



Research Paper

# The *Theyyams* of North Kerala: The Little Gods of Little Kingdom

Geetha.E

Associate Professor,  
Government Arts and Science College, Uduma

## ABSTRACT

The *theyyams* are non Aryan divinities worshipped in northern Kerala. There are substantial differences in the concept and practice of *theyyams* and Aryan worship. *Theyyattams* are highly ritualistic and bound by strict geography in its execution. *Theyyams* are invoked to their specific places of residence, usually called *Kavus* for their annual performance. On such occasions *theyyams* are taken as gods themselves though the performers are individuals who are considered low in the traditional caste hierarchy. *Theyyattams* are the festivals of the whole village and villagers, an aesthetic treat for all.

**KEYWORDS:** *theyyam, theyyattam, kavu, thottam, sacred geography.*

Received 05 Feb, 2022; Revised 15 Feb, 2022; Accepted 18 Feb, 2022 © The author(s) 2022.

Published with open access at [www.questjournals.org](http://www.questjournals.org)

## I. INTRODUCTION

The *Theyyams* are unique forms of divinities worshipped in northern part of Kerala and southern part of Karnataka, which are of indefinite antiquity. The *velichappedal* (supernatural performance) of these divinities are referred to as *kolam-kaliyattam* in north of the Pazhayangadi river, between the Pazhyangadi and the Valapattanam rivers as *theyyam* and from there to Kozhicode as *thira*.<sup>1</sup> In southern Karnataka or Tulunadu the *theyyams* are named as *sathyo* or *deyyo*.<sup>2</sup> One of the early Malayalam works *Thirunizhalmala*, which is attributed to the 13<sup>th</sup> century has a reference about *daivakkuthu*.<sup>3</sup> A Kannada stone inscription of 1379 belonging to Kandeswaram temple of Karkulam Taluk has a mention of *Theyyam*.<sup>4</sup>

## ORIGIN OF THE THEYYAM CULT

Most of the *Theyyams* were human beings who attained divine status usually for standing up for a cause and tortured to death by opponents or people of authority. Tragic death of certain people was compensated with conferring divine status to them by contemporary or later generations. Sometimes persons without any particular virtue - according to the myth given for their origin- also are elevated as *theyyams*. The gods who are the authority of certain diseases, for example, small pox, also are worshipped as *theyyams* to keep off such ailments. The specific places where the *Theyyam* performances are conducted are called *kavus, mundyas, stanams, palliyara* or *tharavadu*.

In the pantheon of *theyyams* additions are made through ages. For example, *Pulithira* of Kadameri meethal in Kozhicode district has a colonial origin.<sup>5</sup> Vishakandan, a *theyyam* worshipped at Kolacherry near Kannur also has an antiquity of less than two hundred years.<sup>6</sup> According to the *thottampattus* (literature which narrates the origin and exploits of *theyyams*) there are only thirty five *theyyams* or *kuttipparadevathas*. But at

<sup>1</sup> Mekkunnathu Kunhikrishnan Nair, (in) *Theyyam* (Symposium- Compiled by Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Academy) Third Edition, Thrissur, 2000, p.28.

<sup>2</sup> C Raghavan, *Tulu Nadum Bhashayum Nattarivum*, Kerala Bhasha Institute, Thiruvananthapuram, 2003, p.230.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with R C Karipath, Folklorist, Payyannur, 15.10.18.

<sup>4</sup> C.Raghavan, *op.cit.*, p. 231.

<sup>5</sup> Ranjith kumar. P, *Thira Charithravum Parinamavum*, (In) Poli, triannual, April- November, 2011, Kerala Folklore Academy, Chirakkal, Kannur, p.97.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with R C Karipath, Folklorist, Payyannur, 15.10.18.

present the number exceeds 400.<sup>7</sup> A few *theyyams* were Muslims during their human existence, for example the Bappuran Theyyam. Their preexistence in human form does not deter the devotees from worshipping the *theyyams*. Their saga is sung as the *thottams* during the *theyyattam* performance. “The *thottams* eulogies the god, explain the origin of the *theyyams*, narrate their divine acts, tell the reason to come down to earth, mention the places where they reside and let know the outcome of worshipping(*bhalasruthi*).”<sup>8</sup> The right to perform as the *theyyams* is the privilege of certain castes, which were counted as *low* in the feudal social hierarchy. The vannan, malayan, velan, mavilan, koppalar and pulayan are such castes.

The antiquity of the *theyyam* cult is difficult to determine. Literary references are meagre. The *thottams* of the *theyyams* are not put down, but remain orally transmitted. In this process of oral transmission, continuous modification are intervened and unedited versions of the songs are not preserved. For the convenience of learning and to make the listeners comprehend the meaning, archaic words are dropped and contemporary substitutes are inserted from time to time by people who are in command of the *thottams*. So the linguistic study of the *thottams* does not help to ascertain their date.<sup>9</sup> The antiquity of *theyyattam* can be traced to the *velan veriyattu* (ancient form of worship of Murukan, similar to the *theyyattam*) of the ‘Sangam Age’ and the cult might have reached the present state through a process of adoption from many other forms of art and worship. Cock sacrifice, *kaliyampalli* (a huge stand on which small lamps are lit), *meleri* (burning ember on which the *theyyams* tread) *kalasum- thiruvappana* (ritual consuming of toddy by the *theyyam*) are the remnants of the worship prevailed in the *Sangam Age*.<sup>10</sup> An act of standardization might have done in the pre-colonial era, probably under the supervision of the Kolathiris or it may be a continuous process over centuries. The sanctioning of the performance of *onnukure nalpathu* (one less than forty-*ie.*, thirty nine) *theyyams* in his domain is attributed to the Kolathiris, and his family deity- Thiruvarkattu Bhagavathi or *thaiapparadevatha* - also is a mother goddess residing at Madayi.<sup>11</sup>

Vast majority of the *theyyams* are manifestations of the Mother Goddess, the most ancient form of worship which symbolises the fertility cult. “Among the *theyyams* there are Mother Goddesses like *Kali, Bhagavathi, Paradevatha, Chamundi*, mandramoorthis like *Bhairavan, Kuttichathan, Kandakarnan, Uchitta, Gulikan*, heros like *Pataveeran, Kudiveeran, Pandiveeran, Kathivanur Veeran, Padar Kulangara Veeran* ancestors like *Muthappan, Vayanattukulan, Thondachan, Karanon Theyyam*, serpent gods like *Nagakanni, Nagayakshi, Nagarajavu*, and there gods in animal forms like *Puliyur Kali, Pulikkarinkali, Puliyur Kannan, Pulimaran, Kandappuli, Marappuli*.”<sup>12</sup> Unlike female goddesses in the Vedic pantheon, who are worshipped as consorts of male gods, goddesses in the *theyyam* cult are independent and virgins.<sup>13</sup>

The cult of the *theyyams* is built upon the tribal belief in ancestors and heroes. The *Theyyattam* is a way of respecting heroes who stood against the injustice in society and became martyrs for upholding virtue. The *theyyams* were the collective constructions of a society, in the process imagination of many people had involved at many levels. The kolathiri had assumed authority over the *theyyams* of Kolathunadu as a patron and manager of *theyyams* in his realm. The *stanams* or *kavus* have their authority in conducting the *theyyam* performances. The families of certain communities are authorized to do these ritual performances and each and every person in the village has definite role related to the *theyyattam* or *kaliyattam* of a village. It is a grand collective of musicians, painters, singers, and many more people. The role of everyone is counted with respect and no caste distinction is observed in the whole process of performance. This may be the only occasion where caste is counted immaterial in the social fabric of traditional north Kerala. Women of *tharavadu* (household) and neighbouring houses pound the paddy needed for rituals and feast. It is the festival of the whole village, which incurs expenditure and involvement of many people in different capacity.

North Malabar had been notorious for caste related rigidity and oppression. Some of the *theyyams* were victims of caste atrocities, for challenging caste rules while they were in their human existence. Stringent rules regulate the cult and performance of *theyyams*. The Kolathiri was the highest patron and the judge in cases of dispute of rights among claimants. Every caste in a village has prescribed duties during *theyyattam*. “Though the *kavus* belong to particular castes, the cooperation and involvement of every caste in the village is ensured at *theyyattam* and other activities of the *kavus*. “The Brahmins are authority of the ritual purity of the *Kavus*. Carpentry works related to *peedom* (ritual seat for the *theyyam*) and pavilion are the right of *janmasari*- the

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p.20.

<sup>8</sup> R C Karipath, *Theyyaprapancham*, Kairali Books Pvt. Ltd., Kannur, 2012, p.221.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with R C Karipath, Folklorist, Payyannur, 15.10.18.

<sup>10</sup> Y P Kannan, *Aaryapuranganalude Swadeenam Theyyathil (influence of the Aryan epics in Theyyams)*, (In) Poli, Triannual, April- November, 2011, Kerala Folklore Academy, Chirakkal. Kannur, p. 90.

<sup>11</sup> V Krishnan Mater, *Sreekoomba Charitham*, Kairali Books, Kannur, 2014, p.164.

<sup>12</sup> Y P Kannan, *op.cit.*, p.88.

<sup>13</sup> Manjula K V, *Amma Daivangalude Prasakthi Utharakeralathil (The Relevance Of Mother Goddesses In North Kerala)*, (in) Poli, Triannual, March- June, 2005, Kerala Folklore Academy, Chirakkal. Kannur, P.31.

carpenter of the village, the *pallival* (sacred sword) and the hand lamp are to be made and renewed from time to time by the blacksmith, bronze items are to be made by the bronze smith, the *thiyyas* are to bring the *kalasam* (toddy pot), oil is to be provided by the *vaniyan*, ritually purified clothes are to be brought by the *veluthedan*, need of gold is to be met by the goldsmith, finding of auspicious time is to be done by the *kaniyan*, the *nair*, *nambiar* and *pothuval* are to act as supervisors and the *pulayas* are to bring mats needed for the ceremony.”<sup>14</sup>

The *theyyams* hold awe and respect in the minds of people of North Kerala. Though there are temples of universal divinities around, the villagers do not leave off these primitive centres of worship. This can be attributed to the perfection in almost all aspects of the *theyyam* cult, innumerable rituals which commence months before the grand performance confer gravity to the *theyyattam*. The combination of colours in which red dominates makes the *theyyam* costume a visual treat. The *Theyyams* are adorned by variety of ornaments, spectacular *mudis* (head gears) and a *pallival* (sword) in hand. On movements the anklets and bangles give rhythmic sounds and creates an ethereal ambience around. Music, dance and songs performed in the magical atmosphere of night, where light, darkness and shadows entwined, generate unique aura where the worship of gods and worship of art are difficult to tell apart.

The *theyyams* are widely worshipped cutting across caste and class. This acceptance has created a tendency to appropriate its ritual authority by the Brahmins, tie it up with Vedic ritualism and get purified of its tribal status. Many of the *theyyams* are referred to as the *amsam* (part) of the Vedic gods like Vishnu or Siva. This position may be taken to avoid confrontation with the Brahminic tradition which claims spiritual as well as social superiority.<sup>15</sup> Though much of the traditional features of the *theyyam* performance are retained, nuances always occur. Though the *theyyams* are free from the Aryan conventions, some of the *theyyams* quote examples from the Mahabharata, the Ramayana etc. while interacting with the devotees.<sup>16</sup> The invention of traditions like the *theyyams* visiting nearby temple before performance and bringing oil lamps and wicker from temples<sup>17</sup> for the *theyyattam* and the *theyyams* visiting prominent households (ofcourse *savarna* or ‘high’ caste) of the *desam* to get permission<sup>18</sup> are attempts to impose the domination of the Brahminic gods and the feudal customs over the *theyyam* cult. Wide deviation from traditional practices does not happen, as the *theyyams* have several primordial identities related to faith, dress, music, residence etc. which cannot be erased in the light of modernity or sanskritisation. Generally the concerned community is proud of retaining its traditional ipurity.

As a part of interaction and blessing session with the devotees, the *theyyams* would speak of its origin, experiences, proverbs and the like which are called *Vachal* or *uriyadal* (sacred sayings). In such sayings the *theyyams* uphold traditional moral values and remind and educate the people of what the gods stand for. The *theyyams* of Tulumadu tell them to have faith in truth.<sup>19</sup> Truth is the highest value upheld by the *theyyams* and many of the *kavus* and *stanams* act as courts of justice even now. The *Theyyams* hold their hands and tell the devotees not to worry, and that the god would be always with them. The devotees can directly interact with the *theyyams* and express their worries and get assurances from the god’s mouth. This is the unique point of the *theyyams*. Like a patronizing ancestor they stand with the worshippers calling them *my children*.

From the social and domestic body politic of north Kerala ritualism had been practically wiped out and individuals are enabled to have more personal space through the process of education and enlightenment. But the *theyyams* find it difficult get out of ritualism of intricate nature, as ritualism is the essential part of the *theyyam* worship, and the performers and the stakeholders are reluctant to initiate any change in the tradition fearing the wrath of god. When the law prohibited human sacrifice, a *theyyam* named Virachamundi ceased to perform, on the reason that as a part of its *theyyattam*, human sacrifice was to be performed. But when the higher authority insists on progressive rules, as substitutes for hunting and animal sacrifice symbolic hunting and symbolic sacrifices are introduced.<sup>20</sup>

## LITTLE GODS OF THE LITTLE KINGDOM

The *theyyams* are bound by regional barriers and do not claim authority over large areas reminding their tribal and regional character. The same *theyyam* is worshipped at many places and more than one *theyyam* can be performed at the same venue also. But the conventions limit the migration of the *theyyams* beyond their traditional geographical limit, i.e., the Kolathiri Kingdom. There is a pre-modern ban on people from north Kerala to cross the Korapuzha (Elathur Puzha), a river near Kozhicode city, and moving beyond that had invited

---

<sup>14</sup> R C Karipath, *op.cit.*, p.17.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with V B Shyamala, Morazha, 29.9.2018.

<sup>16</sup> Y P Kannan, *op.cit.*, p.91.

<sup>17</sup> Payyannur Kunhiraman, *Perumkaliyattam*, Green Books, kozhicode, p.76.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Savithri, Anchampeedika, 29.9.2018.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.47.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with R C Karipath, Folklorist, Payyannur, 15.10.18.

ostracism from caste.<sup>21</sup> This was applicable to the gods of north Kerala also. While giving the ritual send off to Kaman, the love god and the deity of the *Pooram* ceremony, the women folk of North Kerala even today say to *Kama*, “May you come early next year, do not go to the south, the southerners would cheat you.” The myth behind this saying is not known. But the feeling of distrust and alienation is clear. The Korapuzhza was the southern boundary of the Kolathunadu in the colonial times and the ritual boundary of north Kerala. Most of the witnesses from north Malabar who had appeared before the Malabar Marriage Commission had made it very clear that the social practices regarding marriage and conjugality were different in North and south Malabar.

The ritual sovereignty of the Kolathiris over the *kazhakams* or *kavus* of Kolathunadu also limited the migration of *theyyams* beyond the borders the Kolathiri’s territories. The innumerable and intricate rituals, meanings of many of them cannot be explained at present, also restrain the passage of the *theyyattam* to other cultural environments. These rites, many of them are tribal in origin, are essential for the ritual perfection of the *theyyattam*. The *theyyattam* is supposed to be performed at specific places like the *kavu* or the *stanam*, and this directive has been very strict, except for Muthappan and Puthiya Bhagavathi who are not bound by geographical or spatial limits. All the right allotted to all the castes related to the *theyyattam* are within the purview of a *desam*( traditional political unit) and *desacharams*( customs of a *desam*) also are supreme.<sup>22</sup> So nobody would prefer to break such traditional norms, eventhough *desam* is non-existent at present. If the *theyyams* perform at places beyond their traditional margins, it is not entertained; but counted as guest performances without ritual sanction. Though secular public performance of the *theyyams* as an art is carried out everywhere and is commonplace, as the performers have drew up the spirit to bring it out of the *kavus* or the *stanams*.

It is the human invention of customs and rituals that made the *theyyams* complex, colourful and standardized, the same customs, mostly of tribal origin have prevented them from being universal gods and confined their power and glory over a limited earthly areas. The Vedic gods claim universal authority, they are omnipotent, lords of creation, perpetuation and destruction. The *theyyams* are rather humble in this respect, they are concerned about the worldly welfare of their own “children,” by listening to their woes, consoling them saying that I would diminish the magnitude of calamity- which comes like a shower would be turned into powdered snow - meaning that the sorrows would be made bearable.<sup>23</sup> It states limitation of their powers too. The devotees who approach the *theyyams* are humble about their demands: to get offspring, keep off ailments or to keep the wolf from the door. To them the *theyyams* would say: Like a mother I would see to it that you get clothes to wear, food to eat and progeny to keep the cradle in your house swinging<sup>24</sup> A myth related to the origin of the Muchilottu Bhagavathi at Kariipodi in Kasaragod is interesting: The local people happened to see snake and mongoose and tiger and cow living together amicably at a place. When astrologers were consulted they indicated the presence of Muchilottu Bhagavathi at the place.<sup>25</sup> It is believed that benevolent attitude of goddesses create peace and harmony even in nature.

While the universal gods are vocal about their power and supremacy (I am omnipotent, me only deserve worship) the *theyyams* are silent about any metaphysical issues or assertion of power. They confine their attention on the simple dilemmas of worshippers and giving assurance of safety and protection to them, which are more psychological in nature. *Theyyams* never suffer inferiority with the Brahminic gods who reside in grand temples and are offered with daily worship of elaborate nature. The *theyyams* reside in a parallel domain where they have loyal worshippers and unique ways of worship.

While the Brahminic tradition trusts on building temples, consecrating deities and worship them regularly with *pujas* and other rituals, the ways of *theyyams* are different. They don’t have temples where gods are personified as deities in the Aryan style. A *pallival* (sacred sword) which is kept at the trunk of a tree denotes the presence of the *theyyam* and that sword would be taken out ritually and held by the *theyyam* during the *theyyattam*. The *theyyams* do not permanently stay at the *stanam* or *kavu*. For the performance they are invoked from a supernatural space through rituals into the body of a performer, then on, the person is god for a marked time. The *theyyam* blesses, give orders and advises the devotees and when the *theyyattam* is concluded the gods are send back with another series of rituals. The *theyyams* are not worshipped at the *kavus* with everyday offerings as in temples.<sup>26</sup> But evening lamp is lit at such places by the custodian called the *anthithiriyan*.

---

<sup>21</sup> Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, vol.5, Asian Educational Publications, p. 303.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with L T Murali, Keecheri, Theyyam Performer, 18.10.18.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with R C Karipath, Folklorist, Payyannur, 15.10.18.

<sup>24</sup> R C Karipath, *Kavukalum Samoohavum( kavus and society)*, ( In)Poli, triannual,December- April, 2003, Kerala Folklore Academy, Chirakkal, Kannur, p.52.

<sup>25</sup> Payyannur Kunhiraman, *op.cit.*, p.76.

<sup>26</sup> Ranjith kumar. P, *Thira: Charithravum Parinamavum(history and ecolution of thira)*, ( In)Poli, triannual, April- November,2011, Kerala Folklore Academy, Chirakkal. Kannur, P.101.

<sup>26</sup> Y P Kannan, *op.cit.*,p. 90.

In the *theyyattam*, it is believed that, through a ritualistic process the person who take the role of divinity turns into god. On the day of the *theyyattam* when the particular god is invoked into his body by way of rituals and rites, the *theyyam* performer raises to the status of god and then after everyone takes the person as god and pays due respect to him. "Once the *Thirumudi* (headgear) is placed, the person who performs the role of the *theyyam* is counted as god by everyone."<sup>27</sup> It is an exclusive situation in which his caste and social status are forgotten, all stand before him with gestures of humility and respect.

The most significant feature of the *theyyams* is that they are unique and keep their indigenous identity at many respects. They neither compete, nor feel inferior to other divinities. They are less sanskritised and not supported by any philosophical literature or written traditions. Certain rituals of the Vedic cult are incorporated into the *theyyam* worship, but such items never dominate it. Distinct from the Brahminic ways of worship they follow indigenous means. Blood sacrifice forms a part of majority of the *theyyattam*.<sup>28</sup> Offerings to the *theyyams* are always not approved by the standards of the Vedic rites, blood sacrifices are allowed and preferred, but deferred owing to legal intervention which prohibits human or animal sacrifices. Offerings of fish, toddy are continued with pride. The *theyyam* cult sustains on immense faith the devotees places on them. Recently the Brahmins also are given some authority over the *kavus* or *stanams*, but these also do not diminish the primordial nature of the *theyyattam*. Over a long span of time, innumerable customs and rituals have been developed as a part of the *theyyattam* which enrich the cultural aspect of rural life.

#### REFERENCES.

- [1]. Kariyath, R C, *Theyyaprapancham*, (The Land of Theyyams), Kairali Books Pvt. Ltd., Kannur, 2012.
- [2]. Krishnan Mater, V, *Sreekoomba Charitham (The History of Sreekurumba)*, Kairali Books, Kannur, 2014.
- [3]. Kunhiraman, Payyannur, *Perumkaliyattam*, Green Books, kozhicode.
- [4]. Poli, Tri-annual December- April, 2003, Kerala Folklore Academy, Chirakkal, Kannur.
- [5]. Poli, Tri-annual, March- June, 2005, Kerala Folklore Academy, Chirakkal, Kannur
- [6]. Poli, Tri-annual, April- November, 2011, Kerala Folklore Academy, Chirakkal, Kannur.
- [7]. Raghavan, C. *Tulu Nadum Bhashayum Nattarivum (Language and folklore of the Tulunadu)*, Kerala Bhasha Institute, Thiruvananthapuram, 2003.
- [8]. *Theyyam* (Symposium- Compiled by Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Academy), Third Edition, Thrissur, 2000
- [9]. Thurston, Edgar, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, vol.5, Asian Educational Publications.
- [10]. Vishnu Nambuduri, M V, *Theyyavum Thirayum, Kerala State Institute of Children's Literature, Thiruvananthapuram*.

---

<sup>27</sup> C Gopalan Nair, *Malabarile Thirayattangal*, Mathrubhumi Books, Kozhicode, 2009, p.34.

<sup>28</sup> M V Vishnu Nambuduri, *Theyyavum Thirayum, Kerala State Institute of Children's Literature, Thiruvananthapuram*, p.27.