

An introduction to the mother goddess worships in theyyam performance of Northern Kerala

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Abstract: *The origin of theyyam is shrouded in mystery. Even then it is found that theyyam shows slight resemblances to the Velan Veriyattam performed in the Sangam age. Besides, theyyam had grown to the present form through many transformations since its origin. Landlords and chieftains of those days are the main forces behind many of such transformations. The community and its body began to use this art to propagate the major theme of social enforcement. The character representations were very broad. They range from mild to wild in representations. Theyyam is a sect in which old heroes are sanctified and worshipped as the guardians of villages and homes.*

But the theyyam attained the present state of a ritualistic performance when Maṅakkāṭan Gurukkal modernized it. In this around ninety percentages of theyyams are related with the mother goddess worship and are female representations. But the performers are always men folk. Here I proposed to analyse the actually what is theyyam? Its origin, background and how much this performance gives importance to mother goddess worship? Besides, classify male and female theyyams and its worshipping pattern etc, to know about the significance of mother goddess in the ritual performance of North Malabar.

Key Words: *Theyyam in North Malabar- Origin- make up and costumes- Regions- male and female theyyams- Mother goddess worship.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

The folklore of Kerala reflects the evolutions of folk life and belief patterns in the regions through centuries. Besides, the folklore (folk rituals) keeps a high profile attendance in the historical updating of post independent India. According to Roger Abraham “Interaction generated in mother tongue of a society gives way to human development, and the study of them is the main objective of folklore”. The rural folk rituals and beliefs are transformed in to visual entertainment, that flows through generation and also transform ordinary men and women, depicted as heroes and heroines on behalf of a deity. Among them the art of ‘theyyam’, or ‘thira’ of Kerala holds prime value. These types of folk materials are plenty in Kerala especially in northern Kerala and they help us to reconstruct the history of Kerala.

2. ORIGIN OF THEYYAM:

Theyyam is an important one among the religious ritual practice of Northern Kerala. This remembers the cultural wealth of past decades. According to the ‘*pīdavalakka*’ there are 39 forms of *theyyam* is shown in Kerala¹. From ancient times, we can see the practice of nature worship. The aim behind their worship was the collection of food, relief from illnesses. Earth, Sky, Agriculture, Cattles are the basic part of their existence. They believed that the food grains are the gift of goddess, and they want to celebrate the festivals to propitiate the goddess. For this purpose, they arrange the special forms of songs and dances. Many tribes have adopted dance as the mode of Worship of their divine power. They pray to the god to eradicate Cholera and Small pox and for that they perform the ritual art called *theyyam*².

But some writers like C.A Innes and Ivan’s in their “Malabar Gazetteers” and J.A. Hammerton in his popular edited work “The Customs and Manners of Mankind” described *theyyam* or *theyyāttam* as devil dance³. But *theyyāttam* is not a devil dance. It was misunderstood by the foreign writers by the dance of *Kāli*. In fact the early dance originated during hunting and devotion of the goddess for better harvest. After that they modernised the musical instruments by the help of the new rhythm. More over there is much similarity in between *Vēlan Veriyāttam* of Sangam age to *theyyam* art⁴.

May be *theyyam* and other ritual arts alive from the early period but a person named ‘Maṅakkāṭan Gurukkal’ modernized this classical art with the help of Kōlathiri Raja. At the ancient time there is no decoration in *theyyam*.i.e, Face painting dressing, ornaments are very simple. But with the help of Maṅakkāṭan *gurukkal* in *theyyam* changed in to the present position of ritualistic arts performance⁵. The Maṅakkāṭan is the only man who converted it to as a ritual

art. The common thing is that the *theyyam* and *thira* are the ritual art is in the Sangam age. About the origin of *theyyam* performance there is a commentary existed in *Gulikan tōttam pāttu* is given below,

“*Thekkallo daivamē thirupiraviyō,
Vadakkallō daivamē mai valarnnu*”⁶

Here these lines shows about the origin of *theyyam* performance i.e. the birth place of *theyyam* is in the south but its body part was grown in the North. Generally *theyyam* performers are from the lower sections of the society they were under the control of higher caste like Brahmins and Nairs, at the places like “*Kalappura*” (The place where grains such as paddy were stored and beaten is called *kalam*, and the place joining *kalam* is known as *kalappura*) and later it transformed so the space of performance change in to private place like temple, *kāvu* (Sacred groves), *mundya*⁷ (The devotional place of low class people). And the People participated in it irrespective of caste differences. While only high caste Hindus were permitted in to the temples the *Kāvu* welcomes everyone. There are about 400 *theyyams* still performed in the *Kāvu* of North Malabar. Even Muslim *theyyams* are also performed⁸. Normally the *theyyam* performing castes are “*Vañṇān, Malayan, Anjūṭṭan, Munnūṭṭan, Kōppalan, Māvīlan, Vēlan, Pulayn, Pāṇan, Kaḷanādikal*”⁹. They are untouchables in the feudal society but in this occasion the higher caste were worshiped them. They believe that *theyyam* is a manifestation of divinity.

3. MAKEUP AND COSTUMES:

Theyyam have the ability to create an atmosphere that can delve deep into the faith and mind of the people. *Theyyams* are ordained with unworldly costumes. But the new generation doesn't follow the special measurements pre-ordained by the older generation in the making of *theyyam* and the colour used in it. The make ups of all *theyyams* are not similar. The makeup varies according to the character and the expression of the *theyyam*. Makeup makes *theyyam* attractive. This makeup is known as *aṇiyalangal*¹⁰ (*Theyyams* make items is known a *aniyalangal*). This means ‘ornaments to be worn’. These are worn on hands, legs, chest and neck. The *aṇiyalangal* includes *kaivḷla, kaṭakam, cūdakam, kaiyyura, chennipathi, chilambu, paṭṭu and pādakam, thalapāli, manikayalu* etc. To keep the *aṇiyalam* safe and to carry it, a rectangular box is used which is made by the *vēlans*. This box made out of a kind of bamboo is called *peḷya*¹¹ (*pelika*).

Cilambu is worn on legs. Usually every *theyyam* uses *chilambu* except *Thekkumbad Kūlōm's dēvakkūtt* or *theyyakkūtt*. Ornaments worn on hands are *cūdakam, kaivala, kaṭakam, tandavaḷa*, etc. one of the important components of makeup is *talapāli*. *Talapāli* is worn on the head. In this, a small metal strip in the shape of a petal hangs on the forehead. It is very important for the *theyyam* to wear *talapāli*¹². Apart from that, the other ornaments are *chenni, pathi, thāṇi* etc which are wore on the sides of the head. The costume of the *theyyams* is also very special. The costume consists of *pattu, vitānathara (kāṇṇimundu, cirakuduppu, veḷumban*, etc. the costume designed upon floor like *caṭṭa* is called *vithānam*¹³. The other one is *kuruthōla* dress. The tender coconut leaves are removed from their stalks and are worn around the waist. The *theyyam* that wears tender coconut leaves (*kuruthola*) are *Cāmundi, Gulikan, Poṭṭantheyyam* (Worn mask on face) *vishnumūrthi*, etc these kinds of costumes made out of tender coconut leaves are also known as *oliyuduppu*¹⁴ that is, *ōlayuduppu* (dress made out of coconut leaves). Here *theyyam* becomes two different levels of expressions of the same image that means, *theyyam* is shaped by the amalgamation of varieties of things and colours from the nature. The adornments and ritual items for *theyyam* are collected from nature.

It is an unwritten rule that nothing but natural things is to be used in *theyyams*¹⁵. The makeup of the performer or *kōlakkāran* is done by laying him on the hand-made carpet of coconut leaves, on the backstage. The spiritual karma of unifying body-soul with the nature is carried out here.

The ancestors have inscribed that the face decoration should consist of pictorial depictions of animals, reptiles, wild flowers¹⁶. Apart from that, one can see varieties of spectacles on the description of the face, for example, some *theyyams* have beard. The male *theyyams* wear beard while the female *theyyams* wear breasts *theyyams* like *bhagavati*, and *camundi* wear these articles.

The last ritual is to wear the hair. *Theyyam* becomes complete only after fixing the hair. It is called ‘*tirumuti*’¹⁷. The hair plays a great role in changing the shape and nature of *theyyam*. There are different hairstyles like *vaṭṭamuti, ōlamuti, caṭṭamuti, purathaṭṭumuti, pīlimuti, pūkkaiṭṭumuti, omkāramuti*, etc. all these are made out of tender coconut leaves, bamboo, arecanut tree, silk, white cloth, and flower called *chethippū*¹⁸. After makeup and hair, the next component is the weapon. Sword is most important among the weapons. But *gulikan* uses *dandū*. The weapons are known as *tiruvāyudam*. Mother- goddesses use *nāndhakavāl*. And, there are some *theyyams* that use spear and sickle, and arrow and bow, which shows the agrarian and hunting culture respectively. Besides *theyyams* often perform tricks with many weapons. The base of *theyyam* is the drum-beat. Along with drum-beat, there would be other instrumental accompaniments (*vādyamelam*). They include *vīkucendha, thakil, kombu, ilathālam, cheṇila, thudi, pāni*, etc.

The face painting of each specific *theyyam (kōlam)* community have been fixed in the earlier times itself. The *theyyam* performers pass these systems, acquired through traditional learning, to the younger generation. In the older times, *theyyam* performers would handle in a well versed manner, all areas like makeup, preparation of makeup

materials, *tōttam* songs, and instruments¹⁹. But, the new generation shows the account of expertise in a specific area only²⁰.

4. REGIONS OF THEYYAM:

Theyyam exerts an important influence upon the formation of the life and culture of the North Kerala. *Theyyam*, which has been preserved for centuries, is the amalgamated form of the belief and beauty concepts of the village people. The tradition of *theyyam* has been the fact that it has got the involvement of people ranging from the feudal lords to the illiterate and voiceless rustics²¹. *Theyyam*, which has got more than four hundred varieties, has its origin, which ranges from South Nediyrrippu Swaroopam to North Kumbala Swaroopam. Swaroopam signifies dynasty of rulers or a land. In the first half of the fourteenth century, Kerala was divided into 12 regions namely Vēṇāṭ, Ōdanāṭ, Thiruvāṭuvay, Thekkumkūr, Vaṭakkumkūr, Kākkaranāṭ, Perumbaṭapp, Neṭumpurayūrṇāṭ, Valluvanāṭ, Ēranāṭ, Purakīlanāṭ and Kōlothunāṭ²². And also some researchers say that, on the bases of stone Inscriptions, during the rule of *Perumākanmār*, there were eleven regions like Vēnād, Nantulaiṇād, Kīzhmalanād, Vembalinād, Nedumbayūrṇād, etc were existed²³. On the bases of legend, Kerala was divided in to 18 part and were given to the son in laws by the last perumal, among them, Nediyrrippu and kōlathunāṭ were the prominent places in northern Kerala. Apart from that, the Kurumbanāṭ Swaroopam, Kaṭathanāṭ swaroopam, Kottayam swaroopam (*prayattara*), Arakkal Royal family, Allada Swaroopam, Kumbala Swaroopam (māyīpād) etc were the Nāduvazhi swaroopam related to *theyyam*²⁴. Nediyrrippu means connected to the Zamorins and Kolaswaroopam signifies Kolathiri, i.e. Kolathuland. The ruler of Kolathiri gave full support for the conduct of *theyyam*. There is a belief that the *theyyams* were blessed with royal recognition. It was the Kolathiri ruler who gave a royal status to *Theyyam*. By attaining this royal status, *theyyam* which was a folk art form, was ascended to the throne as a respectable ritual. Also, one can listen to the seat (*pīṭam*) ordained by the ruler Chēramān perummāl. They include *Aimbi Cithrapīdham* (of Samuthirinadu), *Paḷli Cithrapīdham* (of Kōlathirinādu), *Maṭṭiyān Cithrapīdham* (of *Kumbalanādu- Mayippāṭi* Swaroopam). The rule for the *theyyam* is to tell all these names of *Pīṭam* (pīdhavaḷakkam) before it sits on the *pīṭam*.

After following all these rules, *theyyam* is usually performed in the place which is known as *kāvu*. *Kāvu* were the centre of dependence for the ancient people. Because, it is a kind of forest. Along with that, it was the centre of worship too. “It is usual that man would be inspired to connect the god that he worshipped and the tree that protected him”²⁵. Although we can see *kāvu* (small temples under a mangrove) that belongs to *nagakāvu* (temple of snake), *Ammadaivakkāvu* (temple of mother goddesses) all through Kerala, the *theyyamkāvu* (temple of *Theyyam*) is unique to north Kerala. There are *Theyyam* places known in the names such as *Palliyara*, *mundya*, *kaḷari*, *matilakam*, *māṭam*, *vāṭil māṭam*, *gopuram*, etc. One can see a lot of such *theyyakkāvus* in northern Kerala. Apart from this, *theyyam* is performed in *kannikoṭṭil*, *padinjātakal*, *thirumuttam* of ancestral homes. Apart from that, *theyyam* is conducted on the fields and land properties where the harvest was carried out²⁶. Like this, each ancestral group that conducted each kind of *theyyam* were given the propriety of that land. This right is called *cerujanmam*²⁷. The main *pūjari* (one who carries out the rituals) of the temple were called the *andhitiriyān*²⁸. The name found its basis on the fact that he lighted the lamp (*thiri*) of the temple in the dusk (*anti*). This person is given utmost respect in the society.

The temples are known by the name of the god that resides (*ārūḍham*) in it. But along with specific gods there might be many other *Theyyam* residing in that *kāvu*. The most important *kāvus* in the northern Kerala are *Muchilōttu Bagavatikāvu*, *puliyoor Kālikāvu*, *Porkīli bagavatikāvu*, *Kūrmba Bagavatikāvu*, etc. Apart from them, there are many *theyyakkāvus* in villages from Kozhikode to Kasaragod. But, the pride of these *kāvu* has diminished. It should be thought that these *kāvu* still exist only because of the belief of people. These *theyyams* which are conducted in *kāvu* and *taravāt* (ancestral homes) have their own genesis that fastens the authenticity of their being.

5. THEYYAM AND RITUALS:

Before the advent of *theyyam*, man used to worship nature that passed on to idol worship with the passage of time. He converted the image of god into sculptures made of stone, wood and metal. In them, he instilled the divine power of *trimūrthis* and mother goddesses according to their custom. It was realized that it is not possible to retroversion, open up the emotions or converse through idol worship. As a solution for this, man himself gave decoration and colour to the idol and wore the garb of *theyyam*. With the background of drumbeats, *theyyam*, adorned in costumes, dance in trance. Through the path of rituals, each *theyyam* has its elevations and in history it became the *tōttam pāttukal*. In the fullest sense, *theyyam* is a ritualistic art form. Rituals like fast, religious observance, incantation of *manthra* etc are associated with this art form. Some *theyyams* have to undergo 3-days, 5-days, or 7-days of fasting²⁹. During this period, they are not supposed to eat non-vegetarian food at all, and have to stay in their home (*pura/kūchil*). But there are some *theyyams* which drink alcohol. But they drink it only as a part of *theyyātam*.

The first ceremony of *theyyātam* is *atyālam kotukkal*³⁰. That means to fix a date and handover the right of *kōlam* to be worn. By this, the person who is to wear *kōlam* (kōlakkāran) is presented with betel leaf, arecanut, and money and they entrust him with the ritual name of the *kōlam*. If the *kōlam* is supposed to take fast, it starts on that day. During the time of fast, rice gruel is to be eaten.

Apart from that, *kotiyilathōtam*, *theyyamkūdal*, etc are important ceremonies of *theyyāttam*. The *theyyam* performer and the musician reach the place a day before itself. Before the fall of evening, the drum is beaten and proclaim commence of the rituals. This ceremony that Initializes *theyyāttam* is called *theyyamkūdal*³¹ (Analysing the rituals for the *theyyam* on the day before perform) *Kotiyilathōtam* is the ceremony where the *kōlakkāran* (Male Performer) receives the plantain leaf containing rice and wick from the place where the goddess is instituted (*dēvathāsthānam*).

There is a usual practice in which after the decoration and all, *theyyam* looks at the mirror. This has different levels of meanings. When the *kōlakkāran* sees the god-image in the mirror, he internalizes that he and god are inseparable. This helps him to get possessed. From *paļlyara*, where the god is supposed to reside, the *karmi* throws rice. At this juncture *theyyam* gets possessed and starts to dance.

*Kuruti tarpanam*³² (The ritualistic function where a big vessel with water is mixed with blood where *theyyam* offers sacrifices). Is to be done at that time. In many *theyyams*, the ritual killing of a cock is important. In some *kāvu*, *theyyam* itself does the *kuruti tarpanam*. Those *theyyam* without *kuruti tarpanam*, instead, should have *pārana*. The ingredients of *pārana* are coconut and puffed rice. But those *theyyam* that doesn't take *pārana* are to be offered with a vessel containing block of sacred ash, block of sandal, a small bundle of money, betel leaf, areca nut, etc. There are *theyyams* with *kalāṣam*(pot). In this, a pot-procession is conducted after the culmination of *theyyam* or along with the conclusion of *theyyam*. *Kalaṣam* is alcohol-filled pots. Many such pots are arranged one upon the other, decorated with tender coconut leaves. There would be a *kalāṣathara*(pot-base) on which this has to be arranged. People belonging to *thiyya* caste are supposed to prepare the *kalaṣam* and take it through procession. The person entrusted with the duty of procession is called *kalāṣakāran*.

In some temples, *mīnamrit*³³ (elixir of fish) is offered. Here, the fish itself is caught after a period of purification by the process of fasting. Fish is caught from the river and offered in front of the *theyyam*. It is cooked and distributed among the devotees as *prasādam*(remnants of the offerings to god) after the rituals. The last ceremony is called *kalāṣam*(Pots filled with Alchahole). There is another ceremony of *śakunam nōkkal*³⁴ (Villagers have belief in good omens they look for good omen by rolling coconut). After *kalāṣam* betel leaves, arecanut and coconut are used in this.

After that there are ceremonies like *sthānam parayal*, *kurikotukkal*, *nērcha vāngal*, *anugraham koṭukkal*, etc. Some *theyyams* narrates the history of genesis and the adventures of the respective gods in a musical manner. This rhythmic narration is called *sthānam parayal*. But some *theyyams* talk on the dynasty. This throws a light upon the dynasties of Kerala. Apart from that, *theyyams* receive offering (*nērcha*) from the devotees. They distribute *kuri* as *prasādam*. *Manjalkkuri* made by powdering turmeric and rice is given as *prasādam*³⁵. *Theyyāttam*, which is entirely devotional, has helped in the unification of different communities on the basis of love and fraternity. Thus, these small groups have led forward this devotional movement of *theyyam*. With this, *theyyam* was able to reduce caste disparity.

6. MOTHER GODDESSES IN THEYYAM:

In the Tradition of *theyyem* performances both male and female version of ritualistic art performances are performed even in the contemporary society. In these more figures are female. Because the concept of village deities like mother goddess worships is remarkably included in the *theyyam* tradition. The intension of these worship is take care of the so called village. Because usually what is the duty of a mother? she always take care child and surroundings and save everyone. The same thing is happening here also. The devotees are her kids and through worshipping her and gave some offerings she will take care of every one and gives blessings what they need and wish. Usually these activities are happening in the mother worshipping pattern of *theyyam* performance. But the other remarkable thing is that devotes believed and give offering to many mother goddess. Sometimes it may who become demi-gods after their death, souls of ancestors etc. Like one of the important mother goddess named *Tiruvarkkattu Bagavati*,³⁶ other mother goddesses are also worshipped as the main deity of a village. Like this, in Northern Kerala, *theyyams* that included *Kāli* and her varieties of mother goddesses and male idols became collective gods for the people.

But without any consideration or divisions like male and female all these *theyyam* figures without *dēvakkūtt* (A female *theyyam* performances in northern Kerala) are performed by men. They worshiped mother/ amma concept but not given complete freedom to women members to perform or being a part of the ritual activities.

Some of the female figures and male figures in the *theyyam* worshipping pattern are given follows,

Female Theyyam Figures: *Mucilōtt bhagavati*, *Manayil bhagavati*, *Raktha camundi*, *Vaññāthi bhagavathi*, *Veerakali*, *Vīracamundi*, *Mahākāli*, *Mākkini bhagavati*, *Malamkurathi*, *Malamēl cāmundi*, *Mikkott bhagavati*, *Vēļlātt bhagavati*, *Bhadrakāli*, *Pācheni bhagavati*, *Pūmkunnam bhagavati*, *Nellikkal bhagavati*, *Putiya bhagavati*, *Kōtōli bhagavati*, *Chutala bhagavati*, *Atiraḷamma*, *Ārya bhagavati*, *Arakkal bhagavati*, *Othayoḷath bhagavati*, *Eramath bhagavati*, *Karumakan*, *Kammiyamma*, *Kurathiyamma*, *Kotumkāliyamma*, etc..

Male Theyyam Figures: *Pattar Theyyam, Parathi veeran, Nādu valīsan, Nambōlan, Paḷli vēttakkorumakan, Pattar Theyyam, Danwam thari, Tōndachan, Vaṇṇathan Theyyam, Vattippūtam, Akam kālan, Angatheyyam, Ālada vīran, Āli Theyyam, ḷam karumakan, Ucāgulikan, Ucārapottan, Karingutti cāthan, Karintiri nair. Guḷikan, Mārān Theyyam, etc..*

Here the female divine figures are more than male divine figures. The main reason behind this is mother goddess worships. And which shows how much they give important to the mother goddess concept. If we go deep in to ancient period there we can see the very good examples of mother worshipping forms. This worship of mother goddesses is out of Vedic perceptions. Once upon a time, it extended vastly from the banks of river Nile to River Indus³⁷. This mode of worship which is universal and basic was not as strong and unspoiled as in India. Thus, worship of mother goddesses spans throughout the country. In most of the villages in northern Kerala, worship of mother goddesses is carried out.

7. CONCLUSION:

I have tried to analyze the mother goddess worships in *theyyam* performance tradition of Northern Kerala. As part of this enquiry when go through deep in to the study get more than enough information about *theyyam* performance and the mother worships in it. It is a significant and very popular ritual art festivity of Northern Kerala. The remarkable speciality of which is, it is being a living cult. In fact it is an artistic dance from where metaphysical thoughts and expressions of immortal souls are impersonated to a believer through a mortal body. Besides, it is a significant part of social life to accept or incorporate traditional belief patterns in this absolute or condensed form. Moreover this type of ritualistic art performance absolutely a source book of social and cultural history as it represents the collective identity of a community.

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