

# Theyyattam, Tribal Ethnicity and Popular Ritual

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**Abstract:** Theyyattam otherwise known as *Kaliyattom* is an ancient socio religious ceremony performed in Kerala since very remote times. As the word *Kaliyattom* denotes, this is a sacred dance performance for Goddess *Kali*. Theyyattams were special festivals of religious and social importance. In ancient times every village of Kerala had its own common shrine called *Kavu* and it was imperative to have Theyyattom performed in front of it, annually, especially during harvest season. The performance was mainly done by the members of the tribe of Velan, through occasionally people of Vettuvar, Pulayan, Mannan and Mayilan communities also performed Theyyattam. It is a form of ancient folk art expressing elements of folk religion, ritual, myths, heroworship and ethnicity.

**Keywords:** Theyyattam, Sacred dance, Folk art, Myth, Heroworship, Ethnicity.

## 1. Introduction

Kerala has a rich tradition of folklore and folk rituals. Folklore is the body of expressive culture shared by a particular group of people; it encompasses the tradition common to that culture, subculture or group. The folklore of Kerala includes elements from the traditional life style of the people of Kerala. The traditional beliefs, customs, rituals etc. are reflected in the folk-art of Kerala. Folklore in this region is a spontaneous expression of human behavior and thoughts. Generally speaking folklore could be defined as the lore of the common people who had been marginalized during the reign of feudal Kings. Folklore today is inscribed with this sense of a break with past. The very consciousness of rupture gives it a quality that in its innocence never knew (Indira Goswami et. Prakash Pattanail, 2001). It is therefore important to examine the roots-the subject of folklore studies (Indira Goswami et. Prakash Pattanail, 2001). Folklore is part of a culture that belongs to and is deeply influenced by the community. The community itself is deeply felt and lived through repetition of the world myth, fable and history (Indira Goswami et. Prakash Pattanail, 2001). Folk arts are an inevitable part of Kerala culture. Kerala is the land of many art forms both classical and folk. Kerala developed its own characteristics of folk art from very early days. The folk arts include the Visual arts, Martial arts, Theatre and Ballet (Manorama Sharma, 2004). There are numerous folk arts in the state, and a major part of them are ritual arts related to religion and castes. Many of the arts are performed by particular tribes. Before a few decades, these arts were very much active. But today, many arts are in the path of destruction due to lack of new students and encouragement.

## 2. Materials and Methods

Analytical and descriptive methods are followed in the study. Field study can provide a large chunk of the sources for the Study. Primary sources and secondary sources used for the study.

### A. Theyyattam

Worship of heroes was one of the common features of our tradition. The heroes who either dedicated their lives for a noble cause or who happened to be martyrs were commemorated through folktales and ballads. The contribution of heroes to social life carried history forward with a dynamic society. Many peculiarities are found in the pattern of hero worship in Kolathnadu (The ancient rulers of this territory were known as Kolathiris or Kola kings. There is also one belief that the rulers belonged to Kolayan community, and thus they were known with the identity of caste as Kola kings. The city of Kola, the capital of the territory, has been described in the *Mooshaka Vamsa Mahakavya* by Atula, the court poet of Srikanta, the king of Kola dynasty). Theyyattam is a popular ritual in North Kerala, prominent in the Kolathnadu, Kannur, Kasaragod. The village folk in their worship of the heroes, who had once lived among them, organized festivals incorporating ritualism, vocal and instrumental music, dance and painting. The common term used for denoting this particular folk art are Theyyam or Thirayattam. Theyyam means *Daivam* or God, in Malayalam, *Attam* means dance. Thus Theyyattam means the god's dance (*Daivathinte Nirtham (mal.)*). Dance as a religious rite dates back to the early days of human history. This significant view has become an important ritual in Theyyattam. God is the supreme aspect of man. The worship of God is a part of the cultural history of man. Some foreign writers misunderstood the noble aspect behind the Theyyattam performance and described it as Devil Dance (Kurup, 1973). Devil is the opposite aspect of God and hence even the common people are sensible enough to realize that the worship of that aspect is harmful to man (Kurup, 1973).

The man who plays the deity is generally called *Kolam*. The word *Kolam* means figure or shape or make up in Tamil and Malayalam. Adiyarkunallar, the commentator of *Chilappadikaram*, has mentioned several folk dances representing the dwarf, the hero, the Brahmin and the Parayan (Kurup, 1973). The performers of Theyyattam belong to the indigenous tribal community and have an important position in Theyyattam performance. According to the legendary

*Keralolpathi*, Parasurama sanctioned festivals like *Kaliyattam*, *Puravela* and *Daivattam* or Theyyattam to the people of the Malabar region (Usha Mehta, 2011). He also assigned the responsibility of performing the Theyyam Dance to the indigenous tribal communities like Malayar, Panan, Vannan and Velan. Theyyattam was sponsored by members of the ruling class like Nair family etc. (Sundhakar Rao et Raghavendra Reddy, 2009). The Kolam as a folk-cult, is prevalent in Ceylon also (Raghavan, 1964). The cult of Bhagavathi became dominant in the social life of Kolathnad that no village of this area could be found without a Shrine or *Kavu* of a Bhagavathi. The Bhagavathi at *Mappitticheri* was known as Mappitticheri Bhagavathi and the Bhagavathy of Kannangot was known as Kannangot Bhagavathy (Situated in the villages like Kadakkad and Pilicode of Hosdurg Taluk.). Jains have also contributed to the cult of Bhagavathis of this area. Their goddess Pattini was incorporated in the Bhagavathi cult. It is believed that the Gaudars, a sect of Jains, who occupied the eastern area of Hosdurg Taluk, entrusted their Pattini goddess to the family of Kattur Nairs of Panathur village (Kurup, 1973). They worshipped her as a Tuluvarakana Bhagavathy and instituted a temple and annual Theyyattam in her favour (In Poothati village of South wayanad, there is a dilapidated Jain temple at Thazhakkavu. Now it is used for the worship of Bhagavathi by the local Hindu community).

A goddess worshipped in Theyyattam - *Kurathi*, has also been included in the cult of Bhagavathi (Kurup, 1973). *Kurathi* is the goddess Parvathi, the Mother of God Subrahmaniya. According to Sangam tradition, goddess Valli was the wife of Murugan whose high priest was Velan. It reveals that the goddess Valli of the Sangam period was worshipped as *Kurathi* through Theyyattam in later period. Goddess Chamundi, worshipped through Theyyattam, also has a significant place in the Bhagavathi cult. Bhagavathi cult of Kerala originated from the Brahmanical religion or from the tradition of Kannaki (The heroine of *Chilappadikaram*, the great Tamil epic, Written by Inango Atikal).

Theyyattam and the study of the cult of Velan as reflected in ancient and later Tamil literature reveal that the cult of Theyyam in its rituals and performance is much indebted to the Sangam tradition. Theyyattam are performed in the houses of Nayars, Thiyyars and other sub sects of the community. They are played only by the indigenous communities like Mayilan, Vettuvan, Pulayan, Malayan, Velan and Vannan. These communities are essentially Dravidian tribes and the original inhabitants of Kerala.

In the cult of Velan of the Sangam period the making of *Kalam* (decorated form of ritual figures, lines, symbols etc. drawn out of natural materials) was a necessary ritual practice. The commentaries of sangam poems reveal that the *Kalam* in early days were made of bamboo splices with sixty-four equal parts. These parts of the design were called *Palpirappu* in Sangam Tamil. According to *Tirumurukarupadi* the sacrificial blood offering was spread over these parts. In Sangam period

the Velan killed a goat and Italian Millet (*Thinai*) soaked in the blood and the offerings were sprinkled over the *Kalam*. Flowers like Chekki (some beautiful flowers from our Gods own country Kerala. (Nadan poovu in Malayalam language) and *Vedchi* (*Ixoracoccinea* (*Ixora coccinea* is a species of flowering plant in the family Rubiaceae. It is common flowering shrub native to South India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. It has become one of the most popular flowering shrubs in South Florida gardens and landscape.) were also sprinkled over the *Kalam*. It is said in the Kurunthokai poem that the Velan used to call the names of different gods in a Prayar-like song which was called *Thottam* (Sasidharan Klari, 2016). In Theyyattam the songs are used by the term *Thottam*. The Velan is said to have high head dress with the cloth hanging down to his back. In Theyyattam the players use high head dress made of red cloth and palm leaves plaited on bamboo splices. *Thirummurukarrapadi* (Tamil Folk Book) gives details about the use of chekki and Oleander flowers in the *Kalam* by the Velan. The same flowers are used very commonly in Theyyattam. The same book gives descriptions about the locations where the *Kalam* was made by the Velan. They are the river banks, forests, groves, estuary and common places like Manram, Podiyil and *Kadambu* Tree. Manram is common place for theyyattam and its name has been derived from the Tamil word Manram. The other places Theyyattam performed are *Kavu*, *Mundya*, *Arai* and *Turuthi*.

The Sangam tradition of the *Kalam* by the Velan under *Kadambu* tree does not exist at present. But some of the Theyyattams are still performed under Banian and Pipal trees as a heritage from the *Kadambu* tree. *Kalladam* (A work belonging to 12<sup>th</sup> Century AD) gives a detailed description of the ceremony of the Velan which is applicable to many aspects of the Theyyattam. The peacock flag of Murukan is hoisted in the courtyard of the house where all the relatives are assembled. *Vedchi* flowers are spread over the floor. After the goat being cut by the Velan millet flour is mixed with blood and put in teak leaves placed in four directions. Velan drinks toddy and plays on the drum while he calls Murukan. *Kalladam* mentions also that the ceremony of the velan was prevalent in the Kadanmalinad. Kerala was known by this name in inscription of the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Centuries.

The *pandal* put up and decorated with festoons of tender coconut leaves and garlands and *Kadambu* and Oleander flowers for the Theyyattam ceremony. Drums and other native musical instruments are used in Theyyattam as they were used in antiquity. The Velan used drum and bell in his worship of Muruka in the dance of Velan Veriyat. Native musical instruments are used in Theyyattam festivals. The instruments are played in accordance with the steps of the dancer. *Drum*, *Cymbal*, *Kuzhal*, *Perumbara*, *Cherututi*, *Utukku* and *Chermangalam* are well known musical instruments used in Theyyattam. The rhythm of the playing of these instruments varies from Theyyam to Theyyam. The continuous playing with measured interludes helps to make the performance very

interesting. According to the rhythm of the instruments, the same instrumental players recite *Thottams* also of the particular deity. The hoisting of festival flags log and tapering with the image of human body or skull or elephant still prevails in Theyyattam ceremonies. The use of red flowers and erection of *Pandal* are common in these festivals. In Theyyattam toddy is used as auspicious *Kalagam*. The person who gives toddy is known as *Kalayakaran*. Killing of goat has been substituted with the killing of a cocks and fowls in Theyyattam ceremonies. This ritual of the killing of cocks is not necessary for all Theyyattams. *Karimchamundi*, a terrorsome deity performed as Theyyam, kills goat as a relic of the past tradition. Sprinkle *Gurusi* was made of *Chunam* (Lime) and turmeric for eradicating evil spirits in some Teyyattams. The red *Gurusi* (The name is derived from a Tamil word Kuruthi, meaning blood offered by Velan in his Kalam) water is considered auspicious, with power to purify whatever is polluted. The *Kalam* is observed in Teyyattams.

The arrangement of *Vadakkumvathil*; (Northern Door) an arrangement of fifty plantain stem is a common factor for all Theyyattams without a few like Muchilot Bhagavathi and *Palantayi Kannan*. This is made of sliced strips of peeled banana stems, arranged on the ground so as to form a square of eith or four equal divisions. In these divisions the offerings like parched rice, puffed rice (Malar), boiled corns, jaggery and tender coconuts are placed. The offerings in the *Vadakkumvathil* are called as offering to *Kaliyamvalli* (Valli who is the consort of Murukan is identified here with Kali). On the joints of the *Vadakkumvathil*, lighted *Kothiries* or wicks are placed. When *Kathivanoor Veeran* is performed, a Tara or Kalam in memory of his wife Chemmarathi is arranged with 64 small equal square divisions, equal in size, in a square out of peeled banana stems. The number of compartments is similar to that of the Velan's *Kalam* of Sangam period (Kurup, 1973) The origin of the *Vadakkumvathil* and the killing of cocks in Theyyattam are definitely from the Sangam tradition of the Velan and his scrfice before an auspicious *Kalam*. (Kurup, 1973).

According to Paripadal Murukan wears a red dress and a red sash on the waist (Naturally the red dress must be liked very much by Murukan's consort Valli who later merged with the Bhagavathi cult of Kerala.). A comparative study of the Theyyattam of Kolathnad and Velan cult in sangam period shows that the former had a considerable indebtedness to the original Velan tradition. The cult of Velan was later lost in Tamilnadu on account of Bhakti movement led by Alwars and Nayanars. The worship of Murukan by Velan became gradually forgotten and the cult of Bhagavathi developed in Kolathnad. The ritual side of the Teyyattam as a worship to the minor deities dominated the folk-cult.

Theyyattam is supported by a vast literature of folk songs. In few cases we have no information about their authors. The songs have a place in the evolution of the Malayalam language and literature. These songs are orally transmitted from

generation to generation. These songs belong to the category of folklore in its nature and scope. These songs transmitted orally from one generation to another, the same *Thottam* of the same Theyyattam has different texts in different places. But fundamental difference in verse or ideas is not found anywhere. The *Thottams* also differ in scope, character and style. Many of them are composed with pure Malayalam words and local usages are in abundance. Some writers consider that it is derived from the Sanskrit word *Stotram*, which means prayer. There are a few songs which consist of Tamil usages and words. But colloquial and early Malayalam usages dominate these songs. The composition of these songs went on as continuous process according to the need of the village people. When they wanted to propitiate a new hero or local Bhagavathi, the *Tottam* related to that particular deity was also composed.

The entire activity of a Theyyam, from the time the impersonator gets possessed till time he casts off, is expressed in the form of singing and dancing by the same person and the companions. As the performer sings and dances there results a unity of expression, which enhances the artistic value of the performance. His rustic singing and agile and light body movements to the accompaniment of music make the performance fascinating. According to style, dance is classified as *Tandava* or the Masculine and *lasya* or the feminine. Both styles are adopted in Theyyattam according to the context and character of the deity. The measures and steps of the dances correspond to the words of the song. *Chekor Kalagam*, *Chavitti Thullal*, *Parakkam* and *Thiriyal* denote the various processes of the dance. The dances are beautiful and picturesque and have their appeal to the emotions of the village folk. The Theyyattams of folk heroes like Othena and Kathivanoor Veeran are well known for skillful bodily movements using sword and shield in imitation of the great warriors, who had used them with legendary skill.

### 3. Conclusion

In Kolathnad the folk dance of Theyyattam has become a powerful instrument of exploitation in the hands of higher castes like Brahmins yet. Aryan temples and Brahmanical Gods still have a domination over the *Stanams* or shrines of the lower castes. For annual festivals and ceremonies, in *Stanams*, the auspicious wick and fire was supplied from the local Brahmin temples. So the *Stanams* became subordinate to the temple authority. When the Theyyattams are conducted in the shrines of the Nair and other privileged classes, the Theyyam deities of the lower castes in the local area present their offerings. This custom became an integral part of the feudal structure of Kolathnad. The cult of hero worship as recorded in sangam literature is still preserved through the ritual folk dance of Theyyattam. The cult of Velan and his dance also has contributed to the impersonisation of deities. The memory of the heroes was cherished by the people and the worship of the spirits developed into a folk-dance, generally known as Theyyattam. Above all Theyyattam has created a cultural

integration among several castes and communities of the area.

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