

Original Article

Negotiating the Suppression of Identity and Survival in the Heroes of Theyyam

Anjana K C

Independent Researcher, Kannur, Kerala.

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Abstract: Theyyam is an inevitable part of the cultural facets of Northern Kerala. The myths and legends of various Theyyams presented in the thottam songs reflect the social circumstances itself. What we see in Theyyam is a special bond between God and devotee, where the devotee could physically express his/her concerns to the God who patiently listens to these worries. Theyyam is also treated as a platform to commemorate the ancestors who sacrificed themselves for various causes. They are elevated into a spiritual level which also bestows a heroic aura to those who were once marginalized just for being born into a different community. This paper focuses upon the depiction of identity and struggle in five different male deities of Theyyam. All of them lived their earthly lives facing a series of trials and tribulations which ultimately resulted in death or disappearance. A close analysis would unveil the layers of social fabric presented in these myths.

Keywords: Caste Discrimination, Identity, Struggle, Theyyam.

I. INTRODUCTION

Every ritual is built upon the belief system of a community. Theyyam is one among the most significant ritualistic practices in Northern Kerala. The preparatory stage of Theyyam begins with the implementation of various sacred acts. When a performer decides to pursue with Theyyam performance, he gradually gets exalted into the position of God. This is where we see a wonderful amalgam of man and God. The devotees believe that the God-possessed-man would bless them and protect from all harms. At the same time, Theyyam is not a mere ritualistic observance, it is also an art which incorporates the suppressed identity of a community. These communities were prohibited from entering into temples. They were also marginalized from all the mainstream strands of living. It was their resistance which ultimately came out in the form of Theyyam. The term 'theyyam' is a localized word for 'Daivam' or God. Thus an analysis of the related myths would reveal how Theyyam presents the elements of identity and survival. This paper aims to bring out the above mentioned aspects by focusing upon five different heroes of theyyam. They are Kathivannoor Veeran, Chathambally Vishakandan, Madayi Kari Gurukkal, Malakkari and Bhairavan.

Theyyam is based up on its own myths and stories. These stories are presented in the Thottam songs. There are thousands of Theyyams practiced in Kerala. Each Theyyam has unique stories of origin. Some of these stories are based on the epic texts such as Ramayana and Mahabharata. However, not all Theyyams are reincarnations of epic characters, some of them are humans born into lower class. Their journey of struggle and survival are beautifully presented in the thottam songs which also reveals several social and cultural practices existed in Kerala like untouchability, Sati, caste discrimination etc.

There are many theories about identity. The term derives from the Latin word 'identitas' which means 'sameness'. Today it has become an important term with its wide nature and interpretations. According to Peter J Burke and Jan E Stets,

"An identity is the set of meanings that define who one is when one is an occupant of a particular role in society, a member of a particular group, or claims particular characteristics that identify him or her as a unique person" (Peter J Burke and Jan E Stets, 3).

The formation of one's identity is closely depended upon social circumstances. It is what make a person different from others, by maintaining the sameness of being. Every individual has the right to live without losing his or her identity. However, for some people, keeping one's identity is still a constant struggle. Most of these people are victims of various social structures such as patriarchy and caste discrimination.

The history of Kerala is the history of caste struggle. This aspect is vividly reflected in the myths of Theyyam. The performers of Theyyam belong to a variety of castes who were once forbidden from the socio cultural realms of living. Vannan, Malaya, Pana, Mavila, Vela, Pulaya, Paraya, Perumannan, Koppala etc are some of the castes of Theyyam performers. It is interesting to observe the rise in honor and respect they receive once they transform into the entity of God. The root cause of this change could be traced back to the belief system and elements of worship in a community.



Theyyams of Veeraradhana (hero worship) is an important category which provides space for the marginalized castes to express themselves. Martyred heroes, ancestors, ostracized figures are also worshipped in the form of Theyyam. This was mainly because, such rebels resonated the suppressed anger and resistance of those who were excluded from the mainstream aspects of living. All the heroes discussed in this paper are such figures whose stories are filled with elements of struggle and survival.

It has been believed that Theyyam originated from the process of expressing emotions through physical expressions. There is no concrete proof regarding the beginning of this ritualistic art form. However, it survives even today with all the glory.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a significant rise in the number of studies related to Theyyam and folk arts. However, most of these are written in Malayalam. The scarcity of resources in English is a problem one may find while doing research in this field. That's why we depend upon oral information from the Theyyam performers. Two interviews done with Mr. Othenan Peruvannan of Aaram Mile village and Mr Rajan Peruvannan of Mayyil village (both are from Kannur district in Kerala) have provided valuable impulses for this study. They wholeheartedly recited the thottams of Pottan Theyyam and Bhairavan Theyyam and also imparted wisdom upon the myths of various theyyams.

One significant author useful for any studies related to Theyyam is Dr M V Vishnu Namboodiri. Some critics claim that his view points are not impartial as he belongs to an upper caste. However, Vishnu Namboodiri's texts are inevitable for Theyyam studies. Two of his books used for this paper are Theyyam Thirathottangal: Oru Padanam(2016) and Theyyam (2015). Keecheri Raghavan's Thottangal Theyyanal (2017) is another book in which he has given an in depth information about the feudal background of Theyyam. The account of rituals in folklore noted by Dr N Ajit Kumar in his book Folklorum Sahitya Niroopanavum (2005) is also valuable in this area. Another text which has to be mentioned here is Chathambally Kandan (1986) written by E P Krishnan Nambiar. This book is a detailed record of the legend of the Theyyam, Chathambally Vishakandan. Sreekand A Trikaripur's Mooring Mirror: A Mooring Mirror between Man and God also provides useful knowledge regarding the male deities and heroes in Theyyam. In God's Mirror: the Theyyams of Malabar (2024) by Pepita Seth encapsulates the history and cultural perspectives of the performance of Theyyam. All these texts have acted as valuable resources for this study. But the most significant data is collected from the performers who pass the myths of Theyyam through Thottam songs.

A. Kathivannoor Veeran

Most of the male deities in Theyyam are reincarnations of Lord Shiva. However the Thottam of Kathivannoor Veeran shows the tragic, emotional and adventurous story of a warrior. The deity is also popular as Mangadu Mandappan. Mandappan, the hero of the story was born into a Thiyya family at Mangadu, a village near Thaliparamba in the Kannur district of Kerala. Mandappan was a child received by Chakki, and Kumarchan, after much prayers to the Goddess of Chuzhali. He grew up as a young man with great interest in weaponry. His lack of interest in other labor slowly rises conflicts with his father. One day he elopes from his house after a big fight with his father. Mandappan's journey is significant as it develops his sense of self and of the world around him. He started his journey with some friends, who soon shows their true colour. They abandon Mandappan at one point by taking his food and ox. This betrayal was the first instance from which he began to understand the space around him. Although there was not much time to recover from the strangeness of his father, this act from his friends puts him into a much vulnerable position. Later he reaches the house of his uncle who welcomes him for stay. Ironically Mandappan agrees to go for the traditional trade of selling oil at Kathivannoor, a place near Kutaku. One day he meets the love of his life, Chemmarathi. He marries her and suppresses all his interest for weapons to meet the ends. Later his trade flourishes, but the pain of losing his passion continued. One day the Kutaku people, who were his rivalries in oil trade came to his house and called him for fight. He wins the fight alone but loses his small finger. Losing small finger was considered to be an act of shame in fighting. It was a wound happened to his pride. Ashamed of this, he ran towards the foes and accepts martyrdom. His uncle and other family members who came to know of his death, creates a funeral pyre in which Chemmarathi sacrifices herself as result of her grief of losing Mandappan. This act of Chemmarathi possess vivid similarity with Sati, an old oppressive, Patriarchal custom where the widow offers herself in the funeral pyre of her husband. It has been believed that both Mandappan and Chemmarathi were transformed into divine power. The deity was later worshipped as Kathivannoor Veeran. However, there is no Theyyam for Chemmarathi. Chemmarathi is remembered in the form of Chemmarathithara (a stone platform) created in every performing cites of Mandappan.

The identity of Kathivannoor Veeran is presented through the development of his war personality. Various circumstances force him to reserve the combat skills momentarily. As someone who do not belong to the Kshatriya, the warrior and ruling class, Mandappan was forced to abandon his passion and pursue his family trade of selling oil. However,

he accepts death voluntarily in the most respectful way he could imagine. Otherwise, death fulfills his long lost dream. Here Mandappan becomes a representative of all the low caste community who were casted away from the mainstream. What makes him a hero is the journey of struggle he follows to show his resistance towards the power hierarchy. Despite all the trials he faces, the legend honors him as a God and as a guardian deity.

B. Chathambally Vishakandan

Chathambally Vishakandan is often considered as a martyr of feudalism. The story of this venerable deity is a story of resistance and survival. Feudalism caused drastic impacts in the Kerala society. People who became victims of feudalism were also celebrated in the form of Theyyam. Chathambally Vishakandan is one among the Theyyams performed at the beginning of Theyyam season in Malabar. Kandan was a young Thiyya boy from Kolachery, a village in Kannur, whose curiosity to learn rejoiced his parents Ambu and Mathayi. Ambu was a chethu thozhilali (toddy worker). Mathayi always wanted to educate her son even though Thiyya community was not allowed to gain education. Somehow the parents convinces the Ezhuthachan (local teacher) to enroll their child. So Kandan grew up as a fine young man. Here we can see that the spirit of Kandan derives from the spirit of his parents. Unlike the father figure of Kathivannoor Veeran, Ambu is portrayed as an ideal father.

Kandan slowly began to become a master in indigenous medicine and the sudden rise in his popularity catches the eye of the feudal lords. Karumarathillathu Namoodiri was a famous physician at Kolachery. One day an upper caste woman was brought to him with snake bite. The Namoodiri tries different strategies to help her, but nothing works. Finally he declared her as dead. While her body was carried back home, Kandan happened to see the woman and expressed his desire for a re-check. After completing the inspection, he told the relatives to put the woman's body into a nearby pond and take it back once they see bubbles in the water. They did as they were told. Kandan recited the mantra of Kolakkaruthu, after which bubbles began to spring out from the pond. It has been believed that as a result of this act, the 'dead woman' regained her life. This incident raised his popularity. The woman's family built a new house as a reward. Jealous of Kandan's success, Karumarathillathu Namoodiri, develops a scheme to murder Kandan. He invites Kandan to his illam, and kills him during the journey.

Soon there began various problems in the Illam. All the ill omens were pointed towards the martyrdom of Kandan. Finally they had no choice but to valor Kandan as Chathambally Vishakandan, the God. Even today there is a custom of the Theyyam's arrival at Karumarathillam during the performance. Kandan is clearly a symbol of resistance and struggle. He overcame all the caste related hurdles to complete his education. From the beginning he fights against his own fate and transforms himself into a model for those who come after him. That's why Chathambally Vishakandan, along with the divine elements, also becomes a mouthpiece of the unending revolutionary spirit against caste hierarchy and oppression.

C. Madayi Karigurukkal

Madayi Kari Gurukkual also known as Puli Maranja Thondachan is a deity worshipped by the Pulaya community in North Malabar. The word '*thondachan*' means grandfather. This deity is celebrated as the grandfather figure of the Pulaya community. As per the myth, Kari Gurukkal, was a Pulaya man who became a scholar after a series of hurdles. He wanted to learn Kalaripayattu, the traditional martial art form of Kerala. But Kari, was not allowed to do so because of being born into Pulaya caste. However, Kunjambu Nair, an upper caste man who favoured Kari told him to take his name to learn kalari. Thus he completes the eighteen Kalari vidyas. Impersonation was the last trick in which he became a master. He could transform into animals like scorpion and leopard.

The Landlord of Madayi sought his help to get leopard milk as a cure for his disease. He offered Kari half of his belongings. Kari brought the cure by turning into a leopard. The landlord's symptoms were reduced after taking the cure. However, he decides to kill Kari as he was not ready to give his money to a low born. So he puts another demand in front of Kari, to bring a leopard, leopard's hair and leopard's milk. Kari realizes the conspiracy behind this demand. He told his wife to not be afraid if he came back as a leopard. He leaves home and returns as a leopard to fulfill the landlord's demand. However, seeing him as a ferocious beast, his wife gets scared and closes the door in front of him. Heartbroken by this, he disappears into the forest. His withdrawal is very much similar to the plight of the Frankenstein monster. Lack of love and total abandonment could break an individual despite his or her firmness. Soon the landlord's illness accelerated and the people found out that all the evil occurrences would stop once they start to worship Kari Gurukkal as Puli Maranja Thondachan (the one who disappeared as leopard).

The legend shows the depth of how far a lower caste man could be suppressed down even if he attain an honorable position in the society. This may not happen if Kari was born into a Brahmin family. The Thottam of Puli Maranja Thondachan reveals the historical discrimination existed in the social fabric of Kerala. Through the elements of exaggeration, Kari is elevated into the position of a Protector. He surpasses his mundane life and maintains his existence in a more glorious

way through Theyyam. This turns out to be a platform to challenge and assert the identity of a Pulaya man along with its divine aspects. The myth of Madayi Kari Gurukkal is also presented in pop culture in the form of the play Pulijanmam by N. Prabhakaran and a Malayalam movie of the same name directed by Priyanandanan.

D. Malakkari Theyyam

The versatile nature Theyyam is a great contribution in Folk studies. Malakkari is a rare theyyam form mainly associated with the Kurichya community of Wayandu. However, it is also performed by the Vannan community in Kannur district. It celebrates 'Malakkari' an Adivasi warrior who is presented as an offspring of Lord Shiva. The costume of Malakkari Theyyam is similar to the costumes of other male heroes such as Kathivannoor Veeran. Malakkari or the 'mountain dweller' is a major deity of the Kurichyar community who lives in the forest and mountain regions. The origin of Malakkari is unknown. However, the thottams variously presents him both a reincarnation and descendent of Lord Shiva. An interesting aspect of Malakkari theyyam is that, it is worshipped by the Kurichya community, Thiyya community and Nair community in Wayanadu. People from various castes unanimously adore this adivasi warrior for good health and prosperity.

The purity/pollution binary of caste is a specific feature knitted along with the socio-cultural history of Kerala. Adivasi/Gothra community occupies the lowest position in the ladder of caste distribution. This is what makes Malakkari theyyam special. The thottam gives voice to the Dalit's right to worship the Deity like others. Malakkari's whereabouts are not clear, but he is undoubtedly a strong figure who gives power to the existence of those who were once treated as outcastes.

E. Bhairavan

Among the different forms of Theyyam, Manthramoorthikal stands out with its association with sorcery. Bhairava, Kuttichathan, Gulikan, Potten Theyyam etc belong to this category. The Thottam song of Pottan Theyyam is considered as a major landmark of art questioning the exploitative social practice of untouchability.

- Nangale kothyalumonnalle chora
- Ningale kothyalumonnalle chora
- Avidekku nangalum ningalumokkum
- Pinnendini chovvarkulam pisakunnu

(From the thottam of Pottan Theyyam, collected from Mr. Othenan Peruvannan. Lord Shiva who came in the form of a Chandala, asks Sree Sankara whether he couldn't see that both of them have the same color blood running through their veins. He also adds that whether it be an upper caste or lower caste, all humans are equal in front of God, so there is no need of degrading the Chandala.)

Here the Chandala's question results in a great realization about the severity of caste system. It is also a direct slap on the face of the narrow mindedness of society.

Bhairavan is a significant manthramoorthi practiced by the Malaya, Vannan, Vela, Munnoottan, Pulaya, Pana and Perumannan communities of North Kerala. However, the thottam of Bhairavan performed by the Pana community includes a unique story that is different from its other versions. As per this thottam, the Cheruthandan and Cheruthandathi of a Thiyya family couldn't conceive for a long time. As result of their prolonged prayers, the Aadinath/ Lord Shiva appeared in front of them and the couple expressed their concern. He asked them whether they want a seven year old boy or a thousand year old boy. For this Cheruthandathi chose the first one.

- Kondupoyi pettole ni aanputhranake
- Ezhu vayassolam ni pettu pottiko
- Ezhu vayassu kazhinjal putthraneyaruthu
- Aayiram yogimarkku annamuttiikk

(From the thottam of Bhairavan, collected from Mr. Rajan Peruvannan. Let the boy be grown with great love and care. Let him be your son till he is of seven years old. After seven years you are supposed to chop him into pieces and prepare a feast to the yogis with the meat.)

Cheruthandathi was surprised of why the Lord gave such a boon to her. After few days she became pregnant and gave birth to a beautiful boy. He was named Cheeralan. By the time he was seven, Cheeralan was admitted to the school of Kathirur Swami. Later the time came to fulfill the promise they made to Lord Shiva. A group of yogis came to visit their home. They were unhappy because Cheruthandan and Cheruthandathi provided education to their son, even though they belonged to a lower caste. The yogis demanded the meat of Cheeralan for their feast. The parents were devastated as Cheeralan was their only hope in life. With great pain they kills their own son and prepares a meal with his body. All the dishes of feast were served quickly. As per the instructions of the yogis a plantain leaf was also laid for Cheeralan. Then

Cheruthandathi called out Cheeralan's name after which the flesh and bones in the dishes started to shudder. The yogis suddenly prepared the pyre to perform rituals. From the pyre came Bhairavam, who was later worshipped as a reincarnation of Lord Shiva himself.

Unlike other male deities of theyyam discussed in this paper, Bhairavan is not a war hero. He is a small boy who became a victim of social circumstances. It is true that the story of Bhairavan is filled with magic and sorcery. But a close reading of the story would unveil the underlying structure of caste struggle. Thousands of children became victims of such social evils at a time. Those who wished to move against the current were cruelly bullied and destroyed.

The life style and belief system followed by a group of people clearly reveals the identity of a community. Recreating the emotional responses and expectations based on the elements in artistic ventures helps us to recognize this cultural identity.

III. CONCLUSION

Every social structure is influenced by the cultural groups in it. Art emphasizes the representation of this social structure in diverse ways. Theyyam stands out as such an artistic form combined with divinity. In fact it is this divinity that elevates common man into a heroic position through the performance. The art form of Theyyam gave a voice to the voiceless. All the different Theyyams discussed in this paper project myths of such figures who overcome numerous hardships in between the journey of their transformation into God. Nowhere else we could see such a wonderful combination of Man and God. Whether it be Kathivannoor Veeran or Chathambally Vishakandan or Madayi Kari Gurukkal or Malakkari or Bhairavan, they fight hard against all the odds, just to be treated as respectful individuals. Their identity is embedded with their struggle against oppressive caste structures. Sometimes it converts into a fight with one's own self. Such constant questionings develops their individuality even though the inevitable fate dominates over all other things. This makes it clear that the possibilities of multiple readings of Theyyam and thottam songs are open towards further horizon which could also widen discourses regarding the cultural spheres of North Malabar.

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