, the economic situation of the people became better. This has had a reflection in the religious festivals too. But the current situation in North Malabar region is opposite to this. After a period of elaborate glittering festivities, people now started stepping back from such celebrations. When people's economic abilities to conduct the rituals lowers, it becomes a 'need' of the people to take initiatives not only to organize the rituals but also to make sure a considerable number of participants, devotees or others to engage in it. It is in this juncture the question arises, 'whether the god is for the people or people is for god?' The case of *kaliyattam* reveals that to sustain a particular type of religious

beliefs and practices, the society takes conscious efforts. The depiction of theyyam as gods and *kaliyattam* as a religious ritual and at the same time its expression as a cultural event or as an indigenous art form is very distinct, peculiar and unique to this region. However, its traditional economic significance cannot be brushed aside and similarly its contemporary political relevance.

The function the ritual plays or the outcome it produces in society is mostly towards the structural features of the society of which caste system being the fundamental one. The performances of theyyam in *kaliyattam* are mostly a display of rebellions against exploitative social relation or evil practices like caste based inequalities, oppressions, injustices and even gender violence. These are clear from the analysis of the narratives and belief system of theyyam. Though the ritual involves demonstration of rebellion against the structural features of society they are not capable of producing any persisting changes to neither the structure nor the relations in society apart from the momentary alterations in individual status.

It is important to demonstrate what *kaliyattam* and theyyam are for the people, with regard to the function of the rituals involved in it. We can understand that *kaliyattam* is the event of propitiation of the gods and goddesses the people believe and worship. The belief system is highly entangled with the daily life of the people in North Malabar. A *kaliyattam* is actually a grand event which cannot be comprehended with a single event of happening. It involves a series of rituals performed by specialists with specific caste bound hereditary duties. An array of non-religious events also stands close to *kaliyattam* with dimensions of economy, politics and entertainment. *Kaliyattam* as a religious festival at the shrine act as an occasion for the expression of customs, traditions and norms of the society. This is also a venue to express the social relation in political as well as economic terms. A theyyam is clearly a deity, mostly females with strong myths associated with them, which are actually mirroring the social life of the people in the past. Influences of contemporary times are also reflected in the narratives and practices of theyyam and *kaliyattam* is very much visibly. Thus, the ritual and the associated beliefs becomes the essential part of people's life and they acts as an expression of the worldviews and eidos of the people.

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GLOSSARY

<i>Aattam</i>	: Dance
<i>Abhishekam</i>	: Giving a special bathe to the idol in a shrine with water, milk or so as a part of worshipping done by the priest
<i>Acharapeduka</i>	: Achieving a distinguished ritual status with specific entitlement
<i>Achi</i>	: Mother; grandmother
<i>Adhidevatha</i>	: Supreme tutelary goddess
<i>Adichuthali</i>	: Cleaning of shrine premise
<i>Adivasi</i>	: Autochthons, in Indian context used to mention tribal people
<i>Adiyanthiram</i>	: Rituals which are particular and customary
<i>Aniyalam</i>	: The whole makeup, decorative items or paraphernalia of theyyam
<i>Annapoorneswary</i>	: The goddess of food and nourishment
<i>Anthithiriyar</i>	: The priest who take care of the shrine
<i>Ara</i>	: Various types of traditional <i>kaliyattam</i> shrines; similar are <i>kottam</i> , <i>mundya</i> , <i>podikkalam</i> , <i>madappura</i> , <i>muchilodu</i> , <i>kannangadu</i>
<i>Ariyittuvanangal</i>	: Worship with raw rice
<i>Aroodom</i>	: Prime place
<i>Asari</i>	: Wood carpenter
<i>Bappidal</i>	: The animal sacrifice ritual associated with the <i>kaliyattam</i> of Vayanattu Kulavan theyyam in Kasaragod district
<i>Bhandaram</i>	: A repertory to collect money as a donation from devotees
<i>Brahmaswom</i>	: The property of Brahman, god.
<i>Chamayam</i>	: Apparel, in context of <i>kaliyattam</i> the decorative items and ornaments of theyyam
<i>Chathan</i>	: A mischievous demon
<i>chaturvarnya</i>	: The system of four fold classification of society according to Hinduism
<i>Cheenikkuzhal</i>	: A traditional wind instrument
<i>Chekkippoo</i>	: <i>Ixora coccinea</i>
<i>Chenda</i>	: A wooden percussion instrument
<i>Chilambu</i>	: (or <i>chilanka</i>) Brass anklet of theyyam
<i>Daivakkaru</i>	: A divine being, godling

<i>Daivam</i>	: God
<i>Deepam</i>	: Lamp, usually that use oil
<i>Desam</i>	: Village
<i>Devakkoothu</i>	: A ritual dance closely associated with and similar to <i>kaliyattam</i> but performed by women
<i>Devaswom</i>	: The property of deva, god
<i>Devatha</i>	: Goddess
<i>Eesana kon</i>	: The northeast direction which is special according to <i>Vastu sastra</i>
<i>Ekachintha</i>	: Singular mentation
<i>Elathalam</i>	: A pair of metallic (brass) cymbals
<i>Ettillam</i>	: Eight <i>illam</i> or eight lineages
<i>Ezhunnallathu</i>	: Procession
<i>Ganapathi homam</i>	: A special ritual done in appeasing the god Ganapathi
<i>Gurusi</i>	: The sacrificial ritual (symbolic); <i>gurusi tarppanam</i> - performance of the <i>gurusi</i> ritual
<i>Ilamkolam</i>	: The first stage in a theyyam dance
<i>Illam</i>	: The traditional household of Namboothiri Brahmanis; a kin group equivalent to sub-clan
<i>Ithihasa</i>	: Used to represent the Hindu books of Ramayana and Mahabharatha; the history of Hindus
<i>Janmam</i>	: Birth; <i>janmavakasam</i> -birth right, hereditary right over certain duties; <i>janmari</i> -the one who holds <i>janmavakasam</i> or birth right
<i>Janmi</i>	: Feudal landlord
<i>Kaavu</i>	: Sacred grove and the worshipping shrine
<i>Kaayakkanji</i>	: The special food prepared during <i>kaliyattam</i>
<i>Kailasakkallu</i>	: A sacred stone in a shrine where worships are made
<i>Kala</i>	: Art
<i>Kalaasam</i>	: Final performance
<i>Kalari</i>	: The traditional martial art school
<i>Kalarimura</i>	: Certain ways of performing <i>kalari</i> , the martial art
<i>Kalasakkaran</i>	: The one who brings the <i>kalasam</i> , traditionally entitled to Thiyya caste men, the duty is hereditary
<i>Kalasam</i>	: The offering (as drinks) made to the theyyam, country made liquor from coconut sap
<i>Kalavara</i>	: A store room for food provisions

<i>Kanakkarar</i>	: A tenant in feudal system who pays specific yearly payment for the land he leases in; <i>kanam</i> -the fixed payment for the leased land
<i>Kanjiram</i>	: Strychnine tree, <i>strychnos nux-vomica</i>
<i>Kanni raasi</i>	: A direction which is astrologically special, Virgo
<i>Karalar</i>	: Lords (of land, property, or ritual rights); a sect among Brahmins
<i>Karanavar</i>	: (or <i>karanavan</i>) The head of a household or family, eldest male member
<i>Kaula</i>	: A type of Hindu worship (Tantric) tradition
<i>Kazhakam</i>	: A territorial unity around one temple; the region under the sovereignty of a deity in a shrine; certain ascribed duties in temple
<i>Kimpurushan</i>	: (in theyyam shrines) the protector deity
<i>Kindi</i>	: A pitcher type brass vessel with long snout used in ritual to pour water
<i>Kireedom</i>	: Crown
<i>Kodiyila</i>	: The tapered end part of a plantain leaf
<i>Kolam</i>	: The complete attire of a theyyam, the form
<i>Kollan</i>	: Blacksmith
<i>Kollavarsham</i>	: The Malayalam calendar
<i>Kolu</i>	: The customary payment given to theyyam performers
<i>Komaram</i>	: Oracle
<i>Koochu</i>	: The special hut made for the theyyam performer in penance
<i>Kooli</i>	: Wage
<i>Kottam</i>	: The shrine of Pulaya community
<i>Kottavai</i>	: (or Kotravai) the goddess of war (little tradition)
<i>Kovilakom</i>	: The household of chiefs or rulers
<i>Koyma</i>	: The patron (belonging to higher caste Nair with special status in <i>kaliyattam</i>)
<i>Kshetram</i>	: The Hindu temple that follow Vedic religious practice
<i>Kudamani</i>	: Brass bell used in adoration by oracle
<i>Kuri</i>	: The sandal paste; powdered turmeric and rice given by theyyam to devotees
<i>Kuttikkaran</i>	: The one who fixes the <i>kutti</i> -the pole for the awning
<i>Maarimattal</i>	: Warding off small pox
<i>Mada</i>	: A cave

<i>Manangiyattam</i>	: A specific dance step in the performance of Muchilottu Bhagavathi theyyam
<i>Manipravalam</i>	: A literary style which is a combination of Malayalam and Sanskrit
<i>Marakkalam</i>	: Wooden vessel; a large wooden boat
<i>Marumakkathayam</i>	: Matrilineal inheritance
<i>Meleri</i>	: A fire blaze made using large pieces of wood used in ritual dance
<i>Moorthi</i>	: Literally meaning a statue, in Hinduism related to the image or incarnation of gods
<i>Mudi</i>	: Hair, in theyyam <i>mudi</i> means the head gear used by the theyyam
<i>Mukhadarshanam</i>	: Looking at the mirror and seeing the face, an important rite in <i>kaliyattam</i>
<i>Mundu</i>	: The waist dress, a dhoti
<i>muppathaivar</i>	: A group of thrity-five theyyam which are special in Allada Swaroopam
<i>Muram</i>	: Winnowing sieve
<i>Mushikavamsa</i>	: The Mushika dynasty in the North Malabar region reigned in medieval time
<i>Nadu</i>	: A territorial division almost equivalent to a village
<i>Naduvazhi</i>	: The head or ruler of a Nadu
<i>Nankuvarna</i>	: Four-colour; use to represent a group of four artisan castes.
<i>Nari</i>	: Leopard
<i>Nilampani</i>	: Preparation of the floor, courtyard of the shrine for theyyam dance
<i>Onnukure nalppathu</i>	: ‘one less to forty’ -thirty nine, a group of thirty nine theyyam specially significant in Kolathunadu
<i>Paala</i>	: Blackboard tree or devil’s tree, <i>alstonia scholaris</i>
<i>Paattu</i>	: Song
<i>Padinjatta</i>	: The room at west side of a traditional house where valuables are kept and worship are made
<i>Pallivaal</i>	: The sacred sword of theyyam
<i>Palliyara</i>	: The sacred shrine or sanctorum in a <i>kaliyattam kaavu</i>
<i>Panthal</i>	: Awning; the shed or tent made around the shrine
<i>Pantham</i>	: The flambeau
<i>Paramadhikari</i>	: Patron

<i>Paricha</i>	: Buckler or shield
<i>Parikarmi</i>	: Priest
<i>Pattum-valayum</i>	: Silk clothe and golden bangle, used to felicitate distinguished achievements
<i>Payyan</i>	: Young boy
<i>Peedom</i>	: Stool (sacred)
<i>Pelika</i>	: The bamboo basket used to keep the ornaments and makeup materials of theyyam
<i>Peruvannan</i>	: A Vanna caste theyyam performer who achieved the special position
<i>Polika</i>	: Blessing
<i>Pooppuni</i>	: Flower works towards adorning theyyam
<i>Pothu kshetram</i>	: Common temple
<i>Pottan</i>	: Stupid, an idiot
<i>Prasadam</i>	: The sacred food which is considered as the leftover of gods given to devotees
<i>Prasnam</i>	: Astrological problem
<i>Puja</i>	: The worship
<i>Puli</i>	: Leopard
<i>Purappadu</i>	: Beginning, commencement of journey
<i>Samudayam</i>	: Community
<i>Sankramanam</i>	: Transition, movement of celestial bodies (in astrology)
<i>Satwik</i>	: Righteous, benevolent
<i>Shakthi</i>	: Power, wife of Lord Shive, Parvathi
<i>Sthalam</i>	: A location, a sacred place where the divinity resides
<i>Sthanikar</i>	: The key personalities or patrons in a shrine
<i>Swaroopam</i>	: A princely state, the territory under a temple or the god in the temple
<i>Thara</i>	: A foundation, the basic form of sacred place in theyyam worship
<i>Thandan</i>	: The headman of Thiyya community
<i>Thalappali</i>	: A type of ornament made in silver with twenty-one pendants wearing on the forehead of the theyyam performer
<i>Thamasik</i>	: Of bad character, malevolent
<i>Thanthri</i>	: Chief Brahmin priest
<i>Tharavadu</i>	: Lineage household

<i>Thavazhi</i>	: Matrilineage
<i>Thidangal</i>	: The oration of sacred verses as the beginning of theyyam ritual
<i>Thinakkanji</i>	: Special gruel prepared for the theyyam performer who lives in penance
<i>Thira</i>	: A ritual that is almost similar to <i>kaliyattam</i> or the dance of deities in regions south of Kannur
<i>Thirumudi</i>	: The divine hair, the head gear of theyyam
<i>Thiruvayudham</i>	: The divine weapons of theyyam, swords, bow and arrow etc.
<i>Thondachan</i>	: Grandfather, in theyyam another name for Vayanattu Kulavan
<i>Thottam</i>	: The songs in theyyam
<i>Thulavarsham</i>	: North east monsoon in Kerala in the months of October and November
<i>Thuvarappuzhukku</i>	: Boiled lentil
<i>tulasi</i>	: Holy basil, <i>ocimum tenuiflorum</i>
<i>Uchaveli</i>	: The sacrificial rituals in daytime
<i>Upadevatha</i>	: Sub-deity
<i>Urachil</i>	: The main dance of theyyam
<i>Uriyadal</i>	: Oration of theyyam
<i>Vaachal</i>	: Narration of stories by theyyam
<i>Valyakkar</i>	: Assistants; the male individuals who have complete ritual status in shrine, among castes like Vaniya, Shaliya etc.
<i>Varachuvakkal</i>	: The astrological problem to find out the suitable theyyam performer
<i>Vayalthira</i>	: The <i>kaliyattam</i> happening in a <i>vayal</i> -paddy field by temporarily setting up shrine.
<i>Veeran</i>	: The hero
<i>Veettuperu</i>	: House name
<i>Vellattam</i>	: The preliminary dance of theyyam
<i>Verumpattom</i>	: A form of payment existed in the feudal times in Kerala
<i>Vettilyacharam</i>	: A way of showing gratitude using beetle leaf and areca nut
<i>Vishu</i>	: A religious festival celebrated on the first day of Medam month according to Malayalam calendar. a festival of light and agriculture harvest.
<i>Vritha</i>	: Penance

PHOTOGRAPHS



Picture 1: A *palliyara* before the commencement of rituals



Picture 2: Theyyam blessing devotees at Kadannappalli Muchilottu, Payyannur



Picture 3: A scene from the *aniyara*



Picture 4: The oracle and his assistants



Picture 5: A scene from the *thottam* of Maakkam theyyam



Picture 6: A typical poster of *kaliyattam*. In addition to the information regarding the theyyam details of entertainment programs are also given



Picture 7: A Bhagavathi theyyam performing the dance



Picture 8: A valiyamudi theyyam (one with long headgear) at Kakkattu Madom Kovilakom, Nileswaram



Picture 9: The *aniyara* where the theyyam performing group is camping. Each of the castes have separate room here.



Picture 10: A *kalasakkaran* from Thiyya community walking before the theyyam during the ritual

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