
**CREATING PANTHEON-NATURE, COLOURS AND BELIEFS: A VISUAL
NARRATIVE OF KALIYATTAM IN KERALA**

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ABSTRACT

The core idea of this essay is to elucidate the process through which people create and worship local gods and goddesses in Kerala, India. By using a series of photographs, this essay portrays the life of the performers and the process of becoming gods in the traditional shrines of a vernacular religious system in Hinduism. The practitioners make use of the nature they live in creating the highly decorated deities. The materials in the costume reflects the natural sources in their own surroundings and intricate face drawings which symbolizes their world view. Most significantly, the beliefs system in the deities reflects the society itself.

KEYWORDS

South India, Hinduism, rituals, performance, sacred grove, theyyam, kaliyattam, caste system.

BIO

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Introduction

Religious festivals and rituals are mostly flavoured with appealing and intense colours and dynamic actions in addition to the sacred beliefs associated with the deities deified in them. The ritual of *kaliyattam* in South Indian state of Kerala is a best example that can demonstrate how religious system exists in the minds of the people as beliefs. Such beliefs are reflected in the *kaliyattam* through a series of rituals. Closely associated with the nature and the social system of the region the pantheon in the festival of *kaliyattam* and the deities generally known as *theyyam* is unique even within the Hindu religion for its exotic and localized characteristics (Gough 1958; Ashley 1979; Freeman 1991; Nambiar 1995; Koga 2003; Tarabout 2005; Chandran 2006; Vadakkiniyil 2010). The specialized performers of the ritual take the guise (*kolam*) of gods and goddesses and performs before the devotees in the ceremony. The beliefs system and the performance of the ritual actually reflects the social system, especially the caste based intercommunity relations in India through the dramatic ritual performance. The ritual makes use of specific colours in costume as well as in sacred objects which when added up to the performance gives a cosmic mood and achievement of divine blessing to the devotees. Through a series of photographs this work narrates how the communities creates the grand religious event that is a part and parcel of their life. The photographs reflect the actions of the performing group and their sacred activities.

The festivals, rituals and practices associated with the religion always gives a kaleidoscopic view of religious and aesthetic compositions. The Hindu religious system apparently offers the most of it and the diversity of this religion across the nation, varying through all India, regional to local levels is a striking euphoria for observers. Looking at the state of Kerala, the northern part of the state particularly is a distinct cultural area, not only when compared to the whole nation but even when compared to central and southern parts of the same state. The erstwhile Malabar is unique and regarding the religious beliefs and ritual practices the North Malabar has further distinction.

Three major aspects of the religious system are the traditional shrines in sacred groves which are generally known as a *kaavu* (Gadgil and Vartak 1976; Gadgil and Chandran 1992; Freeman 1999), the festival of *kaliyattam* and the deities *theyyam*. The sacred places of worship have a number of variation and we can see their connection with the nature as the beginning point. Regarding the religion, the earliest form of the belief system was of animistic type and the sacred places were nothing elaborate than a part of the nature, a tree bottom, where crude stones and occasionally sacred weapons of the deities like spear or trident are kept. This is the most basic sacred space called as a *kaavu*. The power of the deities is believed to rest on those simple items. A small cube construct called as *thara* is the next level sacred place, again one made with minimal material. Small rooms of roughly eight feet in dimension with tiled roof are the most common shrine, known generally as *pallyara*. Depending on the community ownership and the chief deity under worship, the shrines are known by different names like *ara*, *kottam*, *madappura*, *muchilodu*, *kannangadu* etc.

Now, the *kaliyattam* is the festival, a ceremony of a series of rituals happening at the shrine. Depending on the cycle *kaliyattam* are known with an adjective, a *perumkaliyattam*, meaning a great *kaliyattam* is one that happens at a time interval of at least twelve or more. By '*kaliyattam*' it means the event happening once in four years and likewise *ara-kaliyattam* and *kaal-kaliyattam* denotes the time gap of two and one respectively. In the present days every annual festival is known by *kaliyattam*. Regarding the meaning, there are two views one that the word is derived from the pan Indian Hindu goddess *Kaali*, who forms the large share in the myths of the *theyyam* deities. *Kaliyattam* as *Kaali'sattam* or the dance of *Kaali*. The dance is a key element in this highly performative ritual. The second explanation is that *kali-aattam*, here *kali* means play in Malayalam and therefore, 'play-dance'. Both affirms the major aspect of dance associated with the deity (Tarabout 2005).

The third and most significant element in the system is the '*theyyam*'. Etymologically, *theyyam* is derived from the Malayalam word *daiyam* which means god and for the believers *theyyam* is nothing other than god. The physical form of *theyyam* is known as '*kolam*' and this is a unique feature, each *theyyam* having specific features in their costumes and paraphernalia. The number of *theyyam* in North Malabar is large and there exists anywhere between four hundred to five hundred different *theyyam* roughly.

The belief system

The beliefs in *kaliyattam* are associated with local myths. The myths are reflections of the society and at times the stories are extended to legends. The most striking feature of the pantheon is those *theyyam*

which has stories behind them of real human beings who once lived in the area. This happens when an individual meet with an abnormal death, usually assassination by a group or even a self-sacrifice due to opposing social conditions. Individuals who lived a virtuous life often get elevated to the status of gods. This deification of human is a key feature of *theyyam* belief system. To mention a few popular ones, a Brahmin virgin when ended her life after humiliation and excommunication from her highly patriarchal community by a group of male egoistic religious scholars became *MuchilottuBhagavathi* and *ThottinkaraBhagavathi* (Ashley and Holloman 1982) a lower caste lady who was murdered by higher caste people for reading religious books to escape from a miserable life. Purely mythical characters belong to supernatural and superhuman beings, evil spirits, malevolent or benevolent deities who acts as the guardians of lineage households of *tharavadu* or of villages. Ancestor worship is another aspect of the belief system which are done at the sacred places in *tharavadu* houses (Gough 1958). There are also themes like gender, knowledge, and basic human emotions like jealousy, ego, and pride that lies underneath the myths. KadangottuMaakkam and KathivanoorVeeran are examples for theyyam with such themes. Caste conflicts is a major theme in the stories of *theyyam*. The story of *Pottentheyam* and *PulimaranjaThondachan* explains the violence and injustices against the lower caste Pulaya people and their struggle. In the past there existed a number of princely states in North Malabar where the economic relations were of feudalistic in nature. It also has history of colonialism and has went through nationalist and communist movements (Gough 1968; Radhakrishnan 1983; Kurup 1988; Menon 1997). The associated socio-political and economic changes had its reflection in religious sphere too (Kurup 2003). Leading figures in political and social resistances often get superhuman identity and may deified into the *theyyam* pantheon.

The social organization and the ritual

The caste system is the main feature of the society in India and in religious sphere the caste identity plays crucial roles (Miller 1954; Damodaran 2008). The Vedic Hinduism asserts the Brahmins, here the Namboothiri caste as the heads of the ritual activities and the remaining people except few communities who assists the Namboothiri priests in ritual matters have a specific lower status and position in the worship. The case of *theyyam* is different. The difference is not only in the gods and the pantheon but also regarding various roles too. The priests in traditional *kaavu* belongs to the community which owns the shrine irrespective of the caste, whether it is Nair, Thiyya or former-untouchable castes like Pulayan. The priests, known as *anthithiriyar* have minimal role in the rituals unlike that in the temple where the Namboothiri priest acts as the intermediary between the devotees and the deity who have no direct contacts.

In a *kaavu* the significance is for the *theyyam* and not sanctorum which is just a place where the sacred weapons of the deity are kept and the divinity is believed to reside. No idols are there like that in temples. During the rituals specialized performers, the *kanaladi* takes the attire of the gods and becomes the gods through a series of rituals. The devotees see *theyyam* as the god itself and can approach their gods directly, touch, converse and get blessing directly. That is, in this religious system a man becomes the god and make contact with the worshippers. Thus, this ritual involves human as divine beings and as common worshipper. Since every individual possesses caste identities the *kaliyattam* is an event of expressing the caste identity too.

The performance of the ritual

A *kaliyattam* normally happens for two or three days and depending on the festivities, number of *theyyam* and associated ritual it may go beyond three up to seven. All the participating groups, the organizers, ritual specialists, performers and ritual assistants gather around the shrine on the first day or a day before the actual commencement of the ritual. The duties and roles of each of the groups are specific, caste bound and hereditary in nature. The roles are often connected to the traditional occupations followed by various castes in the area. The *theyyam* performer, who are the key role players as the ritual specialists comes from the subaltern castes like Vannan, Malayan, Velan, Pulayan, Koppalan etc. (Kurup 1986). According to the Vedic Hinduist social classification these communities lies at the lowest strata, both in terms of social status and ritual purity. As the *theyyam* and *kaliyattam* are

a local system of dominantly folk religious type (Blackburn 1985) originated in this particular area it often defies the systems and procedures of Hinduism in religious activities including ritual hierarchies.

The right to conduct *theyyam* in any shrine is based on the hereditary birth right called *janmavakasam* in which a family possesses a complete right over doing the ritual, which is immutable. An astrological problem is done to find the right man to perform the *theyyam* from the family days before the *kaliyattam*. After the ritual of selection of the performer, he has to live in the specially made temporary hut called *koochu*. The performer take penance so that he can achieve a continence. The number of days of the penance and seclusion varies according to deities to be performed. Normally, for any *theyyam* three days of penance is required. In the case of *MuchilottuBhagavathi*, which is considered as highly virtuous a twelve-day preparation is required. He will be having special food and avoid any external contacts. No women are allowed to come to this place. The performer will be visited by his assistants who are mostly his family members or relatives. Occasionally the masters of the performer who taught and trained them the rituals and gives advice regarding the ritual. The novice also practices the sacred hymns during this time.

The *kaliyattam* consists of various stages in which different rituals are conducted. Initial rituals at the shrine are done by the oracle or the priest. The *theyyam* performer starts their rites after taking permission from the divine presence in the shrine and also from his father and uncles who are usually his masters. The first stage in the *kaliyattam* is the *thottam* or alternately known as *vellattam* in which the main performer in basic costume recites the sacred verses (also known as *thottam*) in appraising the deity he is going to be performed. This also includes an elaborate narration of the stories behind the *theyyam* in a dramatic way with assisting singers and musicians. This stage is characterized by an entertainment element of the religious activities. After *vallattam* that last for one to four hours depending upon the length of the story of particular *theyyam*, the performer retreats to the *aniyara* to finish his makeup. The performer after adorning with elaborate paraphernalia and specific facial and body paintings comes before the shrine to perform the final rites by demonstrating the power of the *theyyam* through a dance. After the dance and various short propitiation rituals the *theyyam* starts to bless the devotees.

Unlike any other worship system in Hinduism (or even in other religions too) which has an intermediary priest of higher caste Brahmins between the devotee and the deity inside the sanctorum, here the devotees have direct contact with the gods and goddesses they worship. The deities are not sitting inside a secluded sanctorum but rather it stands with the people without any boundaries in between. The *theyyam* holds the hands of the devotee and converse with them to console and solve the worries of the later. The whole happenings are not just a matter of concern to the religious believers exclusively with the exciting spectacular performance and the festivities of the celebration the ritual transcends the boundary of religion and has become a celebration of whole cultural area of North Malabar. The *theyyam* is now a synonym to the district Kannur where the highest concentration *kaavu* and *theyyam* are seen. The emerging tourism industry and market driven economy also taps the possibilities of the exotic beauty of theyyam and the festival and it takes the *theyyam* out of the ritual context to secular spaces, as pure art form which are at time produces conflicts between hardcore religious believers and non-believers.



FIGURES 1 AND 2: The nature is an akin part of this religious system and the traditional sacred places are close to nature. The basic form in this, called as a *thara* is constructed close to a large tree and the sacred weapons of the deity are kept aside. A *kaavu* and the *palliyara* (picture 2) remains in silent during most of the time and becomes a centre of ceremonies and festivities during *kaliyattam* time.



FIGURES 3: Peepal and banyan trees have special significance in a *kaavu* and in many a case sap bearing trees are believed to be more sacred than others (*paala* and *arali*). Apart from being the locus of worship by keeping sacred items at the base of the tree, the canopy of such trees acted as the conventional *aniyara* too. The basket of costumes *pelika* is kept here and hang the dresses onto the tree. The performing group gather and starts their preparatory works here. It is at this time the group prepares the garlands, waist dress and other single use costumes out of flower and coconut leaf. The group discusses about various aspects of the ritual and performances during this time.



FIGURES 4: A typical scene from the shrine premise; children gather around and watch the activities closely with high curiosity and enthusiasm. It is a very common sight in the villages children playing by imitating *theyyam* and *kaliyattam*. Night time is crucial, majority of the rituals happening in the midnight or early morning. The contrasting colours of darkness of the night and the redness of the coconut leaf torches, which are the traditional light source parallels with the two key colours of the ritual, black and red. These two colours are symbolic not only to the nature of the rituals but also to the characters of the deities, fearful, ferocious and powerful gods and goddesses, through the beliefs.



FIGURE 5: At the *aniyara*, the performer lie down on floor and assistants gives the facial drawing (Ashley 1979). Traditionally all the colours were made using naturally available materials like coloured mineral stones (like for the red and orange colours *chayilyam* and *manayola* are used), plant parts like turmeric etc. The reduced availability and difficulties in procurement and preparation of pigments drives performers in choosing artificial colours for facial drawing and body painting. Instead of wood and plant fibres these days people use plastic sheets and threads for making ornaments. Devotees and enthusiasts even criticize this trend of moving away from tradition which arguably diminishes the association of the ritual with nature, the purity and sacredness of the divine beings.

Sharp and narrow lines are drawn with thin stick from coconut leaf and pots are made out of coconut shells. The shape and design distinguish one *theyyam* from another (also refer Figures 9, 19 and 20); the black drawing around eyes are representative of the nature of the deity and also the dots of white, black and yellow. While drawing, the right hand of the artist is usually supported by a finger of left hand- a custom followed while dealing sacred thing. The performer takes a nap to relax during the long drawing process of *mukhathezjuthu*.



FIGURE 6: Apart from the tree bottom special *aniyara* are made at specific corners in the shrine premise. Such an *aniyara* is the living space for the performers for the entire *kaliyattam* time, where they keep their things, sleep and also the preparation of the *kolam* happens here. The performer lie-down on a mat and the assistant applies the makeup. This is what is seen through the eyes of a performer during the time of getting makeup. At least three generations are seen at the *aniyara*; veteran elderly, performing adults and young boys. A continuous process of teaching and learning is an active part of the 'life in the *aniyara*'. An individual belonging to *theyyam* performing caste often starts their life as a *kanaladi* in the tender years of eight or ten, starting with those *theyyam* which are physically and mentally less demanding. After learning the sacred verses, mantras, and ritual acts, by fifteen or sixteen a performer step into a full-fledged *kanaladi* life.



FIGURES 7 AND 8: Putting makeup is a lengthy and laborious task which may take up to two hours at time labouring three or four assistants doing it.



FIGURE 9: A performer waits for the second stage of the makeup. Eminent performers will have continuous events during the season. Lack of proper rest makes them tired and the hot summer sun adds to this.



FIGURE 10: An assistant giving final touch to the *thalappali* -the silver ornaments with twenty-one pendants representing twenty-one gurus in *theyyam*. A *vattamudi* is the characteristic head gear of a *Bhagavaththeyyam*.



FIGURE 11: The sacrificial ritual of *gurusi* is a rite of appeasement of *theyyam*. A sorcerer (*mantravadi* as mentioned by Tarabout 2000) does the puja with long spells of sacred verses. The large pot filled with red water made out of turmeric and lime in front of the sorcerer symbolises blood which is given to please the ferocious and blood thirsty *theyyam*.



FIGURE 12: A war goddess *Vadakkathi Bhagavathi* during the initial rituals. The man waking before the *theyyam* carries *kalasam* -a decorated pots with toddy as a beverage offering to the *theyyam*. This is a common rite for majority of the *theyyam* and is done by men of Thiyya caste whose traditional caste bound occupation is toddy tapping from coconut palm. The same economic activity is sacralised in the ritual too.



FIGURE 13: The *Uchittatheyyam* performing its dance. A favourite goddess of women in the area, this *theyyam* is worshipped as a caring mother and protector of women and children. After the dance the *theyyam* moves to a nearby pyre on which she lies and play with the fire to demonstrate a protector mother's power.



FIGURE 14: Fire torches are an essential component of the ritual and for performance. Oil torches are attached to the *kolam* during the event to demonstrate the power of the deity, more the number of torcher higher is the power of the *theyyam*. Though special protection armours with plantain parts are attached to the performer's body, the event often ends with serious burns, which could even terminate a performer's engagement in rituals. There are a number of *theyyam* which walk over, jump, and liedown over heap of burning coal during the dance, all as a display of the power of the deity on whom devotees relay on for their psychological needs.



FIGURE 15: The ritual is supported by music and songs of sacred verses. The indigenous drums, known as *chanda* (Goesbeck 1999; Goesbeck 2003) is the most important musical instrument to the beats of which the dance and acts of the *theyyam* progress. Together with other small instruments like *cheenikkuzhal* and *ilathalam* (a wind instrument and brass cymbals respectively) ritual assistants produces the musical background which when combine with the rhythm of brass anklets of *theyyam* produces a special mood in the minds of the devotees. The same draws people beyond the devoted worshippers for the artistic, aesthetic, and entertaining elements of the ritual. The dance of *theyyam* like *Maakkam* or *KathivanoorVeeran* are so dramatic and at times involves even performance of martial arts (Zarrilli 1979) in the later one, who is believed as a warrior hero.



FIGURE 16: A *valiyamudi* (one with long headgear) *theyyam* named *PorkkaliBhagavathi*, circling the shrine. This *theyyam* is a village deity at a Nair *tharavadu* and is believed to be an incarnation of the *ThirwarkkattuBhagavathi*, who is the chief goddess of the Kolathusawroopam, an olden day princely state to which the village is a part of.



FIGURE 17: Demonstration of the myth and the power of the deity is performed during the *kaliyattam*. Here, *Vishnumoorthitheyyam*, one of the most important and common gods in the *theyyam* pantheon which has connection with Vedic Hindu god Lord Vishnu is enacting the assassination of an evil spirit. Such themes are common in *theyyam* belief system and the devotees connect such acts of the *theyyam* to the destruction of enemies in their own life and they are being worshipped for the same reason.



FIGURE 18: Weapons like swords, bells and fire torches are key elements of identity of each of the *theyyam*. A war god pictured here, has a long beard and the body is covered in red water, red colour flowers *chekkipoo* and puffed rice, all giving ferocious image. There are deities which spread contagious diseases like small pox and also there are ones who cures such epidemics in the pantheon. A miserable life people lived in the olden days when such epidemics were common beliefs in divine beings and worship of them were the only option they had. Such past is reflected in the *theyyam* like *Vasoorimaala* -an evil spirit that spread small pox and *Puthiyabhagawathi* -a benevolent goddess who cures and saves the people from the wrath of the former. The white puffed rice on the body of *theyyam* symbolizes the marks of small pox.



FIGURES 19 AND 20: The *Muchilottu Bhagavathi* and a war goddess in its complete form. Each of the elements in the facial drawings and decorations symbolizes the nature of the deity, like an elongated silver teeth named *ekir* and the tapering end of the black eyes representing the high power of goddesses.



FIGURES 21: Some *theyyam* are funny and entertaining in their acts in addition to being powerful creatures. *Gulikantheyyam*, a spirit of the Hindu god Lord Shiva is one such. Seen always in playful mood, this *theyyam* does whatever acts possible at the particular space to entertain the audience. Often playing with children who gather around the *theyyam* at this particular instant he climbed to a ladder kept near the shrine.



FIGURE 22: Coconut leaf is an essential ingredient in *theyyam*, as seen here in the case of a *Gulkantheyyam* who is almost entirely adorned with coconut leaf.

The *theyyam* communicates not only with the devotees but also with the oracles who are believed as representatives of gods. The later acts as a mediator between the divinity inside the shrine and *theyyam* outside the shrine. In a practical way the oracle who belongs to the particular community that owns the shrine represents the shrine authorities while the *theyyam* performer is independent, with traditional hereditary caste duties. These two may come in conflict as happened in one shrine, which in a way questioned the power and identity of the ‘*theyyam*’ or in other way the identity of the lower caste ritual specialist.



FIGURE 23: After the main rituals and dance a *Rakhachamunditheyyam* bless the devotees. Devotees give money to the *theyyam* and in return they receive *manjalkkuri* -which is a mixture of powdered rice and turmeric as sacred gift of *prasadam* and blessing from the *theyyam*. Turmeric, having medicinal value is an essential component and is associated with gift of the *theyyam* who is a curer.



FIGURE 24: A performance usually lasts for three to four hours and here an exhausted performer after the ritual dance is removing his paraphernalia. They take rest for the remaining night and continue their work there after at different shrine in the next day. A performer passes through different stages in his religious and social life. As *theyyam* a young performer receives considerable attention from the masses, as a divine being but after one ends his life as a main performer, he slowly gets pushed away from the ritual arena. A veteran performer mostly leads a life in exclusion. The ritual is highly physically demanding and accidents are common of which that caused by fire being prime. The life of victims of such accidents will be more pathetic.

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