

**DANCE OF THE GODS : A SOCIO - CULTURAL  
STUDY OF TEYYAM**

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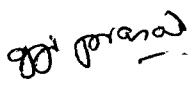
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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that this dissertation entitled "DANCE OF THE GODS: A SOCIO-CULTURAL STUDY OF TEYYAM", submitted by Gita Jayaraj, Centre of Linguistics and English, Jawaharlal Nehru University, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY is an original work, and has not been submitted, in part or full, for any other degree of any University.

We recommend this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

  
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## **DEDICATION**

For

**Daddy and Amma**

the warp and weft of my existence.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

For the amount of space and understanding that my guide, Mr. G.J.V. Prasad gave me, my deepest thanks. I am also grateful to all my other teachers both in flesh and spirit: Dr. R.S. Gupta, my co-supervisor for his time, patience and tolerance; Dr. Nirmal for his interest, encouragement and unstinting support; Dr. Bhat for just **being** and Dr.Nambiar and family for making Teyyam come alive for me, for their hospitality and so much more.

A study of this kind can never claim to be the effort of an individual and I am indebted to all those wonderful people who are too numerous to name. I realise only too well how inadequate this attempt to acknowledge is.

My deepest thanks to my mom and chinnu for their abundant love and care and trust in everything I do; and my dad who is father, friend and teacher, whose enthusiasm far outdid mine in collecting information, and whose support in every way has been a tremendous source of strength. But for them, I would be nowhere.

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Gita Jayaraj

July, 1994.

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## INTRODUCTION

**Teyyam**, a ritual dance of North Kerala, goes back to at least fifteen centuries. The end of the monsoons in Kerala is accompanied by an outburst of festivity. It is celebration time in most villages, and festivity and celebration here are intricately interwoven with the religious in the fabric of social life. The Teyyam performance is one such celebration, the predominant reason for which is propitiation of the deity worshipped.

The dance is performed by male members of specific lower castes who have been invested with this right to perform and it passes down hereditarily in most cases. Teyyam performances take place predominantly in private shrines of ancestral homes, or, of specific castes, or, communities. The performance itself is suffused with rituals and begins with the performer singing the **Thottam** (narrative in which the myth of the deity is related and the deity invoked) in front of the shrine. This is generally the beginning of the sequence of the dance proper. The performer during this narration is not in elaborate costume or facial make-up that normally characterises a Teyyam performance. Instead he is often (though not always) devoid of facial make-up and wears an ankle-length loin cloth (white with red, white and black border) and wraps around the white bit another red cloth.

As the **Thottam** is sung, the deity is invoked in order to enter the body of the performer. He may exhibit signs of possession, through rolling eyes, jerky body movements, or, uncontrollable trembling of limbs in a state of trance. It must be mentioned that in the case of most (though not all), Teyyam deities, toddy (fermented liquor from coconut or palm) is an essential part of the ritual offering. This offering is made intermittently throughout the performance in small spouted containers from the time the performer begins singing the **Thottam**.

Some Teyyam deities have a **Vellattam** which involves a slightly more elaborate costume, head-dress, and facial make-up than the **Thottam** narration and is almost like a Teyyam performance. After the **Thottam** or **Vellattam** (depending on the deity), the performer goes back to the temporary 'green room' adjacent to, or very close to the shrine to prepare for the Teyyam performance.

A few hours later, he emerges and returns in front of the shrine and begins to dance after the preliminary rituals. By this time, he is believed to have transformed into the deity and is recognised as such. The dance itself is rather energetic although it begins slowly and picks up momentum gradually. The performer-deity with his huge head-gear and cumbersome costume even performs some fantastic feats like walking or running through fire or dancing with burning torches (**pandhams**) attached to his waist-dress etc.

After much frenzied dancing and other rituals the performer-deity receives offerings from the audience-devotees and blesses them. He listens to their woes and offers advice and consolation. After some more dancing he asks permission to be returned to the shrine. As the spirit of the deity leaves the performer, the latter undergoes a sudden transformation collapsing weakly as waiting attendants help him or carry him back in a semi-conscious state into the green room.

This kind of dance in which the deity possesses the performer is common in many parts of India. Quite often one observes even members of the audience going into a trance or being possessed. However, neither of these phenomena are restricted to India alone. It may be found in other places (mostly Asian countries) also. For instance, that it is very much a part of the Sri Lankan Island is clear from **The Ceremonial Dances of the Sinhalese** (1973) by Otakar Pertold. A few dances that he describes - the ceremonial dances of the Vaddas and the Yakun-natima of the Sinhalese are remarkable in their similarity to Teyyam performances. Laure Ozanon in *The Hindu Magazine*, (May 29, 1994), reports of another similar ritual performance in the Chinese Province of Guizhou called **Dixi** meaning 'ground theatre' or **Jiao Shen**, 'the dance of the Gods'. Most ritual theatre is thus either an impersonation of the gods or to put it more accurately, preparing the body (performer's) and soul to



become a receptacle for the spirit of god; undergoing transformation from man to god.

These rituals are then "stylized and symbolic body actions centered on cosmic structures and/or sacred presences."<sup>1</sup>

To strike a personal note, for me, the process of watching performance, learning and material collection was a **liminal** phase in the rite of passage of these two years of study. I call this **liminal** because it was a betwixt and between position where I vacillated between roles and constantly kept changing and assuming new personae. So I slipped from being a research student registered at the hostel of School of Drama into a personal guest of the Warden, to a visiting relative/niece with the family of Dr. Nambiar and several other kind strangers - who welcomed me into the comfort and warmth of their homes so that I might watch performances - and who are now good friends. But the most conspicuous shift in roles/positions I observed was during the performances, when I kept slipping between being an objective observer/student and a subjective devotee. It was quite difficult to maintain the first position for too long - and so, I found myself moving in line with offerings for my share of blessings and prophecies of success. I was constantly reminded of my position as student, by the willing interaction of the musicians, assistants, fathers and teachers of the performers and the priests as they took a

few moments off to relax between rituals and their respective duties. I was aware of being studied by the performers, whom I studied and wondered and tried to gauge if it was 'transformation' or 'transportation' that they had achieved. I never failed to be impressed by their perceptive insights as they walked among and talked to us lesser mortals.

There were moments of embarrassment as well - like the time when I stood in a line of people (all men, although, I failed to attach any significance to this, then), who walked up to the performer-deity blessing each by applying sandal-paste on his forehead. Ignorant of the fact that women did not participate in this particular ritual of blessing, I reached the performer-deity. But the deity was not fazed or perturbed, and he, without even a flicker of the eye blessed me the way he had others. I realized my blunder, when an ex-performer, father of one of the present performers kept assuring me how fortunate I was that the Lord had blessed me with his own hand. I could not be sure if my feelings were those of embarrassment or good-fortune.

Teyyam performances always left me feeling elated and euphoric and the feeling persisted for a few days each time. I realised the extent of my involvement with, or my subjectivity towards this 'ritual-theatre' when I even began to dream of Teyyam. The boundary separating ritual from theatre was getting more and more blurred, as a result. I still maintain that the two are closely interlinked and that one

does not necessarily start where the other leaves off. Without getting into arguments regarding the merits or demerits, subjectivity need not, I believe, detract from the authenticity of any study. On the other hand, a certain degree of involvement may lead to, or is a pre-requisite for sincerity.

Finally, there is the problem of interpretation of myths and symbols. This is one of the most difficult tasks that faces ritual and culture studies. 'Interpretation' would invariably give rise to the question 'whose interpretation? Is it 'etic' or 'emic'? Many of us in our enthusiasm get carried away to 'make' and 'see' meanings that may not be. For this reason, I have left the myth just as it was related by Mr. Raghavan - an 'inside' informant. It is here used as a background text on which the particular performance described following it is based. The myth is a ritual process by itself and contains within itself the three phases of separation, liminality and reaggregation that 'Siva' has to undergo, due to a breach and crises in the social drama of his life as Vayanatu Kulavan. On the other hand, the entire myth may function as a liminal period when all social norms are subverted and God - in the guise of Vayanatu Kulavan - walked the earth and lived among men, choosing his friends from various castes and inverting the hierarchy existing between them.

At another level, it may be the worship of an ancestor. Tiyas are essentially a caste of toddy-tappers, and it is they who worship Vayanatu Kulavan. If he is regarded as Divyan as according to Dr. Namboodiri's version, then he could be seen as an ancestor who gave the caste their occupation of toddy-tapping. Since Divyan was created essentially with the express purpose of tapping toddy for his father, Siva.

The assimilation and incorporation that has taken place in Teyyam can be observed in the fact that while the central deity around whom the performance revolves is a tribal hunter-deity, it weaves into the myth, Thiruvadi Nallachan, a very philosophical, vedic concept of God, an eternal being without beginning or end. Interestingly, there is a muslim among his retinue of friends. There are other Teyyam performances where muslims form an integral part of the myth and performance. However, none of these are the essential concerns of this dissertation and therefore, I let them rest.

This dissertation describes various aspects of Teyyam. The first Chapter describes Teyyam: its meaning, origin, seasons, reasons and places of performances. It also describes some of the essential rituals and the basic structure that they follow, which are common to most Teyyam performances, a sketch of which has already been given above.

The second Chapter takes a look at the concepts of caste, religions and ritual which are closely inter-related in the socio-cultural set-up of India. It also names the various castes and tribes who perform Teyyam and sketches briefly their occupations and gives examples of some of the deities that they may perform. It also takes a look at how religion and ritual operates and how Hinduism, in Kerala evolved, as a fusion of the pre-vedic and the vedic with the belief that it may throw some light on what follows in Chapter Three.

Chapter Three narrates the myth of Vayanatu Kulavan Teyyam, which blends elements of essentially tribal hero-worship with that of a philosophical Hindu concept of a God who exists independent of time and space. Myths abound in symbolic elements but the myth in action, and, as movement and process is the essence of ritual and performance and hence from myth to ritual and theatre is but a short step. The focus of this section is, however, Turner's concept of 'social drama', how Teyyam fits into this and where or if it leaves ritual space/context to move into theatre space/context.

The fourth and concluding Chapter is about a few of those many doubts that arise as you realise that the more you learn, the less you know. Some of the questions addressed in this Chapter are: does the movement, from ritual to theatre and vice versa necessarily mean the attenuation of either; does there really exist such a great deal of

difference between 'transformation' and 'transportation' as it is commonly made out to be; and what exactly is the role of body in the exploration of space in performances like Teyyam. However, these questions have only been raised and no attempt has been made here to give conclusive answers.

#### **Notes and References**

- 1 Evan M. Zuesse, "Ritual" in Mircea Elaide ed., **The Encyclopedia of Religion**, (New York, 1987), Vol.12, p. 405.

## CHAPTER I

### TOWARDS PERFORMANCE

A ritual performance of great popularity among the people of North Kerala, **Teyyam** is also an important mode of worship. Restricted to the geographical area around Tulunad Kasargod and Kolathunad, Teyyam is known by various names in the different regions of North Malabar.<sup>1</sup>

**Names and their Etymology:** The performance is known as Teyyam in Kannur (Cannanore), Kasargod and Tellichery districts. According to Dr. Kurup, "The term **Teyattam** denotes the dance of god and the term Teyyam is a corrupt form of **Deivam** or God."<sup>2</sup> The meaning of the word is derived from the root 'tey' n < **daiva** - deity; 'am' is a commonly used nominal suffix. Hence, according to the **Tamil Lexicon** and the **Kazhakat Tamizh**<sup>3</sup> **Akarathy**, tey + am -> teyyam; deity. Gundert's Malayalam and English Dictionary defines teyyam as follows: "as interjection, O God' and gives its origin as daivam. C. Madhavan Pillai gives its meaning as a corrupted form of Deivam hence God."<sup>5</sup> However, the word Teyyam meaning deity is used synonymously with the performance (**Teyyattam**) and the performer or artist (**Kolakkaran**). The Teyyam performances (henceforth Teyyam<sup>6</sup>) of a few deities (**Vettaikorumagan**, **Vairajathan**, **Munnayarishwaran**) are known as **Tira** in Kannur and Kasargod<sup>7</sup>.

In Kozhikode (Calicut) all Teyyams are known as **Tira** or **Tirayattam**. Two predominant opinions exist as to the reason

why this is so, both of which seem equally probable. Dr. S.K. Nayar<sup>8</sup> believes that **tira** is the colloquial version of the original **tara**. Among the several meanings listed by Gundert are: foundation, elevated ground, altar, a small district or parish, country places, mofussil etc. (p.424).

Dr Vishnu Namboodiri elaborates that in ancient times, Kerala was divided into **taras** and **nadus** in order to maintain law and order and to ensure protection of its people. Most **taras** were a cluster of Nair families who formed the feudal chiefs and nobility. They gathered (i.e. assembled) before their common shrine to discuss matters and solve problems pertaining to the society. The land-owners were called **tarakkar** (those of or from the **taras** the word **tarawad** meaning an ancestral residence of landowners is also derived from this root). Since this common meeting ground was also a place of worship, they believed it necessary to settle problems and disputes in the society before their deity or God. In these places the adoration and worship of the deity through performances impersonating the deity were frequent. As they were performed at the **tara** (which may be just an elevated ground, or an altar, or shrines connected to the **tarawads**) these performances came to be called **tara** or **tarayattam** which gradually changed to the colloquial **tira** or **tirayattam**.<sup>9</sup>

However, if the word **tira** is retained as the root then the meaning to divulge, disclose, unveil or reveal



emerges.<sup>10</sup> Gundert defines it as "an offering". Dr. Namboodiri quotes Mekkunnaththu Kunhikrishnan Nair as defining **tira** as a vision of God (**Deivadarsanam**).<sup>11</sup> In Quailandy, **tira** is known by the name **Nattatira** :- **Natta - Nrta** - dance and by definition of Gundert, **Tira** - an offering. Hence, a dance offering. This meaning is quite in keeping with the notion that Teyyam **Tira** is a ritual mode of worship.<sup>12</sup>

Further up north between Kasargod and Mangalore, Teyyam is known as **Kolam Kettu**. The word **Kolakkaran** meaning performer is derived from this - **Kolam** - form, shape, general appearance, beauty, embellishments, or costume" and **Kolamketta** as: "to attire for a dramatic performance, to put on a mask or costume."<sup>13</sup> The word has the same connotations in Malayalam as well. Around South Canara, a variation of the same form is described as the **Bhuta** (ghost) or spirit cult and is called the **Kola** or **Bhuta Kola**. The rituals, costume, head-dress, and in many cases even the deities described by Martha Bush Ashton<sup>14</sup> and M.L. Varadpande<sup>15</sup> are remarkably similar to the Teyyam performances of Kerala. As a result, Varadpande describes Teyyam as "the ritualistic **Bhuta** theatre of Kerala".

At this point it might be worth mentioning that C.M.S. Chandera<sup>16</sup> has another theory about these different names attributed to Teyyam. He argues that an ancient cult of the Mother Goddess (**Kāli**) incorporated dance (**āttam**), as a propitiation; this performance was, therefore called **Kāliy-**

**attam** which in the course of time had its vowel shorted through colloquial speech to **Kaliyāttam**. The appellations Teyamkettu, Teyyattam, Kolamkettu, Kettiyadikkal, Tirayattam were all the different names given to this performance during its various stages of evolution.

**Origin:** The origin of Teyyam has for long baffled researchers. It may be possible to trace its origin to the dance and worship of the early settlers or autochchthonous natives of Tulunad who had immigrated into Kolathunad.<sup>17</sup> Although it is acknowledged to be an ancient ritual practice that has survived over the centuries most scholars are reluctant even to fix its date to any particular century.

"According to the legendary **Keralolpatti**<sup>18</sup>, Parasuram, [one of the incarnations (avatars) of Vishnu according to Hindu legends] sanctioned the festivals like Kaliyattam, Puravela and Deivattam or Teyyattam to the people of Kerala. The native communities like Panan, Velan and Vannan were allotted the profession of Teyyam dance.<sup>19</sup> However, most performers and some researchers are of the opinion that this is a myth perpetrated by Aryans (read Brahmans) involved in a power play with native Dravidians in trying to maintain their dominance in a hierarchical caste structure with the natives at a subordinate position.<sup>20</sup>

Tamil literature of the Cankam period (0 to fifth or even sixth century AD)<sup>21</sup> mentions a similar type of ritual performed by the **velan** (one of the community of Teyyam

performers) called the **veri** although it has elements of exorcism; part of this ritual is the **veriattu** or **veriatat** in which the **velan** is possessed by a deity (Murukan) and he dances in a trance.<sup>22</sup> Features like **Kalam** (an altar created for the veri, made of plantain-tree stem etc.), animal or fowl sacrifice (**bali**), narrative songs (**thottam**), location of performances (**manram** - a meeting place in a village<sup>23</sup>, estuary or river banks, groves or forests, etc.) and huge head-dresses with a cloth hanging down the back, all of which can be traced down to the present day Teyyam are mentioned in **Kurunthokai, Akananuru, Thirumurukatuppatai**. If one were to take the dance of the **velan** as the historical predecessor of Teyyam, which has taken new forms and incorporated new deities, the ancestry of Teyyam goes back to a period of 1500 years.<sup>24</sup> In spite of superficial differences between **Bhuta Kola, Teyyam and Veriyatal** one clear pattern emerges: Teyyam must have originated at a time when the people of Tulunad, Kolathunad and Tamilnad, besides their geographical proximity shared a basic language, as well as religion and way of life: "In North Malabar, they [teyyam dancers] were patronised by feudal chiefs in ... places where the Dravidian culture was maintaining its supremacy. The tribal communities ... were the custodians of the art ... some of them belonged to the Tulu country of the present South Karnataka which once formed a contiguous area belonging to the same cultural heritage."<sup>25</sup> This gradually branched into different but closely connected social set-ups

after making the necessary adaptations that were required of them over the centuries.

**Seasons and Reasons:** Most festivals in Kerala begin at the end of the monsoons. As monsoons draw to a close in late October, it is believed to be Teyyam season once again in North Malabar. But monsoons never end abruptly and the rains continue intermittently almost till mid-December. As a result except for the occasional performance most Teyyam performances begin only around the Malayalam Month of **Vrischikam** - mid-December. The Malayalam month of **Makaram** - mid-January to mid-February is the height of the season with several performances taking place through a single-night to mid-day.<sup>26</sup> The festivity continues right through the months of February and March, gradually dwindling away in the months of April-May as the thunderstorms and summer showers announce the arrival of the monsoons in June.

Although there may be several reasons for the performances of Teyyam, the underlying cause of them all is propitiation, adoration and worship. Since Teyyam seems to have its origin in various cults, the deities thus propitiated and worshipped may be deified ancestors, heroes (including those who had died prematurely, unnaturally or been prey to social injustices), animals (serpents, tigers), deities of various diseases, tribal and folk mother-goddesses, forces of nature and anyone whose memory the society wished to cherish. The appropriate deities were propitiated in times of diseases and other calamities, to grant special favours,

or, just for protection and well-being. Thus an epidemic of pox in a village would call for a Teyyam performance of and propitiating Maakam Teyyam; Muthappan and Pottan Theyyam to prevent impending dangers or ward off calamities and so forth.<sup>27</sup>

**Performance Space and Stage:** Teyyam seems to be a ritual performance of shrines rather than temples<sup>28</sup>; it remains virtually unknown as a form of worship in the temples or shrines even in central or southern Kerala. **Kavu** is the term generally given to those small shrines dotting the countryside and found in villages and private residences, while bigger temples are known as **ambalams** or **kshetrams**. As the late G. Shankara Pillai has said, Teyyam is not an art of the temples; it is an art belonging to shrines and homes.<sup>29</sup> Besides **kavus** Teyyams are performed in shrines such as **ara**, **palliyara sthanam**, **mundya**, **muchilot**, **madappura**, **podikkalam** and **kottam**.<sup>30</sup> Most of these shrines were private and attached to ancestral homes at one time. Later, some of them attained the stature of public shrines (open to an entire community or village) while others gradually developed into temples.

Teyyams are performed predominantly in the open air, before these shrines - which may be either independent or attached to ancestral homes; in the case of Teyyam performances in these latter shrines, it is held in an open air courtyard just outside the house in front of the shrine.

Occasionally Teyyams may be performed in meadows or harvested fields. As Mr. Suresh Awasthi says, "In India theatrical space can take many forms, shapes and characters. It can be a special sacred space or an ordinary space made special and sacred by demarcating and consecrating it. The ordinary space used for a variety of social and secular performances can be fields after harvest, market squares, public parks and gardens, streets and fair grounds. It can be a space surrounding the sacrificial altar ... or a variety of spaces in a temple complex for many types of performances - from ritual events to such highly evolved dramatic forms as Kuttiyattam and Krishnattam. A performance event, such as a celebration in the social life of the community or an offering to the gods, is a vital factor in selecting and conditioning the form and nature of the theatrical space.

Performances are also held in front of the village temple all over the country."<sup>31</sup>

Unlike the **Chakyar Kuthu** or **Kudiyattam**, which are performed only in **Kuthambalams** - a large rectangular wooden structure in some temples of Kerala, is the temple theatre used for the presentation of Sanskrit plays. These are usually located on the right hand side in front of the deity<sup>32</sup> - Teyyam has no such stage inside or outside the shrine. For the most part, it takes place before the deity, in front of the shrine. This, then, serves as the performance space. If there is to be a sacrifice as part of the ritual during the performance, a **Kalam** (a temporary altar)

also determines this space to an extent. But this may shift at any given moment to any part of the shrine depending on the various rituals performed thus proving as Mr. Awasthi says, "Theatre does not simply occur in available space. It creates its own space and alters available space. The character of the performance and most of the elements of a theatrical event - the physical setting and placing of the spectators in relation to the performance space - have a role to play in shaping and determining the space. But the main source is the presence of the possessed body of the actor. A given space acquires new forms and its dimensions change according to where the actors take up their position.<sup>33</sup>

**Rights and Rituals:** Teyyams, are performed only by male members of specific lower castes like **Vannan, Malayan, Velan, Mavilan, Pulayan, Koppalan, Panan, Anjuttan, Munnuttan** etc. It is believed that at some undated time, in the past, the right to perform Teyyams to propitiate deities had been vested in them. This right was inherited by successive generations of sons and nephews who at a very early age (around seven or eight) began training in all aspects of Teyyam. They were systematically taught the **thottams**, the **mantras**, the blessings, the steps and **kalaripayittu** (a martial art of Kerala which was often incorporated into Teyyam). Besides, they accompanied their fathers and uncles to performances and constantly imbibed techniques by helping and observing. At the green room or in the performance

arena, they helped with make-up and costume, and music, thus learning these techniques as well. At times, these young boys performed in the unimportant rituals of deities in village festivals. A Teyyam artist is considered to be proficient if he has a mastery of all these different aspects of Teyyam.

Almost every stage in a Teyyam performance is a ritual. The first step towards a Teyyam performance is fixing the date of performance. In the case of some annual performances, the date is fixed according to the Malayalam calendar (which is lunar) and the performance takes place on the same day every year. However, this is not always the case, and some tarawads invite the astrologer and performer (who performs annually at that tarawad) over, and after consultation by means of **prasnam** (a branch of astrology especially vogue in Kerala<sup>34</sup>) a date is decided upon. In some shrines grand Teyyam performances called **Kaliyattam** or **Perumkaliyattam**<sup>35</sup> takes place once in ten, twelve, fifteen or twenty-five years. It has been reported that "the Thira of Kenamangalathu Baghavathy of Palikkara Kenamangalam Kazakam temple, Nileshtar, takes place once in 100 years."<sup>36</sup> Festivals like these may be either fixed according to the calendar or after 'prasnam' consultation. Sometimes dates are fixed merely according to convenience.

After the date has been fixed, the main performer is given betel leaves with some money. This serves as an



agreement between the trustee of the shrine or responsible person (i.e. the head of the house, **Karanavan**) and the performer. This is also known as "Nirathinu Panam Kodukku-ga" (meaning money given for the colours, with which the performer paints his body and face during the performance), or "Adayalam Vangal" (accepting a token or symbol) and is the beginning of a series of rituals that end only at the end of a Teyyam or Kaliyattam.

Once the agreement to perform at a particular shrine has been made, the performer is expected to meditate on the deity whose Teyyam, he is to perform. Besides, he has also to undergo certain fasts and abstain from some things that he might normally indulge in, in his day-to-day life<sup>37</sup>. The types of fasts and abstinences vary from deity to deity. This ritual is believed to enable the performer to prepare himself both physically and mentally and to gain strength and confidence necessary for the performance.

**Guruthi** is an important ritual in some Teyyam performances. It is the appeasement and propitiation of the deity with blood and is performed at the beginning of the Teyyam performance, by the priest. Red liquid, initially blood of the sacrificial animal, now substituted by turmeric mixed with lime and water, in a flat container, is used as the priest invokes the deity to partake of it. Small squares of plantain leaves are placed on the floor on which small lighted wicks are placed along with other proprietary offerings. The priest then takes a few thin lighted wicks

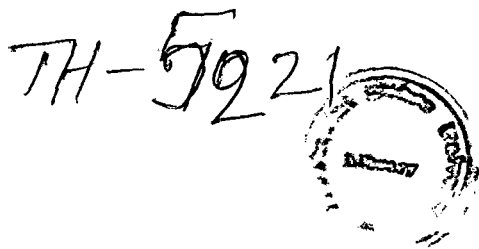
(usually made of cotton cloth rolled and dipped in oil) between his fingers and makes small slapping motions on the liquid. He then pretends to offer it up to the deities. The liquid is then poured out on the ground and the empty bell-metal vessel is inverted and placed there before being removed.

**Velichappadu** or oracle as many writers prefer to call it is important to almost all religious performances in Kerala. While in some cases, the oracles are part of temple processions, in Teyyam performances (especially those that take place in shrines), they are the initial performers who lead the Teyyam performer on to the performance area. Bare-chested and wrapped in a red loin-cloth, the Velichappad holds a long, sickle-shaped sword fitted with bells which he waves wildly about as he dances in a frenzy, and is believed to be possessed by the deity. Often, he cuts himself with this sword and priests rush with sacred-ash to stop the flow of blood from his fore-head or arms or shoulders. It is said that being possessed by the deity, he is capable of these super-human feats and feels no pain and is unaware of any physical injury that he inflicts on himself.

It is this spirit of the deity that the oracle transfers into the performer as the latter takes centre stage. But **guruthi** or **velichappad** is not essential to every Teyyam performance. In some cases, the priest mediates between the deity and the performer with the help of the **kodiyila**

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(plantain leaf with lighted wicks, uncooked rice and a few other ritually auspicious things), as he himself gets possessed and acts as the oracle and dances in a trance with the performer for a short while during which the spirit of the deity moves from priest to performer.

The preliminary ritual of a Teyyam performance begins with the invocation of the deity, followed by the narration, the myth of that particular deity that the performer is to propitiate. This is sung to the accompaniment of musical instruments, mostly percussions like **chendas**, **veekuchendas**, **madhdhalams**, - all drums of different kinds, **elathalams**, - two flat brass plates, clapped together (cymbals), and **cheenikuzhals**, - a small trumpet shaped wind-instrument. The **thottam** begins after sunset, on the evening of the scheduled performance or on the previous evening of the actual performance if there are more than three to five Teyyams. The entire narrative unit is called the **thottam**. although it is divided into several distinct parts each of which is sung for a particular purpose. Briefly, they are **"Varavili, Neetukavi, Thalavritham, Sthuthikal, Varavili again, Anjadi"**. Finally, there is the **"Polichupattu"**. With this the **thottam** comes to an end.<sup>38</sup>

The word **thottam** has several connotations: to create, to make live, to give life to, etc.<sup>39</sup>

**Thottams** are sung without facial make up. The costume or head dress is not elaborate either. The performer comes

and stands in front of the shrine facing the deity and invokes him/her by singing the **thottam**. This invocation called the **varavili** is an important part of every **thottam**, by which the spirit of the deity is invited into the body of the performer. The priest of the shrine who mediates<sup>40</sup> between the performer and the deity gives the performer a **kodiyila**. This is a symbolic act in which the priest invokes the spirit of the deity into the lighted wick and transfers it, in the act of handing it over, to the performer. The deity is now believed to be with the performer. The **kodiyila** (with wicks) is returned to the priest after the Teyyam, symbolic of returning the spirit of the deity.

During the **thottam**, the performer narrates the myth of the deity. He is assisted in the narration both by musicians and the assistants who invariably accompany the performer onto the performing arena. These may in some cases be the sons and nephews of performers who are learning. The **thottams** vary in length and may take anything between one to twenty four hours.<sup>41</sup> As the performer sings he begins to exhibit signs of possession or transformation through jerky body movements, rolling eyes and so forth. The music which had started slowly, gradually picks up speed as the rhythm and tempo increase and the performer's body movements get more and more frenzied (in some cases, the performer may even begin dancing) and uncontrollable and is helped back into the green-room for the costume and make-up ritual for the Theyyam to follow. In the meantime, the **thottam** of

another deity may be recited and so on. Depending on the number of deities to be propitiated, they may begin either on the evening scheduled for the performance or on the previous evening.

Some deities, especially deified heroes and ancestors have a ritual called '**vellattam**' or '**vellattu**' which includes the **thottam**. The **vellattam** of a Teyyam is often described as a less elaborate or an incomplete version of the Teyyam that is performed later. The performer's costume for the **vellattam** is less elaborate than the Teyyam costume. His face is made up and body painted and he wears a small crown or head-dress (**mudi**). The **vellattam** performer (the same who later performs the Teyyam of that particular deity), is given the **kodiyila** (plantain leaf with lighted wicks and other ritual accessories) even before he is costumed and made-up for the **vellattam** performance. He collects it and retires to the green room. Some time later, he emerges in splendid costume and begins to dance in front of the shrine, facing the deity. Often this dance incorporates elements of **kalaripayattu**. The **thottam** narration begins and continues between various rituals and by the end of it, the performer reaches a state of trance and is believed to be infused with the spirit of the deity.

**Vellattams** are generally considered to be the youthful manifestations of the deities who appear in their older or more mature manifestations in the Teyyam performances that follow. **Vellattams** of Teyyam deities are also called **elam-**

**kolams.** However, Chandera<sup>42</sup> is of the opinion that only **vellattams** of female deities and ancestors are called **elam-kolams.** In some districts of North Malabar, **thottams** are called **vellattams** and vice-versa.

Different reasons have been attributed to the reason why this particular ritual is called **vellattam.** S.K. Nayar<sup>43</sup> explains that during some **vellattam** performances, a white cloth is spread over a stool (**peedham**) and the devotees throw rice grains and flowers into it. This cloth along with the grains of rice and flowers is tucked with the head-dress of the performer. Since this cloth is always white (**vella**) and the performer dances (**attam**) with it, the ritual is called **vellattam.** However, this explanation is not entirely satisfactory to most researchers who argue that this ritual of throwing rice grains and flowers into a white cloth, which is later tucked into the performer's head-dress is not found in all **vellattam** performances.

Dr. Namboodiri<sup>44</sup> tells of another improbable explanation as reported by Dr. Chelanad Achuta Menon. He reports that the performers poured boiling rice-paste over their bodies and danced in frenzy which is why the performance is called **vellattam.** It is, however, defined as "a solemn ritual dance" by many including Gundert which seems to be the most appropriate meaning of the word in the context.

**Costume, Make-up and Head-dress:** After the **vellattam** the performer is led away into the make-shift green room

adjacent to the shrine for a change of make-up and costume for the Teyyam performance. The first thing to strike the observer of any Teyyam performance is the colourful and elaborately detailed costume and make-up which is distinct for every single deity who is propitiated; " The distinctive features of each Teyyam and the myths and rituals associated with each determine the nature of the make-up and costume and each Teyyam varies greatly from the other."<sup>45</sup> As a result, the rules laid down for this is taught by one generation of artists to the next and one may not deviate from the specified patterns. However, a little imagination and artistic talent often makes a great deal of difference.

The skirts worn by Teyyam performers are of two types: those made of tender coconut leaves and those made from red fabric. Around the waist is the *oda* or waist dress made from splints of bamboo or arecanut palm and embellished with red cloth tassels, mirrors, etc. The *oda* may be either circular or rectangular. Most hero Teyyams (Kathivanur Veeran, Kandanar Kelan) wear the circular waist dress, and most goddesses (Muccilot Baghavati, Tayipara Devata, Palottu Deivam) wear the rectangular. The shape of the *oda* is determined according to the movements and the basic emotion characterising the deity. "The waist dress is designed according to the movements of the respective deities as well as stayibhava or lasting emotion, which according to the Natyasastra transforms into rasa."<sup>46</sup> The circular waist-dress allows for greater flexibility and is convenient for

the rapid, acrobatic movements of heroic ancestors while the rectangular variety is more suited to deities with slow, deliberate, stately movements.

Painting on the body - **maikkezhuthu** - and the face-**mukhatezhuthu** and **teppu** - is done with the mid-rib of the blade of the coconut-palm. One end of it is crushed to make a brush and the other sharpened to paint thin delicate lines and designs. The colours are made from indigenous substances available locally. Turmeric powder and **manayola** (red arsenic) are used for the yellow colours, lamp-black or **mashi** is used for black; rice-powder made into paste with water is used for white. **Cayilyam** (vermilion) and turmeric powder mixed with **chunam** (lime) is used for red. These are the colours commonly used in Teyyam make-up with red being the most predominant.

Painting of the body - **maikezhuthu** - is essential for all bare-chested male deities. The patterns painted on the body, waist upwards, are symbolic and is closely associated with the legend of the deity. **Maikezhuthu** may be done either very minutely and in great detail, or it may be simple - just pasting rice-paste or turmeric powder on the body. Cotton is stuck on the bodies or on another fabric to resemble fur and is worn by some teyyam performers like tiger teyyams (male), **Ninam aniyal** literally means "wearing blood" and is another form of **maikhezhuthu**. Turmeric and lime are mixed with boiled rice to create the illusion of blood and



this paste is smeared all over the body by deities like Ninappisacu, Rakteshwari and others.

**Mukhatezhuthu** and **Teppu** are both make-up or painting of the face. The former is the more common of the two and is elaborate and minutely done. "Usually sharp lines and tantric patterns like Sudarsanachakram [Lord Vishnu's discus], sreechakram and ashtakon [octagon] are drawn on the face and sometimes on the body."<sup>47</sup>

**Mukhatezhuthus** are of several types and are known by different names among the artists of the North Malabar districts. For instance, **Prakezhuttu** is the facial make-up for deities like Muccilot Baghavati, Aayithi Bhaghavathi, Karin Kali Kannanghat Bhaghavathi; **Kattarampulli** for Rakteshwari, Urpazhichi, Vettaikorumagan etc. **Narikkuriccezhuthu** for Pullikarinkali, Puliyoru Kali, **Vairadhalam** for Narambil Bhaghawati etc.

**Teppu** or **Mukhateppu** is much simpler. Rice paste, turmeric powder and red colour is merely applied on the face without paying too much attention to fine details as in **mukhatezhuthu**. Muthappan, Kurunthiri Bhagavati, Puthichon etc., have this kind of make up.<sup>48</sup>

Some of the deities, Guligan, Pottan Teyyam etc., wear masks or half-masks: eye masks, beards and mustaches and in the case of goddesses, moulded breast-plates of metal or crafted on wood are used. Long, curved false canine teeth called **Mullekiru** are used to denote the ferocity of some of

these deities. Teyyam performers wear heavy metal anklets and a broader anklet adorned with shells and bells. Bracelets and bangles adorn the wrists and arms. Silver ear-ornaments and artificial hair also form part of the costume.

Finally there is the head-dress (mudi) which has specific shapes and sizes depending on the deity. They are decorated with mirrors, coloured cloth, paper, gilt, metal, peacock feathers, tender coconut leaves. The frame of these head-dresses may be made of bamboo splits or trunks of arecanut palms. Some of them go up to almost forty feet in height and requires the help of several attendants to fix it on the performer's head. "An integral part of the head-gear of almost all Teyyams is the beautifully crafted talappali which forms the base upon which the head gear is fixed. It is a silver ornament fringed with a number of flower like decorations, which gives the head dress harmony and beauty"<sup>49</sup>

Depending on the deity and the rituals involved in the propitiation of each, the head-gear may be fixed either before the performer comes on to the performing space or it may be fixed after his arrival there. With this the performer is transformed into a larger than life deity, colourful, exotic and awe-inspiring.

Make up and costumes is a long procedure taking anything between two to eight hours, during which the craftsmen

and attendants<sup>50</sup> continue to chant **thottams** (these are different from those sung in front of the deity; it is believed that the deity is being painted on to the face of the performer and hence they are sung).

After the head-dress is fixed and the final touches of make-up are over, there is a symbolic ritual called **mukhadharshanam** in which the performer in all his finery looks into the mirror and sees instead the image of the deity. It is believed that at this moment the transformation is complete and the self is utterly negated. From this moment, movement and dialogue become stylized.

The arrival of the Teyyam performer on to the performance area is accompanied by the beating of drums and other musical instruments. If the performance is in a separate public shrine, he circumambulates the shrine accompanied by priests, musicians and the public. On the other hand in shrines attached to residences, he comes directly into the performance space. This ritual called the **purappadu** which means beginning of a journey or setting out or just getting ready.

**Purappadu** is followed by a ritual where the Teyyam talks to and blesses the priests and the trustees of the shrine. He then moves towards the people and speaks to them and listens to their woes and supplications. He offers them **prasadam** which may be some flowers or turmeric powder, as a token of blessings of the deity.

Various ritual acts depending on the Teyyam performed follow, accompanied by slow and sometimes frenzied dancing. Some of these deities are propitiated by offering sacrifices of fowl and goats. Others may walk or leap through live-coal or fire, still others perform **kalaripayattu** feats using weapons. Finally the performer slows down. Again, he mingles with the crowds, a God among the people, who make offerings of money and other things. He consoles and blesses them and sometimes metes out penances and punishments. Finally, the **arattu** or concluding dance is performed and he is led away tired and exhausted after several hours of being god into the green room, where his head-dress is removed bringing the performance to an end. Several Teyyam performances may follow with slight changes in the essential rituals. Individual rituals peculiar to each deity may be incorporated. The **kodiyila** is returned to the priest and the shrine is closed for cleaning and purification. The performers, musicians and craftsmen are paid and sent on their way after breakfast or lunch.

### Notes and References I

- 1 Tulunad, Kasargod and Kolathunad is here collectively referred to as North Malabar.
- 2 K.K.N. Kurup, **Aryan and Dravidian Elements in Malabar Folklore: A Case Study of Ramavilliam Kalakkam** (Trivandrum, 1977), p. 5.
- 3 Tamizh is commonly spelt Tamil. Due to the close connection between the Tamil and Malayalam languages both language dictionaries have been referred to, to establish root/origin and meaning.
- 4 H. Gundert, **A Malayalam and English Dictionary** (Kottayam, 1962), II Edn. p. 463.
- 5 C. Madhavan Pillai, **NBS Malayalam English Nighantu** (Kottayam, 1976), p. 498.
- 6 The Word 'Teyyam' will be used to mean only the performance in this dissertation. The performer/artist and the deity shall be known as performer and deity respectively, or the word Teyyam shall be suffixed to the name of the deity in the latter case [e.g. Vishnumurthy Teyyam, Puthiya Bhaghavathy Teyyam etc.].
- 7 M.N. Vishnu Namboodiri, **Thottam Pattukal Oru Padanam** (Kottayam, 1990), p. 53.
- 8 S.K. Nayar, **Keralathile Natoti Natagankal** (Madras, 1962), p. 101.
- 9 Namboodiri, n. 7, p. 55.
- 10 Burrow, T. and Emeneau, M.B., **A Dravidian Etymological Dictionary** (Oxford, 1984), II Edn. p. 283.
- 11 Namboodiri, n. 7, p. 58.
- 12 Ibid., p. 54.
- 13 M. Winslow, **A Comprehensive Tamil and English Dictionary** (Delhi, 1989), VI AES Reprint, p. 380.
- 14 Martha Bush Ashton, "Spirit Cults Festivals in South Kanara" in **The Drama Review**, (Massachusetts, 1979), Vol. 2, no. 23, pp. 81-85.
- 15 M.L. Varadpande, **History of Indian Theatre: Loka Ranga-Folk Theatre - "Theatre of Rituals"** (Delhi, 1992), pp. 44-60.
- 16 C.M.S. Chandra, **Kaliyattam** (Kottayam, 1978), II Edn.

- 17 Ibid., p. 26.
- 18 A book by this name has been written by Rev. H. Gundert who has documented, the myths and legends connected with the origin of Kerala and its culture. *Keralolpatti - the origin of Kerala, lit., the production/making of Kerala.*
- 19 Kurup, n.2, p. 4.
- 20 Ibid., p. 4.
- 21 Friedhelm Hardy, "From the Illness of Love to Social Hermeneutics: Three Tamil Customs, with some Reflections on Method and Meaning", in Richard F. Grombrich, ed., *Indian Ritual and its Exegesis, Oxford University Papers on India* (Delhi, 1988) Vol. 2, Part I, p. 116.
- 22 Ibid., pp. 116-122.
- 23 Nirmal Selvamony, "Manram", *Tamil Civilization* (Madras, 1989), Vol. 7, No. 2-4, p. 39.
- 24 K.K.N. Kurup, *Teyyam: A Ritual Dance of North Kerala* (Trivandrum, 1986), pp. 12-15.
- 25 K.N. Panickar, *Folklore of Kerala* (Delhi, 1991), p. 16.
- 26 Another reason for this may be Kerala's economy which is largely agricultural; the livelihood of most people depend on the monsoons. Corresponding to the South-West and North-East monsoons there are two harvest seasons, the Kanni harvest and Makara harvest. Once the second harvest is over there is a wait for rains, before sowing for the next season or cycle begins. As a result people are free to pursue their own forms of entertainment and worship till then.
- 27 Namboodiri, n. 7, p. 48.
- 28 By differentiating between shrines and temples, I mean the former to be those private places of worship attached to ancestral houses, or belonging to a small community or village (as in Taras mentioned above). The rituals here are not vedic or Brahmanical in nature and the priest belongs to the same community or caste as residents of the place. Temples on the other hand were those introduced by the arrival of the Aryans in Kerala. The rituals are conducted and officiated by Namboodiri Brahmans and sometimes other Brahmans. The concept of purity-pollution in temples and their rituals besides being based on the sacred and the profane (as in shrines) is also based on caste hierarchy.

- 29 G. Shankara Pillai, "Theyattacharchekku oru Thottam", **Theyyam** (Trichur, 1987), p.
- 30 Chandra, n. 16, p. 41.
- 31 Suresh Awasthi, **Drama: The Gift of Gods - Culture, Performance and Communication in India**, (Japan, 1983), p. 50.
- 32 Ibid., p. 54.
- 33 Ibid., p. 51.
- 34 Srikanth, **Power in Temples: A New Look Through Modern Science**, (Payannur, 1987), p. 102.
- 35 See Appendix.
- 36 Jose George, "Theyyam Thira: Dance of the Possessed" in **Discover India**, Vol. 4, no. 5, May 1991.
- 37 These may be in the form of abstaining from eating meat or drinking alcohol. In some cases it was necessary to abstain from any form of sexual activity. In some rigorous fasts it was even necessary for the performer to stay within the shrine premises and cook his own food in order to prevent any form of ritual or accidental pollution.
- 38 Namboodiri, n. 7, p. 57.
- 39 Namboodiri, n. 7, p. 21-22.
- 40 It is generally believed that for an ordinary human-being to enter into any kind of direct contact with gods and deities may result in some dangerous or tragic outcome because of the energy and power that is unleashed. Therefore it is necessary to undergo fasts and other ritual processes to enter into this realm with the help of one who acts as buffer, in this case, the priest of the shrine.
- 41 K.K. Karunakaran, "Thottam of Makkom: A Note", **Malayalam Literary Survey**, (Trichur, 1989), Vol.11, no. 1, p. 41.
- 42 Chandra, n. 16, p. 99.
- 43 Nayar, n. 8, pp. 102-103.
- 44 Namboodiri, n. 7, p. 58.
- 45 A.K. Nambiar, "The Ritual Accessories of Theyyam", **The India Magazine**, Vol. 13, Aug. 1993, p. 8.

- 46 Ibid., p. 9.
- 47 Ibid., p. 12.
- 48 Namboodiri, n. 7, pp. 70-71.
- 49 Nambiar, n. 47, p. 11-12.
- 50 Every Teyyam performer is accompanied by at least one or two helpers who attend to his every need both during the performance and in the green-room.



**CHAPTER II**  
**OF PERFORMERS, RELIGION AND RITUAL.**

Caste, religion and connected rituals are intricately interwoven in the social structure of India. In order to understand any aspect of Indian culture, it is important to realise this. This chapter gives an account of the caste system and how it operated in India generally and in Kerala in particular. It also takes a brief look at those castes which perform Teyyam. It also attempts to explain how religion and ritual operates and to see how religion particularly Hinduism as it exists now in Kerala could have possibly evolved. This will perhaps help to see better the elements of an essentially tribal hunter deity elevated to the status of god in the myth related (chapter III), and how it is connected to the later Hindu philosophical concept of a theophanic God (Nallachan) who has neither beginning nor end, and the tension underlying the relation between the two. Besides it will also explore the concept of **social drama** and how Teyyam as a ritual process operates within it and or subverts the structure of the caste system however briefly, or symbolically.

**Caste:** Caste and Religion form an important and recurring motif in the social fabric of India. The origins of the caste system is rather obscure; there are those who trace it to verses in the Rig Veda while others aver that they are later interpolations. However, the caste system as

it exists now is believed to be more in line with the ordinance of **Manusmriti/Manu Dharmashastra**, rather than the Vedic concept of caste where the word was used in keeping with the profession or occupation of the individual.<sup>1</sup> The word caste is derived from the Portuguese **casta** meaning race or lineage which in turn is derived from the Latin **castus** meaning pure.<sup>2</sup> It now means different things to different people. Therefore, it is necessary to elucidate at the outset in what sense the word is used here. In the words of Edmund R Leach, "In the writings of anthropologists and sociologists, the word 'caste' is used in two different senses. As an ethnographic category, it refers exclusively to a system of social organisation peculiar to Hindu India, but as a sociological category it may denote almost any kind of class structure of exceptional rigidity."<sup>3</sup>

In this dissertation the word is used in the former sense, as an ethnographic category referring to a system of social organisation peculiar to Hindu India and particularly with reference to the concept of **chaturvarna** rather than as **jati**<sup>4</sup> which shall be referred to as 'sub-castes'. It has often been considered as a specifically cultural rather than structural phenomenon, as a fundamental institution of Hinduism and is normally defined by a list of cultural traits. However, caste, as Leach so clearly states: "denotes a particular species of structural organisation [emphasis mine] indisolubly linked with what Dumont...insists is Pan-Indian civilization."<sup>5</sup> As a result castes are

incapable of existing by themselves and form "an organic system with each particular caste and sub-caste filling a distinctive functional role. It is a system of labour division from which the element of competition among workers has been largely excluded."<sup>6</sup> However, with the shifting patterns of dominance, caste evolved into a far more complicated and frustrating system than it originally intended to be.

In an 'ideal' caste type, dichotomy in the field of social relationships - political, economic and ritual relations being external, and kinship, internal - follows from three caste traits: occupational specialization, hierarchy and endogamy. They are established by cultural rules which in turn specify caste behaviour.

Although caste systems in real life lack the absolute rigidity of the ideal type, they always remain hierarchical structures. This hierarchical ordering is based on the belief in ritual purity and pollution. This, in turn, gives rise to rules of social distance between castes.<sup>7</sup>

Although it is difficult to locate exactly the origins of this system, it has been widely accepted as an **Aryan**<sup>8</sup> institution. But, it has been noticed that the caste system, or the rigid adherence to it is greater in the southern parts of India which was and is believed to be a **Dravidian** stronghold. As for Kerala, it is generally believed and accepted that the concept of caste was introduced by the

Nambudiri or Malayali Brahmans who claimed and were believed to be Aryans<sup>9</sup>, and who "settled in Kerala by about the third Century A.D."<sup>10</sup>. By this time, Buddhism and especially Jainism had made its presence felt in the land, on its people and their religion; so there were besides the Nambudiris, other Aryans in Kerala. However, it was the rise of the Nambudiris to power and influence around the eighth century A.D. that gave the caste system in Kerala its final shape, for a long time to come. With the concept of **chaturvarna**, the vedas and their gods they created major changes in its society. In their quest for dominance and control and their need to be on the highest rung of the social - hierarchical ladder, it was decreed that besides touch, the mere sight of a lower caste or outcaste could pollute ritually. As a result, the evils of the system grew to such horrific proportions that it took quite a few progressive reformers and social reform movements to reduce its tenacious grip and effects on Kerala society.

The above account appears to put the blame of the evils of the caste system squarely on the shoulders of the Nambudiri Brahmans. However, in all fairness to them, it must be admitted that the native tribes ("large scale decent-group[s] subsisting in isolation. The tribe[s] may be composed of pastoralists, agriculturalists, artisans and hunters. It has its own culture and sub-culture. It is a group **not** integrated with others in a caste system"),<sup>11</sup> and the settlers - the Dravidians - offered little or no resist-

ance to it and in fact took it up with "as much zest....as the Aryans themselves". Judging by the fact that the caste system has made southern India its stronghold, it is not surprising that Slater suggests that it might have been a Dravidian institution rather than Aryan: "...notoriously the caste system is much stronger, more elaborate and plays a much larger part in social life in South India than in North India; and it reaches its highest development in that part of India which is most effectively cut off from land invasions from the north, the narrow strip of land between the Western Ghats and the Arabian Sea. This fact is by itself sufficient to prove that caste is of Dravidian rather than Aryan origin."<sup>12</sup>

Kolenda, who tries to trace the origins of the caste system to the Indus Valley Civilization, seems to corroborate this suggestion. The script found on the square steatite seals though not definitely deciphered has been hypothesized by most scholars as a written form of proto - Dravidian. These city-dwellers according to most archeologists and scholars may have been ancestors of the speakers of the Dravidian family of languages who now populate South India and form pockets of tribesmen in Central and South India. As the Indus was not a state, but a set of chiefdoms, as seen from the excavations, castes may have developed out of them, as they became regionally specialized in production of commodities and the chief served as the centre of redistributive network and they closed ranks to become endogamous.

This phenomenon might have later spread to the occupational specialists within the chiefdom. But, this is one of the several hypothesis put forward by S.C Malik which Kolenda cites to trace one of the possible origins of the system.<sup>13</sup>

However this may be, the tribes and settlers of Kerala, before the advent of the Aryans did not live without social groups or structures. This would be almost impossible since every society is built upon certain structural units forming a structural whole, although the degrees of complexity may vary from one society to another.

For instance, one type of social system according to Cankam literature was the division of people into groups based on their occupation, which was again based on the nature of land or region they occupied. **Kurinji** (mountainous regions) had as its main occupants **Kuravars** (hunters), since that was the predominant occupation of the land similarly these were the **maravars** (fighters) of **palai** (desert/arid region), **idayas** (shepherds and cowherds) of **mullai** (pastures), **uzhavas** (agriculturalists) of **marutam** (wet/fertile land), and **paravas** (fishermen) of **neytal** (coastal land). Even the poetries and poetry of the Cankam period are said to be based on these divisions.<sup>14</sup>

The native tribes had their own social units although very little was known about them and all anthropological details available about them are of recent date.<sup>15</sup>

As for the caste hierarchy, as seen in Kerala, especially North Malabar, although based on the **chaturvarna** concept, it had quite a few intermediary castes as well. "Of the four varnas there are practically no kshatriyas and few, if any, indigenous vaisya castes: the bulk of the population comprises sudras and untouchables".<sup>16</sup>. Among the Brahmans who follow the patrilineal system (makkathayam) of descent and inheritance, at the top of the hierarchical structure are the Malayali Brahmans (Nambudiris) followed by the Tulu Brahmans (Embrantiris) and finally the Tamil Brahmans (Pattars).

Below them in ritual ranking but economically as or sometimes more powerful are a small group of various chieftain castes some of whom claim to belong to the kshatriya caste. They are sometimes grouped with the Antaratilajatis.

There are practically no vaisyas and the occupation of this caste block is carried on by the Christian and Muslim communities who, however, fall outside the pale of the four varnas and are therefore, grouped with the outcastes - **Avarna**.

The Nayars who are Sudras are a large matrilineal (marumakkathayam) group of castes. Traditionally soldiers and land-owners in the manner of English feudal chiefs, there were numerous subcastes among them which were hierarchically arranged.<sup>17</sup>. Marriage and inter-dining were not permissible between some of these sub-castes.

Below the Brahmans and Kshatriyas and above the Nayars were the Antaralajatis constituting the Amabalavasis and Samanthans. These castes comprised those who were the offsprings of hypergamy between the ritually lower-caste women and the Nambudiri men.

All the other castes and tribes that did not fall within the **chaturvarna** divisions were therefore called **avarna** - the Christians and Muslims were also included among them - and were considered outcastes and untouchables, although untouchability was a feature even among those castes within the **chaturvarna**. The **Ezhavas** or **Tiyas**, the **Vannans**, **Malayans**, **Pulayas**, **Paraiyars**, **Panars**, **Velans**, **Kaniyans**, **Cherumans**-and many other such castes and tribes fall under this **avarna** category. They also have a particular hierarchical order, with the **Tiyas** on the top of the **avarna** group. Besides each caste or tribe had several sub-castes, some of which were patrilineal and other matrilineal, and had their own rules about inter-dining and inter-marriage among them.

The Teyyam performers of North Malabar were from some of these **avarna** castes and tribes. **Vannan**, **Malayan**, **Panan**, **Mavilon**, **Chingathan**, **Velan**, **Munuttan**, **Anjuttan**, **Koppalar**, **Pulayan**, **Parayan**, **Kalanadi**, **Perumannan**, **Pambathar**, and **Paravar** are the castes and tribes whose men perform.<sup>18</sup> Almost all of them have traditional occupations, peculiar to their castes and tribes. Most of them practise magic and witch-



craft. Some of the members of these castes are physicians, who use magic, witchcraft or herbs and other natural products to cure illnesses of members of their castes and tribes. Since Teyyam performances are seasonal, most of them have other means of livelihood during the rest of the year like, tailoring, basket-weaving, exorcism and agriculture. Some of these tribes literally 'sing' for their food, while others hunt or trap small birds and animals, or collect honey and other forest produce which they sell. However, once the Teyyam season begins all other activities are set aside. Curiously, just like the division of labour among castes, even deities have been divided among these performing castes. Each caste was entitled to perform Teyyams of specific deities although these deities and performing castes and tribes overlapped occasionally. For instance, Teyyam performances of Guligan or Kurathi deities may not be performed by members of the **Vannan** caste. However, **Malayans, Mavilons, Cheravans**, were some of the castes entitled to their performance and propitiation.

What follows is a brief account of the occupation and some of the deities that some of the above mentioned castes were entitled to propitiate through performance.<sup>19</sup>

**Vannan** - Vannan is the Malayalam equivalent for washerman. As their name suggests, their main occupation was washing the clothes of those ranking ritually above them. While the women washed clothes of women ranking higher in

the social hierarchy, men also tailored, were physicians and performers of Teyyam. Vannans were and are a predominant caste in Teyyam performances who are entitled to perform Teyyams of the most number of deities, some of whom are Kali, Bhagavathy, Nagam, Bhutam, Puli Teyyams, Ghandarvans etc.

**Malayan** - The name suggests a jungle tribe inhabiting the hills. Their principal occupation according to Thurston is exorcism<sup>20</sup>. They are also healers and great musicians. The women assist in child-birth and are mid-wives for higher-caste women. The men, besides accompanying as musicians during Teyyam performances, also perform Teyyams of Bhairavan, Pottan, Guligan, Kurathi, Kuttichathan, Uchchita etc.

**Panans** - They are akin to the Malayans in that they are also musicians and exorcists by occupation and the women assist as mid-wives. The men perform most of the Teyyam performances of the Malayans.

**Mavilons and Chiravans** - The latter are believed to be a sub-caste of the former. They speak a corrupt version of Tulu and are employed as mahouts; they also collect honey and other forest produce. Besides, they make baskets and other things from wicker. Their chief is called **Chingam** (literally lion)<sup>21</sup>. They perform Teyyams of Chamundi, Visnumurthi, Kurathy, Kuravan, Guligan, Paraliyamma, Virabhadran, Vannathi Bhaavathy, Pottankayathu Bhagavathy.

**Chingathan/Chungathan** - They appear to be a sub-caste of Mavilons according to Dr. Namboodiri. Their chief is also called **Chingam**. They collect honey and weave baskets and perform Teyyams of some of the same deities - Vannathi Bhagavathy, Paraliyamma, Thayi paradevatha, Veerachamundi, Pudiya Bhagavathy.

**Velan, Munuttan and Anjuttan** - Although opinions vary, Dr. Namboodiri argues that the latter two are sub-castes of the former - velan. Thurston believed that Anjuttan was a sub-division of Panan, Velan and Mannan. They are believed to be of Tulu origin and their life reflects Tulu culture. Velans have also been mentioned in Cankam literature as a caste whose occupation was exorcism. While velans propitiate Panchuruli, Dhooma Bhagavathi, Pullichamundi etc. Anjuttans propitiate Kolamagan, Chorakalathi Bhagavathi, Dhooma Bhagavathi and also share some deities in common with Vannans whom they also propitiate.

**Perumannan** - They perform Teyyams of Karimvilli, Puvilli, Bhairavan etc. They usually tie a particular piece of cloth round their head during Teyyam performance which is cremated along with them when they die.<sup>22</sup>

**Kalanadis** - They are mostly magicians by occupation and propitiate Sitayamma Teyyam, Pakantheyyam, Pullikali, Puvilli, Ilavilli.

**Koppalas, Pambathas and Paravars** - These tribes are akin to Velans. They are magicians and witch-doctors/physi-

cians. They perform some of the same Teyyams as the Velans.

**Pulayars** - The cherumars of South Malabar are the Pulayars of North Malabar. They are agricultural serfs by occupation.<sup>23</sup> They perform Teyyams of Mantramurthi, Madayil Chamundi, Rakteshwari, Bhairavan etc.

**Parayars** - They perform Teyyams of Kuttichathan, Bhagavathi, Kalan and their main occupation is magic, witchcraft and sorcery.

With the drafting of the Indian Constitution after independence, and the several subsequent amendments that followed it has been ensured that this section of people have been included among the scheduled castes and tribes and other backward classes. They are entitled to special provisions and privileges in various spheres of life like education, job opportunities etc. Most of them have moved away from their traditional occupations into jobs that are more lucrative and with steady incomes. Pollution and untouchability have been eradicated to a large extent due to Kerala shifting towards an industrial economy which makes it impossible to maintain them in public spheres of work, sport, education etc., although traces of it may exist in some remote parts of the state. Besides, castes have lost most of their traditional functions and cease to be "...exclusive occupational, commensal or administrative units."<sup>24</sup> As a result, they also "lose their hereditary differential

rights in the produce of the village and their economic and ritual interdependence..."<sup>25</sup>

**Religion:** The origins of religion like the origin of caste are lost in antiquity and although the concept of 'religion' has meant various things to different people in human history, as far as one knows, it has always been present in human society. While sociologists and anthropologists the world over have tried to trace its origins by studying "primitive societies" - their beliefs and rituals in relation to their society - the variance in its definition arises due to the fact that these are shifts in focus from which students of religion study the phenomenon. There are the theologians who "begin with a faith in the divine" and try "to work out the implications of this for human life, and conversely the ways in which human experience helps us to understand the nature of divine being"<sup>26</sup>; philosophers, who as metaphysicians argue, "...for and against the existence of God";<sup>27</sup> as epistemologists are, "concerned with the meaning of the claim that men can know God, whether by revelation, by natural theology, or in other ways",<sup>28</sup> and as ethical theorists wonder about and study "the relations between religion and morality."<sup>29</sup> Then, there are the students of sociology and anthropology and comparative religion who all use data from one or many faiths and work from them. They either, "work within a very narrow compass, for instance, the close analysis of a small and transient sect, or...try to develop a grand theory of religion and

society and find(s) that every kind and type of religious phenomena is grist to...[the] mill....[their] job is primarily to understand the meaning for a particular society of its own religious system and inter-relations of that religion with the social structure and with non-religious aspects of culture...."<sup>30</sup>

It is thus evident that each of them take one aspect of this phenomenon as central to their study. They, then build their definitions around it. While there is little doubt that each is capable of benefitting from the work of the other, the focus most appropriate to the context of this study is socio-anthropological.

Even when the focus is narrowed down to this area, Schneider clearly touched the root of the problem when he stated, "Religions vary. Definitions of religion vary. It seems that there is no end to the formulations of definitions of religion."<sup>31</sup> However, he continues that, these differences are not necessarily incompatible, but that they are merely the "effects of looking at different aspects of the same thing."<sup>32</sup> Beginning from the positivists, the intellectualists, functionalists, structuralists, post-structuralists have all defined religion according to their theoretical stands and convictions. In spite of differences, they have all been consistent about the conviction that religion comprises beliefs, symbols and rituals. Symbols and rituals are believed to co-exist. "The phenomenon of ritual in particular, is symbolically saturated. It is

even in a sense redundant to speak of such things as 'rituals having symbolic significance'. Since we can justifiably insist that the term ritual has no meaning unless it is allowed at once that a symbolic element is always a component of it...Ritual 'means' and 'ends' are connected by symbolic contiguity" and are "by no means bound by a causal tie. If we were to insist on understanding ritual on the models of means and performance characteristic for technological endeavor, we might well end again with the view that ritual was mere 'foolishness' and thereby seriously impair our understanding of it and religion generally."<sup>33</sup> Thus belief and ritual are two sides of the coin, religion, both of which are pervaded by symbols.

**Ritual:** That ritual plays a very important role in religion is evident from the fact that all religions are suffused with rituals, "Religion, like art, lives in so far as it is performed, that is, in so far as its rituals are 'going concerns'. If you wish to spay or geld religion first remove its rituals, its generative and regenerative processes. For religion is not a cognitive system, a set of dogmas alone, it is a meaningful experience and experienced meaning. In ritual one lives through events, or through the alchemy of its framings and symbolings relives semiogenetic events, the deeds and words of prophets and saints or if these are absent, myths and sacred epics."<sup>34</sup>

Like religion, definitions of ritual vary with the point of view one wishes to take and while there is a general agreement about the 'central area', there tend to be disputes over the 'periphery and boundaries'.<sup>35</sup>

Ritual then, has been described as culturally, standardized, or prescribed, repetitive activity. It is primarily symbolic in nature and is aimed at influencing human affairs and involving the supernatural realm. But to define it is as an activity involving the supernatural realm is to restrict its scope according to David Kertzer, who argues that "ritual provides a powerful way in which people's social dependence can be expressed" and is, therefore, "symbolic behaviour that is socially standardized and repetitive."<sup>36</sup>

Defined like this a whole new range of activity falls within the purview of this concept, and not merely the religious. It is in this all-inclusive sense that anthropologists use the term now, although, some try to differentiate religious ritual from secular ritual.

The psychoanalysts took it a stage further and described it as non-rational, or formalised symbolic behaviour of any kind.<sup>37</sup> which included neurotic obsessional acts as well and contrasted this with science and common sense. A distinction is then made between ritual in which the "means-end" relationship is non-intrinsic i.e. either irrational or non-rational and technical acts which is



rational. However, as La Fontaine says, there are cultures that exhibit irrational or non-rational symbols which are peculiar to their tradition, in their technical skills. The question therefore is not one of difference but the proportion of the 'preponderance of symbolic over technical action' which marks off ritual action from technical action. Thus there is a continuum of action stretching from the purely technical to the purely symbolic.<sup>38</sup> But "ritual is more than merely symbolic action..., although it underlines and makes emphatic its symbolic intention."<sup>39</sup>

Gilbert Lewis takes up this problem of what ritual really is as he accepts these varied anthropological descriptions and from it systematically analyses, eliminates and tries to formulate a theory of ritual that is more coherent than most,

"It is more accurate to look on ritual as a performance like a play, which is responded to in various ways: Communication is only a part of it....Ritual is not exactly like language; it is not exactly like communication by means of a code nor can it be decoded like one. The complexity and uncertainty about a ritual's meaning is not to be seen just as a defect - a code too obscure, too hard to decipher, too easily garbled. It can also be a source of that strength, evocative power, resilience and mutability which may sometimes sustain and preserve ritual performance."<sup>40</sup>

Thus one of the distinguishing features of ritual is that it is 'performed'. That religion and ritual is not synonymous has already been mentioned; for, the former may operate more through conscious cognitive faculties than ritual which makes use of all the senses in its performance. As rituals are 'transformative experiences', one may become what one performs,<sup>41</sup> at least for the duration of the performance.

Turner throughout his career investigated ritual and found it in social processes which he realized were performative. He built on the insights of Arnold Van Gennep, who introduced the term "rites de passage" to describe two types of rites: those that accompany the passage of a person from one social status to another for instance from childhood to adolescence or adulthood (circumcision and puberty rites), marriage rites, funeral rites etc.; and those that marked recognised points in the passage of time (new year, new moon, solstices etc.). The term is now almost restricted in use to the former types of rites also known as 'life-crisis rites'. Van Gennep further discussed its inherent fundamental tripartite structure - separation or rites of separation, transition or marginal/liminal rites and incorporation or rites of aggregation. He was the first to note that it was necessary for a person to be separated from one role or status before being incorporated into another. He thus identified besides separation, and incorporation, a transi-

tion or liminal phase, and emphasised that ritual is a 'process'.

Taking this as his point of departure for his theories on the ritual processes, Turner argued that ritual universally involves a dialectic between 'structure' and 'anti-structure'. Social order and continuity is maintained by ritual which juxtaposes these two by managing the passage of persons from one set of normative positions, roles, rules and social status to another. On the other hand, when ritualists enter this phase of liminality or this state of 'betwixt and between', successive lodgements almost anything - unexpected, dangerous or potentially creative things - may happen.

Turner specialized in the liminal, the in-between, or threshold (from the L. Limen - threshold). He was particularly "interested in performance, - theatre, dance, music, ritual and social drama - because performance is the art that is open, unfinished, decentered, liminal. Performance is a paradigm of process."<sup>42</sup>

All Hindu rituals are also codified acts "done" or "performed" whether it is the private family puja practice at home or a more elaborate and public vedic sacrificial ritual in temples. While these are essentially ritual practices as performance, these are some actions that are best described as ritual performances.

Religious practice in all cultures has been closely associated with poetry, dance, music, drama and other visual arts. Traditional Indian performances in particular "are suffused with religious significance and punctuated by ritual practice."<sup>43</sup> What sets apart these ritual performances from other ritual acts is its "vivid, visual, visceral and overt visitations of divine powers. They are characterised by direct visitations of the deity in the form of possession either of ritual specialists or of devotees..." The "action" of ritual performance is "immediate"<sup>44</sup>

The Teyyam performance of North Malabar would fall under this category of ritual performances, as would others like **Mudiyettu** and **Padayani** from other parts of Kerala. The story or myth of the god, goddess is important and is narrated, sung or performed and the god/goddess makes an appearance. Make-up, costume, masks and weapons, movements and actions make the performer an immediate and dramatic vehicle for this divine visitation. Thus, the god or goddess is believed to have come to this world in a "graphic, immediate sense"<sup>45</sup> by possessing either ritual specialists or devotees.

All these performances, mentioned above, are associated with some type of **sakti**, the manifestation of the feminine aspect of divine power. This feminine principle is generally subsumed within the all-Hindu hierarchy by associations with **siva**. This **sakti** appears in a wide variety of feminine forms, some benign and the others awesome and fearful.

Teyyam in particular incorporated within its fold of performances varied deities. Religion in Kerala even before the advent of Hinduism, as it exists now, was animistic and hence polytheistic. The native people worshipped trees, serpents, animals, spirits, ancestors and heroes; Saivaite gods and goddesses were later identified and merged with Rudra<sup>46</sup> of the vedas with the settling of the Brahmans. Vaishnavaites were also included among these divine cults. On the other hand, the worship, rituals and performances associated with most of these deities who were originally tribal gods and goddesses have been accepted by the Brahmans of Malabar with a few changes. A large number of Teyyam gods and goddesses are worshipped in Malabar by different communities including the Brahmans. Some of the Brahman families have their own Bhagavati shrines in the vicinity of their house-holds where the traditional folk dancers perform Teyyams like Raktaswari, Bhagavati, Camundi and Visnumurti<sup>47</sup>

Similarly the tribes and indigenous population of Kerala adopted many of the Brahman/Aryan rituals substituting several of their own with them. Thus, with the introduction of Hinduism, and Buddhism and Jainism to a lesser extent, the native people incorporated elements from them into their own religion. Hinduism as it exists now in Malabar (Kerala and in most of India) is a fusion of the vedic deities, puranic gods, mythical heroes, tribal gods

and goddesses. As Kolenda says, "The working together of Aryan culture and culture of the indigenous conquered peoples produced Hinduism and the caste system with the Brahman at the apex as priest. Both Hinduism and the caste system had been established by the pre-Christian era and had spread from Northern India to the Southern part of the peninsula...absorbing and eventually winning out over such sophisticated competitors as Buddhism and Jainism. Thus the historical process was one of progressive Hinduization of the tribes."<sup>48</sup>. However, "they [the tribes] differ in degree of commitment to orthodox Hindu values [and] in the richness and uniqueness of their sub-cultural life...."<sup>49</sup>, along with their beliefs and rituals which is perhaps why Teyyam as a ritual performance and mode of worship and propitiation has survived to this day.

But, as Dr. Kurup says, "It seems that there was no violent confrontation between the classical culture of the new immigrants and the indigenous folk culture of Malabar society. Both cultures co-existed influencing each other."<sup>50</sup>

## Notes and References II

- 1 John Wilson, **Indian Caste** Vol.1, (New Delhi, 1976) p.101.
- 2 S.V. Ketkar, **History of Caste in India** (Jaipur, 1979), p.12
- 3 Edmund R. Leach, "Introduction: What should we mean by caste?", in Edmund R. Leach, ed., **Aspects of Caste in South India, Ceylon and North West Pakistan**, (Cambridge, 1971), p.1.
- 4 Chaturvarna meaning four colours, literally. The Caste system was divided into four - Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras. Among each Varna were innumerable sub-castes which could be termed jatis.
- 5 Leach, n.3, p.5
- 6 Ibid., p.5.
- 7 E. Kathleen Gough, "Caste in a Tanjore Village", in Edmund R. Leach, ed., **Aspects of Caste in South India, Ceylon and North West Pakistan**, edited by Edmund R. Leach, (Cambridge, 1971), p. 11.
- 8 The term means "noble", which perhaps refers to their dominant position in Society. The Aryans were early speakers of Vedic Sanskrit, an Indo-European Language.
- 9 Reference to their arrival and subsequent settlement is constantly made by the scholars and performers of Teyyam. This is also referred to in both the social and cultural History of Kerala.
- 10 L.A. Krishna Iyer, **Kerala and her people** (Palghat: 1961), p.40
- 11 Pauline Kolenda, **Caste in Contemporary India: Beyond Organic Solidarity** (Jaipur, 1984), p.8.
- 12 Gilbert Slater, **The Dravidian Element in Indian Culture** (New Delhi, 1976), p.53
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- 14 K.N. Panikkar, **Folklore of Kerala** (New Delhi, 1991), pp. 8 & 9.
- 15 Kolenda surmises that perhaps that the tribe existed first. Then, perhaps the tribe became a caste as Hindu Village life was established. n.11,p.9.

- 16 Eric J. Miller, "Village structure in Northern Kerala", in M.N. Srinivas, ed., **India's Village** (West Bengal, 1955), p.46.
- 17 *ibid.*, pp. 40 & 41.
- 18 M.V. Vishu Namboodiri, **Thottam Pattukal : Oru Padanam** (Kottayam, 1990), p. 75.
- 19 For a more detailed account on Castes and Tribes - occupation, kinship etc. Check Seven volumes of Edgar Thurston's **Castes and Tribes of Southern India**. Dr. Namboodiri and C.M.S. Chandra give a list of books to refer to in their footnotes. Besides these latter books also list out comprehensively the deities to be propitiated by each of these castes and tribes.
- 20 Edgar Thurston, **Castes and Tribes of Southern India**, (Delhi, 1975), vol. VII.
- 21 Namboodiri, n. 18, pp. 78 & 79.
- 22 *ibid.*, p. 84.
- 23 *ibid.*, p.84.
- 24 Leach, n.3, p. 13.
- 25 *ibid.*, p. 13
- 26 Betty R. Scharf, **The Sociological Study of Religion** (London, 1970), p.11.
- 27 *ibid.*, p. 11.
- 28 *ibid.*, p. 11.
- 29 *ibid.*, p. 12.
- 30 *ibid.*, pp. 11,12. Psychologists and Psychoanalysts have also been studying religion and man's behaviour in connection with it and they have their own theories and biases.
- 31 Louis Schneider, **Sociological Approach to Religion** (New York, 1970), p. 11
- 32 *ibid.*, p. 11
- 33 *ibid.*, p. 31
- 34 Victor Turner, **The Anthropology of Performance** (New York, 1986) p.48



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- 36 David I. Kertzer, **Ritual, Politics and Power** (New Haven, 1988)
- 37 Evans M. Zeusse, "Ritual" in Mircea Eliade ed., **The Encyclopedia of Religion** (New York, 1987), Vol. 12, p. 405.
- 38 J.S. La Fontaine, "Ritualisation of Women's life-crises in Bugisu", in J.S. La Fontaine, ed., **The Interpretation of Ritual: Essays in honour of A.I. Richards** (London, 1972), p. 160.
- 39 Zeusse n. 37, p. 406.
- 40 Gilbert Lewis, n. 35, p. 8.
- 41 Barbara G. Myerhoff and others, "Rites of Passage: An Overview" in Mircea Eliade ed., **The Encyclopedia of Religion** (New York, 1987), Vol. 12, p. 385.
- 42 Victor Turner, n. 34, p.8.
- 43 Phillip B. Zarrilli, "The Ritual Tradition: Introduction" in Farley P. Richmond and others, ed., **Indian Theatre Traditions of Performance** (Honolulu, 1990), p.121.
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- 47 K.K.N. Kurup, **Aryan and Dravidian Elements in Malabar Folklore: A Case Study of Ramavilliam Kalakam** (Trivandrum, 1977), p. 7.
- 48 Kolenda, n. 11, p. 31 and 32.
- 49 *ibid.*, p. 14.
- 50 Kurup, n. 47, p. 31.

### CHAPTER III

#### SOCIAL DRAMA : RITUAL AND THEATRE

This chapter begins with the myth of **Vayanatu Kulavan** and **Kandanar Kelan Teyyams** and goes on to describe the performance in 'action' or 'process' and takes a look at how a Teyyam performance fits into the redressive phase of social drama.

The version of the myth of **Vayanatu Kulavan**, a saivaite deity and **Kandanar Kelan**, an ancestral spirit is as told, and later, written out by the priest Mr. Raghavan from the tiya caste, who plays a very important role during the performance of these Teyyams. Dr. Namboodiri in his Ph.D. thesis, gives a brief account of these myths. While the **Kandanar Kelan** myth agrees in most respects with that of Mr. Raghavan, that of **Vayanatu Kulavan**, differs considerably. Although there are no major changes in the episodes and the main plot in both versions, all those things that happen to **Vayanatu Kulavan** (Siva, here) after the birth of Divyan, in Mr. Raghavan's version, happen to Divyan in Dr. Namboodiri's version. The place of the eternal being or the timeless one **Thiruvadi Nallachan** is taken by Lord Siva. Dr. Namboodiri's version is also the version of some spectators among the audience. What follows here is, however, Mr. Raghavan's version.

**Vayanatu Kulavan Teyyam** and **Kandanar Kelan Teyyams** are usually performed on the same evening-night-dawn. The

former may also be performed, at times, without the latter. The myth of Kandanar Kelan follows that of Vayanatu Kulavan, or rather, is one episode among many in his life.

**Vayanatu Kulavan:** Those were the days when Siva and his consort, Parvati lived in the forests and hills of Wyanad. Siva spent the day hunting and while returning home in the evening, he always stopped by near the palm-trees and got quite drunk from the toddy, which, in those days, sprang from the stem and bottom of the trees. Every night, he came back intoxicated and this disgusted Parvati, who decided it was time for her to intervene and put an end to this readily available addiction. She found the trees from which her problem stemmed. She patted/rubbed the intoxicating brew upwards, and, through her divine powers sent the toddy up the tree to its crown, from where it henceforth had to be brought down. The next evening, tired after the day's hunting, an eager Siva reached the trees, only to find that there was no sign either of the toddy or the pot out of which he drank it. Looking around, he spied it on top of the tree and realised that it was the handiwork of his beloved consort. Irritated, he slapped his thigh; a son sprang forth whom he named Divyan. He ordered Divyan to bring down toddy from the tree. At his father's behest, Divyan did so and Siva drank until he could drink no more.

Still furious with Parvati, he threatened to leave her and go to Malanad. A worried Parvati pleaded and cajoled

but Siva would not listen. Finally, she coaxed him to go with her to the eternal one **Thiruvadi Nallachan**, who would settle their dispute. Siva agreed to this suggestion and they reached the presence of the great eternal being, who advised him to stay in Wyanad. He also granted Siva permission to hunt in all the forests of Wyanad except the Kathali forest. At once, curious about this forbidden area, Siva headed straight for the place, where he discovered twenty-one pots of alcohol kept there as an offering. Intoxicated by the mere sight of it, he opened one and took several swigs out of it. In the process, some of the toddy ran down his chest and body. On his way back, attracted by the alcohol on his body insects bit and stung him. (This is symbolically represented by the maikkezhuthu - body painting on the performer. The red and white dots painted on his torso represent these wounds). On seeing these wounds, the eternal Lord asked Siva if he had disobeyed him. Siva lied. Infuriated by the lie, Thiruvadi Nallachan cursed him with blindness. Struck by blindness, a contrite Siva begged Nallachan's forgiveness. Nallachan gave him a pair of false eyes instead. But these were of no use, since it made his partial blindness total. (The false eyes are represented by the metal eye-masks worn by the performer). Complaining bitterly, Siva left Thiruvadi Nallachan's presence and was advised by the latter to light his way with a torch made of dry bamboo leaves. (This torch is now made of dry coconut leaves in Teyyam performances).

Siva with his false eyes and his torch wandered blindly till he reached a place called Udayakannam Perumala. With no sense of direction and frustrated by his blindness, he threw the torch towards Perumala, plucked out his false eyes and flung it in the direction of Ashtagandamala. Totally helpless and lost, he wandered in the forest. His impotent rage prompted him to inflict eleven wounds on his own forehead with his arrow.

Meanwhile, the burning torch that he had thrown towards Perumala, had landed in the courtyard of Parambath Kannan's house, that afternoon. Startled by the sudden fiery torch, he heard the Lord telling him not to fear, and advising him to take a piece of string that held the torch together and place it in a particular spot in his house and worship it. Kannan complied. He then accompanied Siva back to Wyanad where the latter met Thiruvadi Nallachan and told him about his desire to leave for Malanad. Nallachan tried to dissuade him and warned him that he would be offered three nazhis (measure) of rice and dried fish fry. In spite of this Vayanatu Kulavan left with Kannan for Malanad and reached Midhamangalam, fifteen kilometres east of Payyanad.

The **Kolathiri** (Chieftain) of Malanad had, by now, heard about this deity's arrival and desired to visit him. Siva had with him by then five companions **Kudakampalli** (Agampadi), **Kolachekavan** (Kollan), **Thumirikalladi** (Vannan), **Kotavaddukkan** (Tiyam) and **Muhammad** (Muslim). The Kolathiri met the deity, north of the Valapatanam river and offered him a

small piece of land, where he could be worshipped. He got a thatched shed constructed and organised a vellattam in the afternoon during which he offered Vayanattu Kulavan, dry fish (fried) and three nazhis of rice. Kulavan remembered Nallachan's prophecy at the sight of this offering and lamented that his prophecy had been fulfilled. The Kolathiri overheard this and told Siva that if he was such a great deity then he ought to prove it. In order to do this, the Kolathiri told him to hunt in the forests at Chalatu Kadappuram and bring back the carcass of a deer that had been killed without spilling a drop of blood, or bearing any external injury. If Siva was unable to do this, his companions would be sent to the gallows. The Kolathiri then ordered to make arrangements for the execution of Vayanattu Kulavan's companions.

Siva left for the forest accompanied by his friends. Amazingly, there they came across a tiger and a deer playing together. Siva advised Kotavadukkan to aim the arrow into the deer's ear and shoot. This done, they took the carcass back to the Kolathiri, who at once realised the greatness of the deity. Calling him an attractive looking deity, the Kolathiri ordained that from then Vayanatu Kulavan would be offered an extra-measure of rice compared to the three that was normally offered to other deities. His belief in and respect for the deity was established and increased after this.

The following night, the Lord's manifestation is believed to have appeared in the dream of a **Karanavar** (head of a house-tarawad; tiyan residences are also sometimes called tarawad), at Vellikil (near Taliparamba) and instructed him to offer him four measures of rice. This offering was made and accepted. Vayanattu Kulavan also ordained that his Teyyam ought to be performed at his house every year.<sup>1</sup> To find out the meaning of this dream, the Karanavar consulted the **prasnam** with the help of an astrologer who informed him that Vayanatu Kulavan a manifestation of Siva, had entered and was now residing in their **Kottilakam** (place of worship). From then, Teyyam performances of Vayanatu Kulavan had been organised and held every year. The priest was a tiyan ancestor of the present informant.

**Kandanar Kelan Teyyam:** He is a deity propitiated quite often along with Vayanatu Kulavan Teyyam by means of a Teyyan performance, since Siva had ordained it so.

Kelan was an ordinary man belonging to the mavilon caste of Malanad. He worked hard and was capable of a great deal of physical labour. At the same time, he had a great weakness for alcohol which he could never resist. One day, a tiya woman in whose house he was working told him to clear up some forested land. She handed him a machete and three **nazhis** of arrack and three **kuttis** of toddy.

On reaching the site to be cleared, the first thing that Kelan did was, to place the pots of alcohol facing each

of the four directions as an offering to the gods. He then drank up all the alcohol. Filled with strength and vigour, he cleared up the entire area in a short time. He then decided to set fire to even out the clearing and burn up all the twigs, branches and wood. Standing in the middle of all this, he set fire to it. Since it was mid-day, this act of Kelan infuriated Lord Vayu (god of Wind) and Lord Agni (god of Fire), and the fire spread wildly. Kelan realised that he had no means of escape. He climbed the only tree that he had not felled. But atop this tree were a pair of snakes which had taken shelter from the raging fire below. Seeing Kelan, the serpents bit him and Kelan fell unconscious into the fire below and was burnt to ashes.

It was around this time that Vayanatu Kelavan reached this place while returning from a hunt. Exhausted, he decided to rest awhile. Sitting near the burnt clearing, he idly poked his arrow among the ashes. The arrow touched Kelan's body, who held on tight to it. Kulavan then saw that it was Kelan who had been burnt. Since he 'saw' Kelan, the latter was called, addressed by Kulavan, as 'Kandanar Kelan' (from the malayalam *Kān* - to see). Kulavan told Kelan to accompany him and ordained that Kelan's Teyyam would be performed along with his own. It is due to this blessing of Vayanatu Kulavan, that Kandanar Kelan Teyyam is performed along with Vayanatu Kulavans's.

The priest, Mr. Raghavan informs that for a period of forty years, there had been a break in the annual perform-



ances of these Teyyams at that particular house. As a result, the family's status and happiness deteriorated steadily. Finally one of the ancestors - a **Karanavan** - fell off a bridge while crossing it and died. Consultation with astrologers revealed that Vayanatu Kulavan had pushed him off the bridge for failing to propitiate him. Soon thereafter, a nephew/son-in-law, also met with an accidental death. **Prasnams** revealed the lord's anger at being ignored. Soon, thereafter, Teyyam performances were resumed after this and things are much better for the family, as a result.

Vayanatu Kulavan Teyyams are performed by the Vannan caste. Tiyans mediate as oracles and priests. The deity is described as attractive, and great care is taken in make-up and costume to ensure that his legendary good looks are preserved. The performer wears necklaces, armlets, bracelets and anklets. The Mudi or head-dress is medium-sized. He holds a burning torch of dry coconut leaves and wears eye-masks which render him blind during most of the Teyyam performance. Along with his blessings, he offers flowers plucked out of his armlets, bracelets or head-dress. The offerings made to the deity are: rice-grain, coconut, water, bananas, sugar candy, puffed rice, alcohol (toddy, arrack) and raw meat. Flowers are also an important offering.

Kandanar Kelan Teyyams are performed by either the Mavilon or Vannan castes. All other details of costume and

offerings made to the deity are similar to Vayanatu Kulavan. The painting on the face is different and not as attractive as Vayanatu Kulavan Teyyam. The body-painting is of two snakes instead of the spots that is found in Vayanatu-Kulavan. The head-dress is fairly large. Kelan Teyyam also walks on live coal and through burning wood during the performance.

Thus each of these rituals and ceremonies are coupled with special types of attire, music, dance, food and drink, masks, body-painting, head-gear, furniture, shrines, properties like weapons, modes of staging and presentation, physical and cultural environment, and, although abundant opportunities are offered for personal inventiveness, it remains always within the culturally defined celebratory frame.

The material objects, and components used in the performance illustrate the power of symbol and symbolic action. Some of them are expected like the bow and arrow in Vayanatu Kulavan's hand, or the torch or eye-masks, others do not so easily lend themselves to interpretation, like Vayanatu Kulavan leading by the hand devotees around the heap of live coal and ashes. While individual guessing at meaning may be possible, ritual specialists or people considered as 'exegetes'- experts in explanation of symbols - often assign the celebrity or ritual symbol to its role or place within a religious myth or heroic tale. Thus representational mystery is transformed to verbal mystery which is what seems to have taken place in Mr. Raghavan's - the 'exegete' here -

version and interpretation of the Vayanatu Kulavan myth. To borrow Victor Turner's definition myth, which is designated by him as "...the creative deeds of gods, heroes and ancestors who established the cosmic and social orders, often in struggle with powers of chaos. Myth and morality vary independently; indeed some divine, and heroic exploits violate what a society normally considers its standards of goodness or righteousness of conduct or character. Deities commit incest and parricide, tempt and deceive mortals, practice cannibalism. Great heroes have fatal flaws of character. Myths portray generative power as transrational and transethical. Quite often celebrations have mythical "plots" and are based on narratives of divine intervention in human affairs. Celebratory objects may remind participants of those myths and of the primal energies they represent (that is, make present again to the senses, changing the symbols into what is symbolized.)"<sup>2</sup>

But not all symbolic objects can be explained by myths, and one may "have to view them in action, in movement, in becoming, as essentially involved in process."<sup>3</sup> Social structure, organisation and even psychology may be involved here as one observes the attitudes displayed publicly by members of the group towards the symbols and the persons comprising the group: male, female, old, young, or people of high or low castes or ranks or social statuses or both, members of a family or kin group, neighbours or strangers, members of single caste or multicasite, etc.

The above mentioned myths were witnessed in action or in 'process' during the third week of January 1994, at Kanool, near Bakkalam in Kannur district, Kerala at Mr. Krishnan's ancestral residence. It was a sort of thanksgiving propitiation in return for saving the life of one members (sons) of the family. It took place almost a month after the regular annual performance. One of the sons of the late Mr. Krishnan, is with the Border Security Force and was injured in an exchange of fire at the border. News reached home that he was flickering between life and death. His widowed mother in her anxiety promised to organise and offer another Teyyam performance to her family's deity - Vayanatu Kulavan - if her son's life was saved. This performance was in fulfillment of that promise.

The evening had already begun with the **vellattam** of the Kandanar Kelan Teyyam. Dressed in a resplendent red pleated skirt with fan-shaped pleats and metal decorations and the **Vellattakuri** (body painting particular for vellattams; this is different from that of Teyyam, which is more elaborate) and the mudi or head-dress of vellattam, the performer was in the process of blessing the priest, and some of the family, as well as members of the accompanying group of musicians. Then, at random, he proceeded to choose spectators from the crowd and bless them. The thottam narration and a few other rituals, I was told, had just got over. There was a huge pile of firewood at one corner of the

courtyard, where the performance was being held. The musicians who had till then been relaxing and lounging around picked up their instruments. To the rhythmic beat of drums and cymbals, the performer began a steady and rhythmic dance, waving the sword in his hand. He continued to recite parts of the narrative. The rhythm and tempo of the beat increased gradually building up to a crescendo. The performer's dance also kept time with it as his movements built to an almost uncontrollable frenzy. There were whispers among the spectators that he had achieved the transformation and had crossed over to that state where his body was now merely a receptacle for the spirit of the deity<sup>4</sup>. Visible signs of possession were recognized as the performer-deity, quivered and trembled in every limb with taut and tightly leashed energy, and his eyes rolled and he moved with amazing agility in his cumbersome costume to leap, spin and twist in air and on the ground. The vellattam is brought to an end as the music gradually slowed down and the performer-deity entrusted his weapon to the priest before he was led away in to the green-room to change his facial and body painting, before he came back for the Teyyam performance.

Even as Kelan Teyyam left the arena, the drums and cymbals beat stridently anticipating the arrival of Vayanatu Kulavan for his Vellattam. He arrived in great splendour, his way lighted by burning torches held by his assistants, or novices. He was in a similar red-skirt and vellatakuri

and mudi as Kandanar Kelan but his face was far more arresting and captivating. Well-chiseled features were highlighted by the black and red and yellow drawings in fine detail. As he reached the shrine he bowed reverently to the deity. During the vellattam the performer did not wear eye-masks and began the thottam with the invocation. He then narrated the myth of the deity and as he finished singing the thottam, the performer invited the priest to receive his blessings, this was followed by blessing the head of the family. He talked to them and enquired about their general well-being, and discussed matters pertaining to the house, the shrine, the members of the family and himself. He then, also blessed neighbours and spectators who had gathered on the raised land surrounding the courtyard where the Teyyam was performed. This entire event is called the **Mumbusthanam**. He continued narrating the thottam holding in his hand, the bow and arrow which the priest had handed over at the beginning of the thottam narration. As the narration progressed, there was a transformation and the performer began dancing, slowly at first and gradually faster and faster.

This was followed by a ritual called **Bhutamutal** (feeding the bhutas and ganas) or **Ashthadikumareuta** (feeding those of the eight directions). He began by pretending to bathe. A little water was kept in a spouted brass beaker for this purpose. He then took his place in front of the **Kalam** (a temporary altar ) made of strips of a banana-tree's

stem, which had been prepared in the performing space. Sandalwood paste on a piece of plantain leaf and coconut had been placed along with a lighted lamp in front of the kalam. The kalam itself was a square divided into four smaller ones, in each of which a particular offering was placed: rice grains, coconut, puffed rice, a small spouted container of alcohol and a local dish called **adakkachona**. A **peedham** (low stool) had been placed in front of the kalam. The performer placed his weapons on it and proceeded to symbolically make an offering of the offering in the kalam to his followers<sup>5</sup> and, other deities.

The Vayanatu Kulavan vellattam having finished the bhutamutal ritual picked up his arrow and wrote on the ground with the tip of his arrow. This is a **mantra** which is a closely guarded secret to be imparted only to subsequent performers.

The Vellattam performer began dancing again and worked himself into a frenzy. He then climbed the steps leading to the main doorway or entrance of the house. Here the family had already lit a lamp and placed ritual offerings. He bowed and worshiped the presence of the deity and then turned to the members of the family who flocked around him. They were most voluble as they complained and poured out their troubles and accused him of neglecting them. He consoled each one as he listened to them and explained that things followed a certain order or logic and great tragedies may be averted or rather its blow softened by constantly

propitiating or praying to him. Each of them offered him coins as they talked to him and he listened with patience to each, including the youngest grandson.

He then left the entrance of the house and returned to the courtyard towards the devotees thronging all sides and listened to their woes and supplications. For some of them, he accurately predicted their problems and offered advice as to what should be done (usually it is an offering or some form propitiation).

Finally, he broke a coconut with a sword handed to him for this and prophesied what the future held for the family, from the way it broke. He then placed a piece of the kernel on the flat blade of his sword and flipped it into the fire. The sword, bow and arrow (weapons) were returned to the priest in front of the shrine and a transported performer was assisted back into the green room for a change of make-up etc.

A Kudiveeran vellattam (ancestral spirit) followed and was followed by his Teyyam, before Kandanar Kelan Teyyam made his appearance. The performers, musicians and assistants, novices etc., all had their dinner after the Vellattam performances were over and before the Teyyams began. Kandanar Kelan Vellattam, I was told, were similar in almost all respects to Vayanatu Kulavan vellattams. There was the thottam narration, mumbusthanam, bhutamutal, but no kalam and finally the personal contact and the blessings of the



deity with the devotees-audience.

The Kelan Teyyam began after the Kudiveeran Theyyam. Everything that had taken place in the vellattam is repeated with more elaboration and for a longer period. The performer's chest had, painted on it, two hooded serpents. He moved towards the (the heap of ashes and live coal) **meleri** that had been divided into four parts and stood in its centre. All the artificial and electrical lights and lamps were switched off as dried twigs and leaves were fed into the live coal and stoked to build up a fire. Soon there was a blazing fire but the deity (possessed performer) who had been standing on the peedham, both of which were removed after twigs and leaves were added. The deity was then held by two assistants and he made a lunge into the fire. Then the three of them leapt and ran and charged through and into the fire. This went on for a long time and the performance was completed after he talked to the members of the house, the spectators, collected whatever offering they made and in exchange offered them flowers or turmeric.

By then the musicians had relaxed and some of them had even managed to doze off but Kelan could not leave until Vayanatu Kulavan made his appearance which took time. Kelan Teyyam went around talking to the priests and spectators but never as performer. He was the deity and he spoke like one, in the first person plural and his movements and speech were highly stylized.

It was announced that Vayanatu Kulavan was ready but some of the musicians were still sleeping as others sat around chatting. All of them were drunk and intoxicated, but more than that they were tired. Kelan Teyyam went up to them and prodded the sleeping ones awake with his weapon, as he yelled ear-piercingly to startle them awake. They stood up blinking the sleep out of their eyes and began playing their instruments as Vayanatu Kulavan Teyyam blind-folded by eye-masks charged his way into the courtyard. He first made obeisance towards the shrine and then proceeded to the opposite end to change his vellattam head-gear into a larger Teyyam headdress. He was shown a mirror and then went through an elaborate version of the vellattam rituals. After a few minutes in the courtyard together, Kulavan and Kelan met and then Kelan left the courtyard. The performance continued and Kulavan also walked and ran through the fire. He then led people towards the fire and made them walk around it holding his hand. This began with the priest, and went on, one after another, through the male members of the family, and any willing spectator or devotee. This was followed by dancing, blessing the family and audiences and several other rituals. Towards dawn the performer removed his eye-masks and sat in front of the shrine, receiving offerings and blessing people offering flowers and turmeric powder. With the removal of the head-dress and handing over of the weapons, the performance came to an end. This was a very important part in the performance signifying

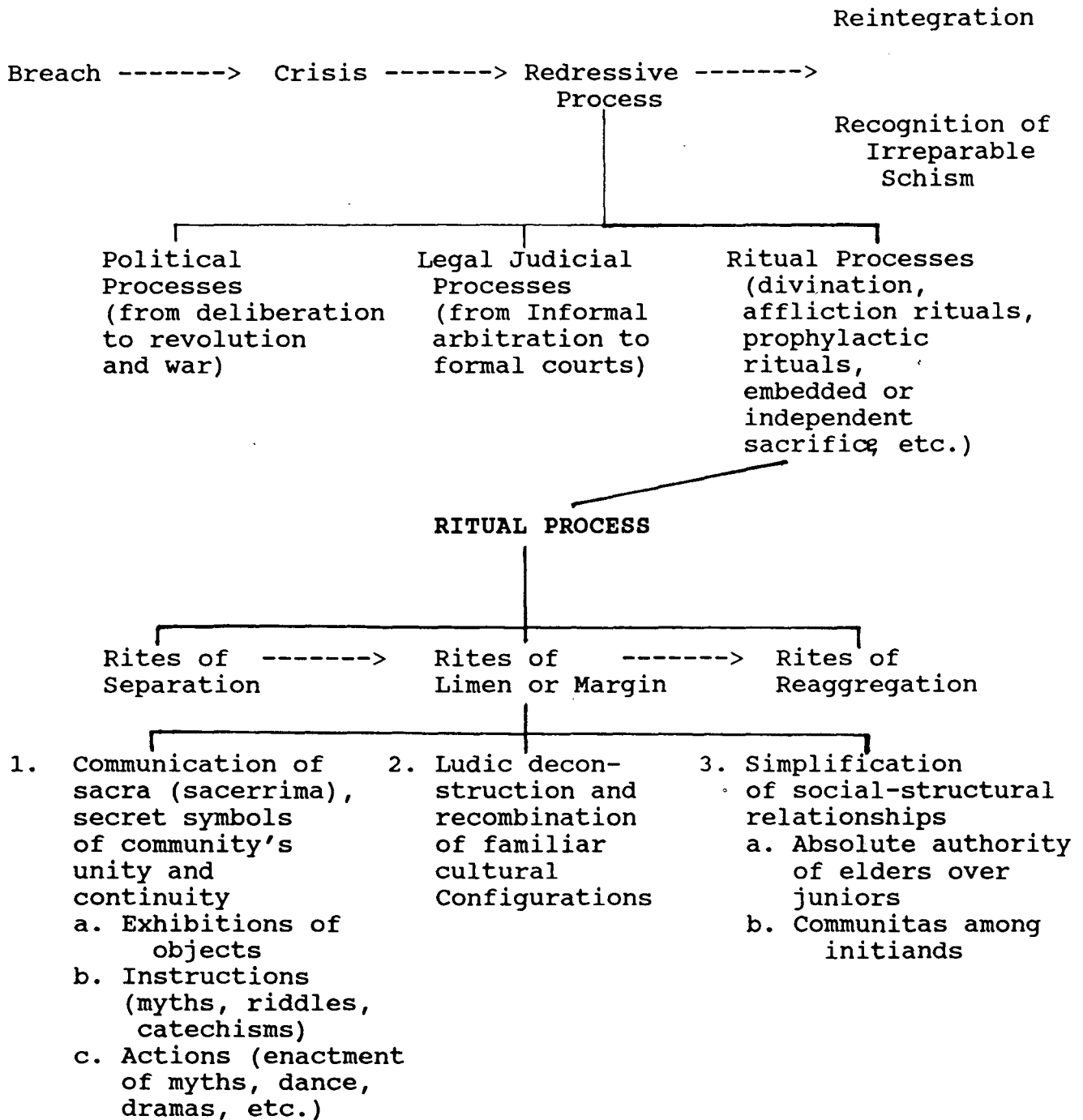
that the performer had returned to his daily sphere of activities and life, and that the performance had come to an end. He was no longer a deity to be worshipped but an ordinary mortal. The head-dress thus signifies both the assumption and renunciation of power by the performer,<sup>6</sup> his willingness to be transported from one reality to a meta-reality and also what Keats called negative capability.

One important part of the **vellattam** and Teyyams of both these deities is the constant supply of **toddy** and **arrack** being made, almost from the beginning till the end. However, some teyyam deities do not partake of alcohol, are teetotaler deities and they are offered tender - coconut - water instead.

**Social Drama:** Theatre performances in most cultures evolved from religious practices and rituals. A careful study of the history and evolution of drama and theatre the world over reveals its roots in religion and its rituals. This in turn is part of a process that Turner calls **Social Drama** the following figure illustrates his theory of social drama.

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**SOCIAL DRAMA**



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The relationship between Social drama and ritual process.

This processual form of 'breach-crisis-redress-outcome' Turner called social drama since it relies heavily on cultural values and rules by which human conduct is assessed. Conflict situations gives rise to social drama. Ritual processes and the world of theater with its immense variety of theatrical sub-genres arise out of the redressive phase of social drama. When conflicts swell to crises then ritualized forms of authority, which are redressive are invoked to put things back in order<sup>8</sup>. Thus ritual and theatre both unfold in 'spaces' that are distinctly masked off from every day actions and are found to take place in the realm of possibility or make-believe and constitute to use Turner's phrase, "that eye and eye-stalk which society bends round upon its own condition". They are....reflexive artifacts or performance through which a society may look at itself, reaffirm its values, or criticize its practices."<sup>9</sup>

The 'space' in which ritual and theatre unfolds contains within it what Turner called the **liminal phase** which is dominantly in the 'subjunctive mood' of culture, as opposed to the 'indicative mood' of day-to-day life. Liminality is thus the mood of "may be, might-be, as-if, hypothesis, fantasy, conjecture, or desire", and contains the dialectical (the notion that an idea or event generates its opposite) and is not merely a matter of making the indicative unquestionably exemplify the ideal) and the reflexive (arousing consciousness or self-awareness of one's consciousness).

Teyyam performances can also be said to operate at two levels: as the redressive phase of social drama (i.e. ritual process) and as cultural performance. Teyyam was essentially a ritual of pre-technological societies. When there was illness, epidemics, famine or personal misfortunes and accidents the norm of every day life was recognized to have been violated. Things were brought to a crisis when reasons for these 'violations' or 'breaches' were sought and found with the help of astrologers and diviners. Remedial measures like propitiation was prescribed involving ritual processes. Finally ritual co-operation was enjoined upon participants and celebrants. Perhaps the belief that invisible causes of affliction cannot be removed unless there is unanimity of heart among all people may itself be a potent means of redress.<sup>10</sup> Both the phases of crisis and redress (involving ritual) contain within itself the liminal phase which is a no-man's land, a limbo filled with possibilities and potency. Anything could happen in this phase of the ritual process and all pre-liminal states of existence are subverted as the social unit enters the liminal to take a "look at itself, reaffirm its values or criticize its practices."

Teyyam performances are never the effort of or worship and propitiation by a single individual. The whole community/village plays out his or her past in the ritual process. Every participant whether central to or in the periphery of

enters into liminal phase, although the focus of the festival is around the performers. For him the process is an obvious rite of passage as he is separated from his normal day-to-day life and activities by means of abstinences and sometimes physical separation from usual surroundings, a few days or weeks before the performance. He enters the liminal phase and is a threshold person or "liminal personae" in a state of betwixt and between rendering him ambiguous in this condition. He eludes and defies classification that normally locate his state and position in cultural space, and one perceives the interesting blend of 'lowliness' and 'sacredness'. The performer from the lower castes in society, and considered untouchable is elevated to the status of sacred deity and the entire social structure is inverted during this process. All other classes or castes are lower now in status to him, serving him in these ritual roles and duty.

For instance, costume and make-up are taken care of by the group of artists and their families. Music for the performances are mostly by members of the Malayan tribe. Blacksmiths and carpenters take care of the various ritual implements and weapons of the shrine and provide the firewood necessary for the performance respectively. The village astrologer fixes the date and gauges the efficacy of the ritual. Priests and oracles from specific castes mediate depending on the deity. If the performance is in a shrine, the responsibilities are greater and divided among more people. There may be a committee or trust and each member

may be assigned a particular role or duty to fulfill. In the case of a family's shrine then, the members of the family take care of these responsibilities - finances, food and other temporary ritual implements. Muslims sometimes supply the fire crackers.

One observes that in spite of the inversion one notices a strict hierarchy and assignment of roles in the participation for the Teyyam performance. This is characteristic of the liminal phase, a moment in and out of time, and secular social structure revealing a fleeting recognition of a general social bond, yet has at the same time, been fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties. It reveals the dialectics between structure and anti-structure. This gives rise to a direct total confrontation of human identities which is more than the casual social intercourse of ordinary life; called **Communitas**, it exists in its purest form, however briefly, when the social structures ceases to be and in pre-industrial society, it seems to be a means of purifying, redefining and revitalizing a social structure. 'Liminality' implies that the high could not be high unless the low existed and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low. This is precisely what happens during Teyyam performances - a lowly untouchable is transformed into an awe-inspiring, larger-than-life deity, and those who are 'high' in terms of social status bow in reverence and humility receiving his blessings and from his hand tokens of blessing flowers, turmeric and puffed rice.



Communitas has been linked with liminality and the structural and historical theory of performative genres. Although first associated with the liminal phase in various rites of passages in social drama, in the redressive process, it was extended to include those moments in time when the actor was passing between states. To distinguish between the liminal phases of the two Turner extended the concept of liminal of the ritual process to the liminoid (liminal-like) phenomenon which included all genres of cultural performances, including theatre. So, as the ritual process of social drama evolved into theatre, the passage from ritual to theatre was effected by this transitional 'liminoid' phase.

"If one were to guess at origins" said Turner, "my conjecture would be that the genres of cultural performance, whether tribal rituals or TV specials, are not.... simply imitations of the overt form of completed social drama. They are germinated in its third, redressive phase, the reflexive phase, the phase where society pulls meaning from that tangle of action and therefore, these performances are infinitely varied, like the result of passing light through a prism."

If theatre is the progeny of ritual what distinguishes one from the other? According to Schechner theatre begins to exist when a separation occurs between the audience and performers. In the case of theatre, the audience are free

either to attend or stay away, and their staying away would affect the theatre adversely and not those who would have been audience. But where ritual is concerned, attendance becomes compulsory as it is the absent who suffer. In other words, "ritual is an event upon which its participants depend; theatre is an event which depends on its participants".<sup>11</sup>

Any ritual can become theatre if taken from its original context and performed elsewhere. That which distinguishes ritual, entertainment and ordinary life is largely context, not basic structure, and to what degree spectators and performers attend to efficacy, pleasure, or routine, and how symbolic meaning and effect are infused and attached to the performed event. Just as there is some theatre in all ritual, there is some efficacy in all entertainment.

"The entire binary efficacy/ritual - entertainment/theatre is performance : performance includes the impulse to be serious and to entertain, to collect meanings and to pass the time, to display symbolic behaviour that actualizes 'there and then' and to exist only 'here and now', to be oneself and to play at being others; to be in a trance and to be conscious, to get results and to fool around; to focus the action on and for a select group phasing a hermetic language and to broadcast to the largest possible audiences of strangers who buy tickets". It is these oppositions and those others generated by them which comprise performance, which is "an active situation, a steady process of transfor-

mation".

Teyyam then is performance in exactly the sense that Schechner describes it. Although essentially a ritual organised and performed for its efficacy, it constantly borders on theatre. In fact, for the many non-believers and non-Hindus who form a part of the audience, it is theatre since it provides entertainment and an opportunity to pass time. To separate ritual from elements of theatre would be doing violence to the concept of performance which oscillates between efficacy/ritual and entertainment/ theatre.

### Notes and References III

- 1 This is the tarawad where I witnessed one performance of the Vayanatu Kulavan Teyyam and Kandamar Kelan Teyyam. The Karanavan mentioned is the ancestor of the present residents - the late Mr. Krishnan's family. The priest who mediates during the Teyyam performance here is the descendent of the priest who was both oracle and priest of the first Teyyam performed here. He (Mr. Raghavan) is the present informant whose version of these myths I have translated here.
- 2 Victor Turner, ed., **Celebration : Studies in Festivity and Ritual**, "Introduction", (Washington, 1982), p. 18.
- 3 *ibid.*, p. 20.
- 4 This transformation known as "**Urayal**". It is generally used with reference to any kind of possession (as in Teyyams, Velichappadu etc.) and means the achievement through several stages or degrees the complete absence or negation of self and replacement by the 'other'. Urayal also connotes tightening or setting, hardening (as in concrete) etc.
5. **Bhutamutal** is also called **Bhutaganamutal**. Vayanatu Kulavan being a saivaite deity or a manifestation of Siva is believed to have a whole retinue of ganas who are fed and propitiated by Vayanatu Kulavan so that they do not bring misery as is their wont to the members of the Tarawad.
- 6 This is the last piece of costume that is worn and removed during any Teyyam performance.
- 7 Victor Turner, "Are these universals of performance in Myth, Ritual and Drama" in Richard Schechner and others ed., **By Means of Performance, Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual** (Cambridge, 1990), p.10.
- 8 Redress may be either in the name of law or religion. In the case of the latter redressive rituals would include personal or social conflict, illness, divination into hidden causes of misfortune (all of which is tribal or pre-technological societies are closely inter-connected and thought to be caused by the invisible action of deities, witches, spirits or sorcerers); it includes curative ritual (these may involve spirit possession, trance among patients who are subjects of the rituals shamanic trance mediumship) and initiatory rites which may be connected with the above rituals of affliction and life-crisis ceremonies. - Victor Turner, "Are there Universals of Performance in Myth, Riutual and Drama?", in Richard Schechner and others ed., **By Means of Performance : Intercultural Studies of Thea-**

tre and Ritual (Cambridge, 1990), p. 11.

- 9 Sophia S. Morgan, "Borger's "Immortal": Metaritual, Meta-literature, Metaperformance", John J. MacAloon ed., **Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle: Rehearsals Towards a Theory of Cultural Performance** (Philadelphia, 1984), p. 79.
- 10 For instance, at Kanool during the performance in the late Mr. Krishnan's house, I learnt that his brother was not on very good terms with Mr. Krishnan's family. The brother felt slighted on several occasions where he felt he was not being accorded the respect due to him after his brother's death. However, during the Teyyam performance, he did not allow these differences to interfere with his being there or to do the things required of him thus ensuring that the ritual was efficacious.
- 11 Richard Schechner, **Performative circumstances: From the Avant Garde to Ramlila** (Calcutta, 1983), p. 142.
- 12 *ibid.*, p. 151 and 154.

## CHAPTER IV

### DEGREES OF SEPARATION - RITUAL AND THEATRE:

#### SPACE AND CONTEXT.

Like any other subject, Teyyam also offers the possibility for limitless explorations. There are so many questions that remain unasked and many that remain unanswered. A few of them have been asked and attempted brief answers in this concluding chapter. But each of these are only the points of departure for what could turn out to be fascinating and independent studies by themselves.

Does the movement from ritual to theatre or vice-versa lead to an attenuation of the characteristics of either?

"Theatre is one of the many inheritors of that great multifaceted system of pre-industrial ritual which embraces ideas and images of cosmos and chaos, interdigitates clowns and their foolery with gods and their solemnity, and uses all the sensory codes, to produce symphonies in more than music: the intertwining of dance, body languages of many kinds, song, chant, architectural forms (temples, amphitheatres), incense, burnt offerings, ritualized feasting and drinking, painting, body painting, body markings of many kinds including circumcision and scarification, the application of lotions and drinking of potions, the enacting of mythic and heroic plots drawn from oral traditions. And so much more. Rapid advances in the scale and complexity of

society particularly after industrialization have passed this unified liminal configuration through the analytical prism of division of labour, with its specialization and professionalization, reducing each of sensory domains to a set of entertainment genres flourishing in the leisure time of society, no longer in a central, driving place. The pronounced numinous supernatural character of the archaic ritual has been greatly attenuated."<sup>1</sup> Turner regrets this attenuation or dismemberment, as he calls it, of ritual but he observes immediately thereafter that these 'amputated, specialized genres' of theatres are trying to recover some of this 'lost numinosity'.

As far as Schechner was concerned, the development of theatre from ritual was only one of the two way process. He further believes that the basic opposition is between efficacy and entertainment and not ritual and theatre and what marks a performance as ritual or theatre depends on the degree to which it tends towards efficacy or entertainment. So no performance can ever be pure efficacy or pure entertainment. Depending on period and culture, one or other is dominant; these changes are part of changes in the overall social structure. However, performance is not as 'passive mirror of social changes, but a part of the complicated feed back process that brings about change'. Hence, a dialectical tension constantly exists between the efficacious and entertainment tendencies.

Ritual has only to be taken out of its original setting or context to become theatre and the focus shifted from efficacy to entertainment. Teyyam has often had this done to it. It has been performed at tourist festivals, cultural shows and cultural exchange programmes (both national and international). In all these performances, the ritual aspects are generally toned down and more attention is focused on entertainment. Even when Teyyam is performed 'in context', the performance still operates at both levels - as ritual for those devotees in the audiences and as theatre for the non-believing spectators among them. The former concentrate on its efficacious and the latter on its entertainment aspects. This is at the level of the spectators. As for the performance itself, there is two-way process between the binary efficacy/ritual and entertainment/ theatre. Teyyam constantly fluctuates between the two, as in great solemnity rituals are performed and with equal levity the elements of play or the ludic are brought to the fore.

If performance is a dialectical process that moves between efficacy and entertainment, or ritual and theatre as Schechner says it is, then the possibility of attenuation does not arise although one aspect may take precedence over the other depending on the context of performance.

Besides, Teyyam is also known to have been performed for purposes of political propaganda, as instruction to students of school of Drama, Trichur almost every year, (last in December, 1993,) as part of the Republic Day Parade



in Madras, January, 1994 and at the folk performance festival that followed "These examples are not" as Wayne Ashley and Regina Holloman put it, "meant to point out any corruption or impurities in the Teyyam system....there is no such thing as a closed and perfect event. These examples are meant to demonstrate the open-endedness of 'traditional' material which must finally be viewed within a much larger performative cluster, noting the various ways of framing and restricting the ritual. To ignore these processes is to miss possible shifts in the domain of cultural meaning".<sup>2</sup>

This naturally gives rise to the question of **transformation** and **transportation**. Is the gulf between 'transformation' and 'transportation' really as wide as it is often made out to be?

Both these terms refer to the movement or passage between states. Schechner calls those "performances where the performers are changed 'transformation'" as in rites of passage (life-crisis sites) "and those where the performers are returned to the starting places 'transportation' because during the performance, the performers are taken somewhere but at the end often assisted by others, they are 'cooled down' and re-enter ordinary life just about where they went in"<sup>3</sup> The latter may be either 'voluntary' transportations as in the case of acting or 'involuntary' as in the case of trance.

A good performer in most Indian performances is considered to be one while never forgetting himself, understands and becomes the character. So one half of the performer watches the other half performing or in the role of the actor.<sup>4</sup>

Schechner quotes Goffman with regard to what happens during performances that involve trance. Hoffman says that the 'entranced' person "will be able to provide a correct portrayal of the god that has entertained him (because of all the contextual knowledge and memories available, that) the person possessed will be just the right social relation to those who are watching, that possession occurs at just the right moment in the ceremonial undertaking, the possessed one carrying out his ritual obligations to the point of participating in a kind of skit with persons possessed at the time with other spirits." Goffman goes on to add that his observations are not always shared by those possessed; "participants in the cult believe that possession is a real thing and that persons are possessed at random by gods whom they cannot select."<sup>4</sup> While these may be true of most random trances in religious performances, Teyyam appears to be a combination of these two states where although possessed, the 'entranced' performer is not 'possessed at random by gods whom he cannot select'. He knows precisely which god is to possess him and he prepares himself for it, like an actor watching himself in the role of the other. This is also where training comes in; the performer begins

his training as a boy and somewhere along the way the training is internalised. "An illumination of sorts occurs as what is being written in the bodies of the dancers is read from the inside by each of them"<sup>5</sup>. This is true of many performances practices in Kerala, like Kathakali, Kudiyaattam and it is very likely that it may be true of Teyyam also.

Thus the actor who does not forget himself in the knower, and the half who becomes the character itself is the feeler. In between these two halves is the centre of the performer, the self, standing outside observing and to some degree controlling. While this happens in some kinds of trance performance, there are others where feeling completely takes over that knowing is completely blotted out.

Theatrical performance then appears to be a peculiar human activity in which there is high arousal of both 'ergotropic' (hyperaroused states like schizophrenia or mystical ecstasy) and trophotropic (hyperarousal like yogic samadhi or zen meditation) systems, while the normal 'I' of daily life or routine is held back as an observing controlling self. Performance training is thus the development of a range of communication skills. It is learning how to arouse these two extremes of brain activity without cancelling out the centre, so that the performer never wholly loses self control. Strong theatrical performances like trances therefore, border on the dangerous, since they are on, or even, over the edge. Self control is reduced to minimum or absent and hence the necessity for helpers

(people who stay out of trance specially to aid those who are in trance preventing injury and assisting the trancers as they come out of the trance)<sup>6</sup> and it is in these 'psychophysical moments' that the 'character' is being created not in the personality of the actor but as an embodied, projected or living form between the actor and audience.<sup>7</sup>

The entire training process is a rite of passage in the performances life transforming him from one state to another, while the performances are transported states of being. Hence one cannot divide the two in most performances since they co-exist and one is not possible without the other.

Ritual and Theatre, or Performance is then basically "intentional bodily engagements" which bring the physical self, its social and cultural identity to encounter with the transcendental realm. It is this relation of the physical self the 'transcendental' other that is the concern of these concluding pages along with its explorations of 'space'.

The self is first of all a physical self and one would have no awareness of the world without the body. In religious experiences also the body plays an important role than it is usually given credit for and ritual centres in the body which is as much a vehicle for religious experiences as the mind or soul. As a result, physical experiences and actions engage consciousness more immediately and irresistibly. In fact it bestows a much stronger sense of reality than any merely mental, philosophical, affirmation of faith.

Most "ritual symbolism draws on the simplest and and most intense sensory experiences, such as eating, sexuality and pain. Such experiences have been repeated so often and so intimately by the body that they have become primary forms of bodily awareness. In ritual, they are transformed into symbolic experiences of the divine, and even into the form of the cosmic drama itself. We may, therefore, speak of a 'prestige of the body' in ritual. In bodily gesture, the chant, dance and stride of participants, primordial presences are made actual again, time renewed, and the universe is regenerated."<sup>8</sup>

Space in these contexts takes on a fluid and dynamic character, a visual pattern woven by the performing figure as he defines space with his positions and movements. In Teyyam performances as any other, there is the space of the spectators and that of the performers. Each of these two categories define and contextualize their space by means of the bodily motions; both are fluid and dynamic but the space of the spectators although it vibrate with as much energy as that of the performers, the frequency of these vibrations align rarely and at these moments of the performance, there is a brief ecstatic state and sense of union, between the audience and performers, lasting for barely a few seconds. Turner describes this as a 'Sense of harmony with the universe' and the 'whole planet is felt to be in communitas'.<sup>9</sup>

In ritual, there is a voluntary submission to bodily existence by the performers who assume very specific roles with highly patterned roles. This connects them to and conforms the self to all others who have 'been' these roles in the past. To contact reality then, one has to sacrifice the conscious self's individual autonomy, its freedom in fantasy to "be" anything. Ritual 'locates' and 'imprisons' one in a particular reality whose consequences can no longer be avoided.

Ritual thus involves a discovery of the self as a public, external reality which is possible only by or through perspectives mediated by others; especially 'transcendent' others. The primal beings provide the model and source of life in these actions and encounters. It is submission to these deeper realities and willing their bodies into identities and movements stemming from the ancestral past that is essential to ritual participants. This requires a great deal of humility.

"We can call this essential preliminary movement of the self "recentering" there is a kind of standing outside of oneself, a taking up of the position of the divine "other" and acting on its behalf that is expressed explicitly as a personal submission to it and that is experienced directly as a submission of the personal will in the divine will. The ritual comes from the ancients and was a gift from the divine; to repeat it means to receive their stamp upon self and to make their world one's own."<sup>10</sup>

## Notes and References IV

- 1 Victor Turner, "Are these Universals of Performance in Myth, ritual and drama? in Richard Schechner and Willa Appel. ed., **By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual**. (Cambridge, 1990), p. 12.
- 2 Wayne Ashley & Regina Holloman, "Teyyam" in Farley, P. Richmond and others ed., **Indian Theatre - Traditions of Performance**, (Honolulu, 1990), p. 149.
- 3 Richard Schechner, **Performative Circumstances from the Avant Garde to Ramlila** (Calcutta, 1983), pp. 97, 98 and 99.
- 4 Richard Schechner, quoting Padmanathan Nair (Kathakali actor) in "Magnitudes of Performance", Richard Schechner and Willa Appel ed. **By Means of Performance, Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual**. (Cambridge, 1990), p. 36.
- 5 *ibid.*, pp. 25 and 26.
- 6 *ibid.*, p. 36
- 7 Phillip B. Zarrilli, "What does it mean to 'become the character', Power, Presence and Transcendence in Asian in-body Disciplines of Practice", Richard Schechner and Willa Appel, ed., **By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual** (Cambridge, 1990), p. 144.
- 8 Evan M. Zuesse, "Ritual", in Mircea Elaide ed., **The Encyclopedia of Religion**, (New York, 1987), Vol.12, p. 406.
- 9 Turner, n. 1, p. 13
- 10 *ibid.*, p. 407.

## Appendix

**Kaliyattam:** There are places in North Malabar where a Teyyam performance is also called kaliyattam. As always, there is disagreement among scholars as to the use of the word **kaliyattam** for a single Teyyam performance. Some scholars trace the original name of Teyyam to Kaliyattam, claiming that Teyyam was originally a Kāli cult, and the dance offering, propitiating her was Kāliyattam which eventually changed to Kaliyattam. In course of time other deities were incorporated into the fold and propitiated with rites, sacrifices and dance. Chandra believes that the different names (**Teyyam, Tira, Kolamkettu etc.**) point to the different stages of evolution of Kaliyattam as well as its spreading to the neighbouring regions. However, there are those who argue that Kaliyattam is not merely a Teyyam performance, but a Teyyam festival. While a single Teyyam performance may be held generally, in return for special favours granted, Kaliyattam is the propitiation of more than one deity. While Teyyams could be held in a single evening-night-dawn, Kaliyattams may go on for even a week, sometimes more, depending on the number of deities propitiated.

Annual Teyyam festivals called **Kalpanakaliyattams** are held in public shrines and private shrines attached to Taravads. **Perumkaliyattams** are those that take place once in ten, fifteen, or, twenty five years, since a large amount of money goes into the organisation of Kaliyattams. Perumkaliy-



attams take place in those shrines which find it economically difficult to conduct a Kaliyattam annually. As a result, they have one in regular intervals. Besides the propitiation of some of these deities involves the feeding of thousands of devotees, as a result of which some shrines find it impossible to hold them annually. It is mainly due to financial constraints that most shrines hold Perumakaliyattams at regular intervals.

An important difference, according to Dr. Vishnu Namboodiri, that may be observed between Teyyams and Kaliyattams is that the latter are restricted to shrines and ancestral homes while the former may be performed even in the open, or harvested fields.

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