

Teyyam Oral Traditions

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The northern part of Kerala, the south western state of India to be more precise, the small stretch between Korapuzha in Kozhikode district and Chandragiri River in the present Kasargod district is the region where this age-old culture of *teyyam* still prevails. Kozhikode and the surrounding regions were ruled by Zamorins and the Northern tip was ruled by Kolattiri and thus known as Kolattunadu. In fact, though the whole region is a part of erstwhile Malabar, as it was the five northern districts of the present day Kerala state, (viz. Kasaragod, Kannur, Wynad, Kozhikode, Malappuram and some parts of Thrissur and Palakkad districts) especially with the commencement of British rule. Similar ritual form can be seen in Kozhikode. In southern parts of Kannur district. Similarity does not end there; there are several male deities who are known as *tira* even in Kasargod district as it suggests that those *teyyams* have come from the places of Kozhikode districts and Southern side of Kannur district. It is also a fact that several *teyyams* are performed in the name of *Bhutas* in several places in Kannur and Kasargod districts. In the two districts of Dakshina Kannada and Kodagu in the neighboring state of Karnataka, a similar form is known as *Bhuta kola*. In the present chapter an attempt has been made to introduce *teyyam* in general.

Teyyam or *tira* – considered synonymous with *teyyam* or another ritual performance such as *Putan* found in Malappuram, Palakkad and Thrissur districts of Malabar with slight variations - appears as an annual ritualistic festival. All these performances require ritualistic arrangements and also the involvement of traditional performing communities. Therefore, it is considered as ritual performance, and not merely as performing art.

When we consider the rich form of folk culture sprouting from the Dravidian region and also from the caste-based composition of the society, it is the *teyyam* ritualistic performance that can be described as the most visible, spectacular art form of Malabar, associated with myths and legends. Other major folk forms, which are inseparable from the dominant culture of the region, are, *Kolkali*¹, *Bhuta*², *Purakali*³, *Kummatti*⁴, *Tira* and *Putan*⁵, *Porattunatakam*⁶, *Kanyarkali*⁷, *Arabanamutt* and *Daphmut*⁸ *Oppana*⁹, *Tidambu Nrntam*¹⁰ etc. Folklorists agree that *Tira*, *Putan* and *Bhuta* strike a similar chord with *teyyam* in terms of their ritual and performative aspects. Also these three forms including *teyyam*, command religious fervor for the underlying divinity and for the belief that they are Gods, Goddesses and divine spirits. But in the case of many other folk forms they are devoid of the aspect of divinity. A few find their places in the folk culture as entertainers. Some folk-arts like *Kanyarkali* and *Purakali* provide religious solace for the believers who propitiate gods and goddesses. The ritual dances and the connected art forms in Northern Kerala can be related to the more vibrant Dravidian culture of South India.

As mentioned earlier, this region was called Kolattunadu as the land was ruled by Kolattiri. This unique form of worshipping gods, goddesses, dead ancestors, deceased heroes, victimized personalities, terrifying animals and serpents, devils etc. is based on a rather simple concept: that after suitable propitiatory rituals, a god

or goddess belonging to a pantheon of hundreds of deities becomes temporally manifest in the body of an empowered man, thereby elevating him to a divine status.

Ceremonies usually take place either within the precincts of a small shrine or in the yard of an ancestral house, or in an open space with a temporary shrine called *patti*¹¹. The first stage of almost all *teyyam* performances is either a *tottam*¹², in which a performer with simple costume and minimal make up comes before the shrine and recites the invocatory songs or tales of the deity, or comes before the shrine wearing a more elaborate costume and make up as *vellattam*¹³ who performs an energetic dance usually associated with vigorous war heroes. Some *teyyam* do not have *tottam pattu* as its tale and is confined to the invocatory songs. On the other hand, some *teyyams* do have an elaborate *tottam pattu* which lasts for several hours. The authors of these songs are, with few exceptions, not known. Generally songs are made in local language but Sanskrit verses drawn from epics are also sung as *tottam pattu* for some *teyyams*. It is also common that similar *tottam pattu* with slight variations, such as welcoming the particular *teyyam* by name, can be seen singing for several *teyyams*.

After the singing of *tottam pattu* and performing some rituals, the performer retires to prepare for the actual *teyyam* performance, a process beginning with the application of intricate facial make-up whose every line is symbolic, and ending with the donning of the elaborate costume. The most sacred part of the costume, the head-dress, is put on in front of the shrine's sanctum after which, as the drum beats, the performer looks at his reflection in a small hand-mirror. This is one of *teyyam*'s most conceptually crucial and intimate moments as what he sees in the mirror is not his own image, but of a powerful divine being which he represents.

While *teyyam* ritual proceeds, the performer with the striking costumes and head gear, circumambulates the shrine, dances, runs and walks through the shrine compound to the tune of *Cenda*. Towards the end of the performance he blesses devotees, receives offerings and speaks in a dialect alien from the general parlance creating a divine atmosphere.

"Dance is one of the earliest forms of human worship"¹⁴. It has its roots in the primitive life of the tribes, as they have adopted dance as a mode of worship to the divine power or the spirits. "It is the propitiation of gods, goddesses and spirits. The divine dancer achieves identification with the deity and the movements of his body represent a religious rite associated with the mysterious divinity" (*ibid*).

Generally, *teyyam* is not performed in the Brahmanical temples, but in small village shrines. A shrine may be a worshipping place of one family or one community and in a few cases it is a common worshipping place of all castes where an elected body from the public looks after the performance.

Teyyam can be described as a "form of worship consisting of a special combination of symbols, rituals and art-forms, particularly dance, through which the ghosts, good and evil spirits, in the manifestation of sub human, animate beings, ancestor spirits of legendary figures of great valour, extraordinary powers, and endowments and gods and goddesses: Siva, Sakti, visnu are appeased and honoured"¹⁵.

The origin of *teyyam* is traced to tribal living and culture. "As a cult, its origin can be related to rituals and practices of primitive society. The elaborate accounts of *VelanVeriyatal* available in the Sangam literature may have some connection with the *teyyam* cult"¹⁶. But the impact made by Brahmanism widened it, almost, into a religion, more appropriately a folk religion. The influence of Brahmanism cannot be

ignored, because the dominant castes found *teyyam* quite close to divinity and provided patronage. The Brahmanical religion had cast their influence on *teyyam* and in the process new rituals came into being within the framework of *teyyam* tradition. There are both male and female deities. Goddesses outnumber gods in *teyyattam*. We can find that most of these goddesses are either called *Bhagavatis* or *Camundis*. It is true that the Brahmanical religious philosophies such as Saktism, Vaisnavism and Saivism have made their impact on *teyyam*. However, in *teyyam* the tribal character has not much altered and hence it is still the most powerful and vibrant folk/tribal form of the region. The latter day perceptions and practices of Buddhism, Jainism and Brahmanism have their effect on the evolution of *teyyam*. A significant incorporation into *teyyam* and associated rituals is that of earmarking a separate space for offerings of blood and other edible items and toddy in the northern part of the shrine known as *vadakkenvatil*¹⁷. In the shrines where main deity does not require such sacrifices, space for *vadakkenvatil* can be seen outside the main compound, where sacrifices will be offered only for the subordinate deities.

Further, for the reason that Lord Vishnu did not appeal much to the imagination of the people of Malabar, the influence of Vaisnavism on *Teyyam* is minimal. Like wise Lord Siva, Lord Ayyappa, although many people from north Kerala go for pilgrimage to Sabarimala (famous Lord Ayyappa temple of Kerala) and Lord Subramanya also are not worshipped as *teyyam*. Instead people are more inclined to worship different forms of a mother goddess for fertility and warding off ills. In spite of this, there are a few *teyyams* which emerged out of the minimal impact made by Vaisnavism, one is Visnumurti and the other is Palot *daivam*. Lord Siva's son (Vettakorumakan) and incarnations are performed as *teyyams*.

As in some other societies in India, the caste system has dominant influence in the evolution of the *teyyam* cult of Kerala. It would be impossible to perform *teyyam* in a ritualistic manner if we ignore the caste hierarchies. The link between *teyyam* and the gods/goddesses of the Hindu pantheon is unmistakable. But sometimes, in actual practice, ancestors, heroes and heroines, village gods and victimized persons are also found worshipped as *teyyam*.

Teyyam is believed to be a corrupt form of a Sanskrit word *Daivam*, which means god/goddess. Worship of *teyyam* can be considered one of the earliest forms of worshipping village gods in Malabar. Irrespective of caste and religion, people attended *teyyam* performances for seeking blessings, warding off evil spirits, demanding prosperity in their agricultural activities, begetting children, curing diseases, and settling disputes and so on.

Earlier, many colonialists (both missionaries and administrators), considered it as spirit worship or devil dance. The *Bhuta* cult, which is seen in Tulum (previously the land between Sirur of Karnataka State and Cheruvattur of Kerala state), was described by some British as devil worship due to their ignorance of its deeper meaning. "The spirits worshipped in this cult are not to be identified with devils, nor is the ritual associated with them to be equated with witchcraft, black magic or propitiation of ghosts"¹⁸. Some foreign scholars like C.A Innes and Ivans in their Malabar Gazetteer, and J.A. Hamerton in his edited work, *The Customs and Manners of Mankind*,¹⁹ misinterpreted *teyyattam*, describing them as a devil dance²⁰. F.E.Penny also misunderstood this dance as propitiating evil spirits in southern India. But Herman Gundert, in his famous Malayalam-English Dictionary,²¹ defines *teyyam* as *Daivam* (God). Later it became very much a part of the social life of northern part of Kerala. Still it exists with all its pomp and passion and with its visual beauty in Malabar.

There are various theories about the origin of *teyyam*. A few argue that it is a continuation of hero-worship. Yet another theory is that it is a relic of tribal worship. It is very difficult to find out the exact period of the origin of *teyyam*. At the same time none can refute its antiquity.

The costume as well as the facial make-up of each *teyyam* varies according to the role and myth of the form, which speaks volumes of the nature of the particular *teyyam*. Using indigenous pigments and other materials the artistes themselves prepare most of the costumes.

Teyyam reveals the human capabilities of abstraction, synthesis, and idealization; it describes social and economic activities and reveals practices, beliefs and ideas. It provides a unique insight into spirituality, intellectual life and cultural adventures. It is a divine dance with ancient testimony of customs, traditions and artistic creativity.

Training forms an important component of the *teyyam* tradition. But there are no conventional schools to train the younger generation or initiate them into the cult. The right to perform *teyyam* is transferred to either sons or nephews depending upon the system of lineage followed by the particular caste. It is patrilineal among Malayas and matrilineal among the Vannans who constitute the main communities of *teyyam* performance.

The skill of *teyyattam* is picked up by the learner (after he is identified) by observing the performance from close quarters. The initiation into *teyyam* is through performances of *Adi vedan* among Malayan, *Karkadotti* among Vannan, again *Onattar* by Vannan, *Galinjabu* Koppalan etc. *Teyyam* are held at their early age during monsoon and Kothamooriyattam by the Malayan community during October and November months. To some *teyyattams*, martial art, *Kalaripayattu*, is essential (Kativanurviran, Tacholi Otayanan, Payamvalli Chandu, to name a few) and hence the trainee schooled in Kalaripayatu. For some of the *Teyyams*, knowledge in Sanskrit is vital and hence they need to learn the art of letters also.

By learning the finer elements of *teyyattam* a performer becomes complete and matured. For instance, the performer should possess the special skill of putting on the facial makeup and making the costume. At the same time he should also excel in reciting *totam pattu*. The *totam pattu* did not have a written text in the olden times, and hence it is orally transferred from generation to generation and therefore the performer should learn them by heart. There are no texts or written records describing rhythms of drumming of Cenda, making of costumes, facial make-up and other aspects. Hence, there is a necessity to learn them all by oneself by observing his elders in performances. The tradition transfers from one generation to the other in the following manners-

Form of Tradition	Method of Learning
<i>Tottam pattu</i> (<i>Teyyam</i> songs)	By hearing
Dance and rituals	By mimetics
Face painting and costume making	By practice
Playing of musical instruments	By practice

Notes

1. Rhythmic stick dance has its origin in mythology. It is prevalent all over India, but the Kolkai of Malabar is unique. Muslim Kolkai is distinct from the other Kolkali. It has several regional variations in mythology, steps and movements.
2. Divine dance also called *bhuta kola* found in the old Tulunadu area of Karnataka
3. Legend has it that this dance is drawn from the dance of 18 *Apsara Kanyas* (celestial beauties). It became a vigorous dance of the men folk of Northern Kerala during the *Puram* festival, which falls during February-March. The performing communities are Tiyya, Maniyani, Mugaya, Mukkuva, Caliya and Kammalas.
4. It is a form of entertainment found in Thrissur and Palakkad districts. During the Onam season, the so-called *Butaganas* of Lord Siva visit the houses with their costumes made of matted grass and masks to ward off the evil spirits. People from all religions take part in this performance especially in Thrissur.
5. These art forms are found in Malappuram, Thrissur and Palakkad districts. Male dancers, in accordance with their traditional makeup, dance in tune with the drum beats. The headgear and costume of *Putan and Tira* are excellent, quite elaborate and colourful. Mannan and Parayan are the main communities to perform *putan* and *tira*.
6. It is a rural theatre of Palakkad district enacted by Panan community.
7. It is a form of ritualistic entertainment of Palakkad district with male folk of Nair community who stand around a burning lamp and dance vigorously to commemorate a mythological fight.
8. Male Muslim folk of Malabar sing and dance rhythmically on festival occasions in accordance with the beating of small drums called *daphu*. *Arabaṇamut*. another dance form of the Muslim community, uses a different drum called *Arabaṇa*.
9. It is a bridal dance of the Muslim community in the Malabar region. It usually takes place on the eve of a marriage. Girls, including the bride, put henna on their hands and sing and dance.
10. This is a temple dance associated with temple festivals, performed by Brahmans who carry the decorated idol on their head and dance around the temple in accordance with four different rhythms played on the *Cenda* by the Maran community. It is seen only in the Kasargod and Kannur districts.
11. A temporary abode of gods. It can be a shed made of dry coconut leaves or a raised platform on which an oil lamp and weapons of *teyyam* are placed.
12. Corrupt form of the word *stotram* that is invocation
13. An introductory dance associated with male characters
14. Kurup K.K N - Aryan and Dravidian elements in Malabar folklore (Trivandrum 1977).
15. J.J.Pallath – Teyyam: An analytical study of the folk culture, wisdom and personality (New Delhi - 1995).
16. Kurup.K.K.N. The Cult of Teyyam and Hero worship in Kerala (Calicut -2000).
17. Its meaning is northern door, this is a place where symbolic sacrifice is performed.
18. U.P.Upadhyaya and Susheela.P.Upadhyaya- Folk Rrituals (Of the Tuluva Region of Coastal Karnataka(Udupi) 2002
19. Cited in Kurup. K.K.N. The Cult of Teyyam and Hero worship(Calicut -2000)
20. *ibid*
21. Malayalam-English Dictionary by Dr. Hermann Gundert, (Kottayam – 1991