

Discovering Theyyam: Characters Within and Without

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Summary- *Theyyam is a performing art that is exclusive to the Kannur and Kasargod districts. This paper explores Muthappan Theyyams through their customs, practices, and audiences.*

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Discovering Theyyam: A Spiritual and Artistic Experience in Kerala

The ancient ritualistic art form of Theyyam originated in Northern Kerala and is deeply interwoven with the cultural identity of its people. Rooted in history, customs, and beliefs, there are over three to four hundred distinct Theyyams, each one a challenge to document due to the localised nature of many character-based lores. Living in central Kerala where Theyyam is uncommon, such an opportunity rarely arose. Additionally, as a literature and cinema student, I found it intriguing that a Malayalam film, *Kaliyattam* (or in English: The Play of God) adapted Shakespeare's *Othello*, setting it in a community of Theyyam performers. While making inquiries about Theyyam performances, I serendipitously stumbled upon a three-day Theyyam Mahotsavam being organised by an old family friend and was invited to attend. Having only seen performances in films and online videos, I looked forward to my first live Theyyam performance.

A week later, the sun was beating down on the lush landscape at Baavod Varayil Marappura, the location of the bustling kāvu hosting the three-day Theyyam festival. Travel challenges led me to arriving on the second day before noon, already disappointed that I had missed a day. Despite the summer heat, around fifty people had gathered to witness these performers adorn themselves in elaborate costumes, painting their faces in vibrant colour, ready to bring tales of the gods to life. As I arrived, I was greeted with warm smiles and taken to the veranda of a small building, where I offered my prayers. With my heart full of anticipation, I ventured into the kāvu, eager to explore and soak up the vibrant energy surrounding me.

An Intriguing Spatial Arrangement

Excited, I made my way to the kāvu, anticipating a space charged with celestial energy. I wondered if it would resemble what I've seen on screen—an overgrown area with a temple and people reverently praying. To my surprise, the compound was much larger than I had imagined, with lush trees encircling the space that occupied two levels.

The Kāvu: I had to make my way to the kāvu along a narrow-tarred road that led to a dirt road, steeply sloped and lined with homes and livestock. I had to park my vehicle on the side of the tarred road before going on foot through the dirt road. On the side of this tiny dirt road, people had set up makeshift tinker stalls displaying toys and other items in preparation for the three-day performance. Descending from the steep road, I navigated a few laterite steps (E in Figure 1) that led me into a mud-walled compound, recently reinforced with concrete. The Kāvu was larger than expected, featuring a traditional Kerala house, the temple, and a stage-like structure arranged in a triangular formation.

As I descended the steps, I noticed a tarp-covered shamiana immediately on the left of the steps. This makeshift structure served as the make-up and resting area for the artists performing at the temple. In front of the shamiana stood a house-like structure, which used to be the family home. The house had a veranda adorned with a lamp where people offered prayers once again before proceeding to the temple.

The House and the Temple: The house (B in Figure 1), built in the traditional Kerala architecture style, featured intricate wooden carvings and a sloping roof. I learnt that a branch of the family had lived in this tiny house till five years ago, when they moved out of the cramped space. The temple (A in Figure 1) which stood across the space from the house, was a humble structure consisting of only four walls, with the back of the temple facing the steps (marked E in Figure 1).

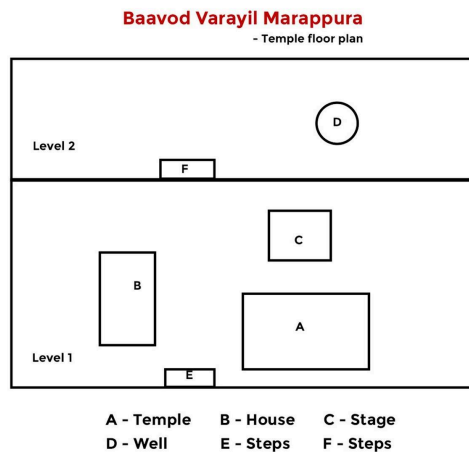


Figure 1. Baavod Varayil Marappura, Temple floor plan

Since there was still time for the performance to begin, I took time to get to know the family members and Janmaari, the person in charge of maintaining the temple. "I take care of everything related to this kāvū," Phalgunan told me. He is a native of the locality and is also in charge of several other kāvūs in the area. He belongs to the local Vannan community who have the right to perform Theyyam. In earlier times, others could perform Theyyam in a kāvū only with the permission of the janmaari, but that is not strictly followed now. I also learnt that the family members have formed a Trust, and raised funds to build the temple about three years ago. The transformation of a family temple to a family Trust for a public purpose, was testament to the site's evolving dynamics, and a family's changing role in the religious and cultural practices associated with the local art form.

The Stage: As I continued my exploration of the site, I noticed a small raised platform in front of the temple that resembled a stage with a roof (C, in Figure 1). One of the family members, Babu, told me that this was where the poojas or religious rituals used to take place before the current temple was

constructed three years ago. The temple, the family house, and the stage-like structure created a triangular spatial arrangement (A, B, and C in Figure 1). The space between the temple and the stage-like structure was also covered by a tarpaulin sheet, providing much-needed shade from the scorching sun.

Thara: Several *tharas*, similar to a tulasi-thara but without the tulsi plant, were scattered around the temple. These tharas served as platforms for performing poojas or religious offerings, adding to the variety of spiritual practices associated with this site. According to Babu, the compound and the temple had undergone renovations on three separate occasions, emphasising the changing nature of the site and underlining the family's efforts to preserve its cultural significance.

Lower Level: During the day, I had observed a second level on a lower terrain, but it wasn't until nightfall that I could explore it further. Descending a few steps (F in Figure 1), I arrived at this area where food was being prepared and served to all who attended the Theyyam performance. Men served various dishes, including fish curry and rice, to the visitors tired from the day's activities. The activities on this level seemed spontaneous, yet everyone was eager to assist, ensuring tasks were completed. Diners washed their hands and dinnerware at temporary water stations, while women stood ready with large baskets to collect the cleaned plates near the big well at this level.

Although this lower level appeared less maintained compared to the upper level, its disorder possessed a unique charm. From cinematic depictions, I had envisioned the kāvū as a serene space surrounded by trees, with soft prayers and murmurs in the air, illuminated by the glow of lamps at night. However, what I witnessed was a community engaged in ensuring the smooth execution of the event. Their hospitality towards outsiders and reverence for Theyyam added a human element to my perception of the kāvū that I hadn't considered before. While people at this level engaged over

dinner conversations, those remaining on the first level stayed, waiting for an opportunity to meet the Muthappan Theyyam, who remained in character.

Becoming Theyyam

In my early interaction with the Theyyam performers at the *kāvu*, they recounted their travels to other places for work, their history with this particular *kāvu* and life in general. They conversed with me like anyone else, enquiring about my job and research. While chatting with them, I wondered how they would become these god-like characters. Would this affect my experience of their transformation?

Reminded of old theory classes on the willing suspension of belief, I wandered around, waiting for the performance to begin. The dancer has to prepare his mind and body to bring the Theyyam within himself. This metaphysical experience and possession passes through three stages; first being one of impersonation, the negation of his own self, and the affirmation of something through the mask which is far from reality. The second stage helps him to take off to a mental state of mystic heights with a look at the mirror, a meaningful ritual that convinces him about the identity of the deity (Theyyam) which he impersonates. The last stage of impersonation signifies the processed state energised fully by the accompanying rhythm. The whole physique and the psyche of the performer get possessed by the mood of the character which he impersonates.¹

As I strolled through the *kāvu*, taking pictures and interacting with members, I observed a *pooja* being performed on one of the *tharas*. Preceding each performance, the performer was brought to the make-up area by a caretaker of the *kāvu*. The energy in the air was electric as

the performer, now in character and full costume, took the stage.

The Make-Up: The performer was completely unrecognisable as the man I had spoken to a while ago. The performer's movement, the song he sang, the instruments that accompanied him and the lighted lamps brought a different energy to the space. Gone was the familiar countenance that at once exuded charm and familiarity, replaced by an unsettling transformation that defied notions of normalcy. Natural materials such as turmeric and sandalwood in make-up, reflect the importance of the natural world in Theyyam. Its application considers not only the physical appearance of the character but also their personality and emotions. His rounded features had now sharpened into an otherworldly facade, his face taking on an unnerving pointed shape. A palpable aura of dread emanated from him, causing an instinctive shiver to ripple through the air. I automatically folded my hands like everyone else as the Theyyam chanted the *thottampaattu* and passed by me.

The Mirror: Towards the end of the make-up process, the performer looks into the mirror: this glance signifies the transformation of the Theyyam performer. The performers are now no longer themselves but the embodiment of the character they represent. The actors transport the audience to a different world, blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction and permitting them to connect with the characters and the story. The physical transformation process serves a deeper symbolic purpose, representing the self as a fluid, ever-changing entity. By assuming the character's persona, the performer can transcend their everyday self and connect with a higher spiritual realm. This act of transcendence is further reinforced by using sacred objects and reciting prayers and music during the performance. In addition, the body shivering as part of

¹ Panikkar, K. N. (2012). *Folklore of Kerala*: National Book Trust, 26-31.

ritual can be seen as an important element of pre-Hindu tradition.²

Rituals of Theyyam

The Theyyam festival is usually fixed around the Malayalam month of Meenam, with performances taking place on this month's 3rd, 4th, and 5th dates. The janmaari had told me that the festival is organised annually to remember the person who set up this kāvū years ago. Nobody seemed to know how long this kāvū has existed, and answers from family members or locals ranged from a thousand years to a few hundred years.

Gender: As I got used to the space, I noticed a difference in the way men and women interacted in the space. Why were the men and women of the family standing separate? Did it have a more profound significance? During the Pooja, the men of the family actively participated as recipients of blessings from the performer. Positioned within the sacred space, they eagerly awaited their turn, receiving individual blessings that bestowed spiritual grace upon them. But, female family members typically stayed within the house or the veranda. They didn't step outside, as the performer respectfully approached them, acknowledged their presence, and gave them their blessings. This distinction highlighted the gender dynamics within the ceremony,

Theyyam in a way is a platform where depressed and oppressed female minds are liberated through a male body. The patriarchy that oppressed them—the male body—invoked these mythical heroines who were the victims of their oppression. All female characters in Theyyam reflect the liberation of their emotions which were once restricted. The female mannerisms are adorned in a male body which in real are often seen as

derogatory. Here we see a subversion of gender identity where a male invokes the feminine.³

The Pooja: A namboodiri priest or a respected elder member of the community typically performs the pooja before the start of the Theyyam. The identity of the individual performing the pooja may vary depending on the specific customs and traditions of the community. The tharas, scattered around the kāvū, are a focal point for many customs and religious practices. For instance, during the performance, the priest pours toddy on the slab and the surrounding mud floor. He scatters tulsi leaves and various flowers upon the surface. These flowers typically include a variety of marigolds, roses, and jasmine, among others.

Additionally, banana leaves are cut into strips measuring 8 inches by 1 inch, with the number of strips corresponding to the number of male family members residing in the home. Following this, the Theyyam bestows blessings upon the male members of the household before placing equal quantities of raw rice and rice grains onto the mud floor. After the cooked and raw rice has been spread, a strip of banana leaf is placed atop each small mound of rice. Finally, the flowers are scattered over the entire surface, adding colour and vibrancy to this ceremonial display.

Character Muthappan: Muthappan is considered a potent and revered figure in Theyyam mythology, and the Bavode kāvū is known for its Muthappan Theyyam. Mythologically, Muthappan was raised by a childless Brahmin couple, but unable to conform to the strict customs of the community, he left home after revealing his divine Siva form to his parents. Known as a hunter god, Muthappan temples offer toddy and fish as *prasadam* (food and other blessed substances gifted to devotees) since they are his favourite food.

² Renjitha V.R. "Folk Tradition of Sanskrit Theatre: A Study of Kutiyattam in Medieval Kerala." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 74 (2013): 313–22. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44158830>.

³ Madhu, Aiswarya and Sreedevi R. "The Subversion of Caste and Gender inherent in Theyyam". *KochiPost*. May 17, 2019. <https://kochipost.com/?p=10390>

I stood in line with numerous others after the performance, waiting my turn to talk to Muthappan. Before his metamorphosis, he had agreed to speak to me about his experiences after the performance. Would he remember our earlier conversation? When it was my turn to speak with Muthappan, he calmly took my hand and gave me some advice. Forgetting my interest in interviewing the performer, I saw only Muthappan before me. Such was the aura he emanated.

The Theyyam festival is deeply rooted in tradition and custom, with strict guidelines governing the selection of the leading Muthappan Theyyam performer. Chandran, a friend of the family who lives close by and attends the festival every year, told me that the individual chosen to perform Muthappan must come from the Thiyya caste family that initially established the Theyyam at this particular temple. "Someone from that family has to perform," he said. Interestingly, the family organising the Theyyam festival is also part of the Thiyya caste. This connection underscores the importance of community and tradition in the performance of Theyyam. The practice of untouchability by the higher castes restrained the lower castes from entering the temples. Theyyam performance became a counter-reaction to the system as it is performed at the home courtyards and sacred groves of the lower castes resembling the Brahmanical temple ceremonies.⁴

Prasadam: Unlike the more traditional offerings of flowers, sandalwood paste, malar(a variety of rice puff), banana pieces and jaggery typically found in temples, the prasadam at this particular temple was composed of boiled red beans, coconut pieces, and dry fish. This unconventional combination of ingredients surprised many visitors and added to the distinctiveness of the

⁴ Mathew, R & Pandya D. Carnavalesque, "Liminality and Social Drama: Characterising the Anti-Structural Potential of Theyyam." *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* Vol. 13, No. 3, 2021. 1-11. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v13n3.28>

Theyyam festival. Indeed, the prasadam offered during the Theyyam festival is often an essential part of the overall experience, as it represents a physical manifestation of the blessings and good fortune bestowed by the Theyyam performers.

Still in character after the performance, people approach the Theyyam seeking blessing, and the performer tries to talk to each, answering questions and giving counsel. He pulls flowers from his garland and offers them to those he is speaking to as a prasadam. In return they offer a dakshina. What I found fascinating was the people's reverence for the Theyyam. By the end of the day, the audience had considerably increased, with many non-locals coming in the afternoon. Speaking to some of them, I realised that many of them, like me, had found the festival schedule online and were interested to know more about the customs and rituals associated with Theyyam.

Transmitting Thottampattu

As I followed each Theyyam, I tried to pay attention to the songs the Theyyam characters were singing. The thottampattu recited by the Theyyam is the life story of that particular character. In what language were the lyrics? And did the locals understand what Theyyam narrated through the song? I could not help but wonder how the performers and the people playing the instruments were so in tune. Rajan, a family member told me that since he had been experiencing Theyyam all his life, he could understand the thottampattu, a mix of an archaic Malayalam and another language I could not recognise.

*"Each Theyyam performance of the same character could be of different lengths, depending on the performer and how elaborately he decides to perform that day", said Chandran. "The accompanying instrument players would keep up with the performer."*⁵

⁵ Interview with Chandran, a family friend and neighbour, 19 March 2023.

Performance, song and music: Seeking out one of the *nadaswaram* players who looked well into his seventies, I learned that the musicians start young, observing Theyyam for years before becoming part of a performance. Their keen observation and knowledge of the *thottampattu* enable them to keep up with the Theyyam, no matter how short or long the performance may be. Like Rajan, who has observed Theyyam all his life, these instrument players assimilate the performance and song over their lifetime. People belonging to the Malaya community played the drums. Some members of this community also perform Theyyams. The knowledge possessed by the performers of Theyyam reflects their understanding of the characters, their backstories and the rituals involved. It reveals their connection to the land in which they live. As far as I understood, the acquisition of skills was through observation and practice and not formal.

Reactions to Theyyam

During the colonial period, Theyyam received many kinds of criticism. The East India Company criticised the practice of Theyyam and considered it as a barbaric ritual filled with superstition, corruption, evil and inhuman. So in the 19th century, they imposed a ban on Theyyam but removed it in the early 20th century. Sree Narayana Guru, opposed the practice of Theyyam claiming that it involves animal sacrifice, worship of evil deities and toddy consumption. He initiated a movement against Theyyam, which failed to acquire popularity in Northern Kerala, but had a revolutionary effect on the performance of Theyyam later.

Approaching Theyyam from a Marxist perspective, the Communists did not criticise the practice, considering it the collective voice of the unprivileged against the upper castes. In the 1940's and 1950's, the Communist party saw Theyyam as a form of socio-political resistance, which resulted in weakening

its historical and ritualistic moorings by highlighting its artistic form only.⁶

Another response to Theyyam can be seen in *Kaliyattam*, an award-winning film by Jayaraaj (1998) which uses the conventions and community of Theyyam, to relocate Shakespeare's *Othello* and the issue of racism by transposing on to it the iniquities of the caste system. Not only does it examine the tensions of contemporary Kerala society, its reworking provokes insights into aspects of the play buried under centuries of learned response. Malayalam intelligentsia has had a lukewarm response to *Kaliyattam*, holding its depiction of a romantic union between a low caste Theyyam performer and a brahmin's daughter as entirely implausible.⁷

Recognising that the Theyyam will be perceived differently, observing around the Kāvu for two days, I saw the reactions of locals and visitors. Having seen Theyyam all their lives, the family members and locals seemed indifferent, though not irreverent, unless the Theyyam moved towards them. For them, the performance is an integral part of their cultural identity and an expression of past iniquity, connected to the lived experiences of their ancestors.

Conversely, for those who have come from further away, the films and videos on Theyyam today have a major influence. Diasporas often release videos on YouTube of Theyyam every year which they get through their acquaintances from the homeland. When Theyyam videos of their region are posted on YouTube, it gives them a major sense of belonging.

⁶ Aparna S Anil. "Beyond Sacred - Understanding the Historical, Socio-political and Cultural Dimensions of Theyyam." *JETIR* January 2019, Volume 6, Issue 1. (ISSN-2349-5162).
<https://www.jetir.org/papers/JETIR1901C59.pdf>

⁷ Trivedi, Poonam. "‘Filmi’ Shakespeare." *Literature/Film Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (2007): 148–58. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43797348>.

All the Theyyams are not perceived equally from a distance. Some are considered weird and criticised for being superstitious, devoid of morality and ethics. Hence, the representations and values associated with this form emerge from a tension and interaction of global and local influences within the diaspora. Consequently, the YouTubers wanted to record every bit of information they could about the performances. Early on the first day, seeing me talk to some of the family members, a Youtuber approached me, asking questions about Theyyam and this particular family's relationship to it. The festival was an opportunity to make a few videos and he asked if I could "Tell all about Theyyam in five minutes in a capsule form".

This interaction highlighted several challenges Theyyam faces in the contemporary era. The encroachment of urbanisation, changing social structures, and diminishing interest among the young pose a threat to the continuity of this form. Additionally, commercialisation and commodification for tourism raise concerns about the dilution of its sacred significance. People from afar were curious and fascinated, their sense of awe not only to the exotic performance, but also because they lack the connection to the land and lore that provides a subtext for locals and organising family members.

As I stood with the Theyyam still in character, I noticed a young woman standing close to us filming my conversation with him. The performer continued to talk, till suddenly turning to her he asked, "Who gave you permission to do this?" His stern voice, together with the make-up on his face, heightened the feeling of intimidation. The startled girl swiftly turned off her camera and took a few steps back. At this, the Theyyam performer continued, "You know, you can continue. But know that I am letting you do so. If I had said no, everything on that (pointing to the camera) would go blank. Nothing would be visible". Saying this, he turned back to me and continued our conversation as if nothing had happened.

The weakening ties with local lore, legend, and land for multiple reasons makes it difficult for current audiences to understand and appreciate the cultural significance of Theyyam. In the recent past, some of the rituals have been diluted while the spectacular aspects of the performances have been retained in condensed form. Together with the economic, social, and cultural changes that are taking place now in rural Kerala, not many Theyyams will remain in their present form for long.⁸

Some Observations

After my two-day trip to Baavod to see the festival, I wanted to bring together what I had learnt from the locals about Theyyam together with what I had read about it. The most pressing question in my mind was regarding the relevance of Theyyam in this current day and age.

Though rooted in the caste system, Theyyam spaces witness a temporary inversion of caste hierarchies because upper-caste people are answerable to and have to pay obeisance to this lower caste dancing god, at least during the span of the ritual performance. Devotees may talk to, touch, and even hug the god, and receive consolation and advice in return. Even as the caste system defines the ritual in itself, a limited reversal of the social order can be momentarily seen. In many of the stories associated with Theyyam, an angry character can only be calmed and pacified through prayers, offerings, and by agreeing to celebrate him as a Theyyam. In that sense, a Theyyam performance is closely connected to the caste hierarchies in northern Kerala, for each thottampattu explains the atrocities that the Theyyam character had to face from the upper castes. However, as soon as the performer removes his make-up and

⁸ Nambiar, Balan. "Photographing Theyyam." *India International Centre Quarterly* , SUMMER-MONSOON 1995, Vol. 22, No. 2/3. pp. 132-134. New Delhi.

costume, the status quo is often re-established.⁹

In 1986, a Theyyam performer from the Vannan community was barred from performing in a shrine in Pappinisseri village, in Kannur district, over an argument about financial remuneration. The performer was replaced by another performer from the Malayan community, even though this Theyyam is usually reserved for performers from the Vannan community.¹⁰

According to Rajan Panicker, a Theyyam artist honoured by the Kerala Folklore Academy, Theyyam can never be considered as an escape from the caste system, even when the upper caste people can be seen praying to the God that is represented through Theyyam, performed by a lower caste. The reinforcement of the hierarchical order can be seen at the final part of the performance, during the time of the blessing. Then, the Theyyam first calls out the family name of high caste people present at the ceremony and would give them special blessings and experiencing this would make the other devotees feel like the Theyyam is a representation of God who remains helpless in front of the caste system.¹¹

Theyyam has long been intertwined with the relationship between individuals and the land they inhabit, providing a means for people to express their connection to the natural world. The use of specific

locations and landscapes reinforces the idea that the land is imbued with spiritual significance. Moreover, the rituals often incorporate elements of local ecology, such as using plants and animals, reinforcing the interconnectedness between humans and the natural world. From an anthropological perspective, the study of Theyyam provides a valuable lens through which to explore how people's relationships with the land are constructed, expressed, and maintained.

On a recent trip to the kāvu in his North Malabar village to pay respects to the Theyyam, journalist Thulasi Kakkat was dismayed to find that the surrounding forest had all but disappeared. Commenting to the neighbouring family about this he heard, without any sense of irony, that the Theyyam would have more room to perform if the forest was cleared further.¹²

Bavode kāvu offered a unique blend of personal, collective, and moral elements. The veranda of the family house, with its lamp and prayers, reflected the intimate connection between the family and the temple with its minimalistic design and the absence of an idol. The site presented an opportunity for a critical analysis of the changing landscape of religious institutions, the intersection of tradition and modernity, and the dynamics of power and authority within the context of Theyyam. The efforts of the family to preserve the traditions and practices associated with the kāvu and pass them down to future generations beyond the family through a Trust to encompass the broader community, was evidenced by the contributions made by others towards the renovation of the temple.

Community-owned festivals are mostly large-scale involving greater public participation, while family run festivals

⁹ Mohan, Amritha. "How caste still rules the social lives of Theyyam practitioners in Kerala." *The Caravan Magazine*. <https://caravanmagazine.in/caste/how-caste-still-rules-lives-of-Theyyam-practitioners-kerala>

¹⁰ Vijisha, P. and Raja, E.K.G.V. (2016). "Existence of Untouchability towards Maari Theyyam—A Traditional Art Form of Kerala." *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 4, pp 260-263. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4236/jss.2016.43032>

¹¹ Aparna S A. "Beyond Sacred - Understanding the Historical, Socio-political and Cultural Dimensions of Theyyam." *JETIR* January 2019, Volume 6, Issue 1. (ISSN-2349-5162). <https://www.jetir.org/papers/JETIR1901C59.pdf>

¹² Kakkat, T. "As Kerala's sacred groves disappear, the Theyyam art form loses a vital link." *The Hindu*, March 02, 2019. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/as-keralas-sacred-groves-disappear-the-Theyyam-art-form-loses-a-vital-link/article26417293.ece>

are relatively small. Theyyam practitioners said that the remuneration is better in family-owned shrines than community shrines. The organisers in community-owned shrines enforce authority over the performers. Being a hereditarily entitled duty, the performers cannot stop performing the rituals at such shrines. Here the remuneration will be a very small amount, and any arguments of the performers will never meet any favourable result.”¹³

Whether in *kāvus*, *tharavads*, and occasionally other private spaces (not all Theyyam characters leave the *kāvu*), the primary purpose of organising a Theyyam performance is to please the gods by having a human dance and chant in *daivakkolam* (man dressed as god). Families organise one for various reasons, from giving thanks for prosperous harvest to a celebration of customs and traditions of the place. A typical Theyyam festival ranges from two to five days, depending on how many Theyyams are in the programme. "Arranging a Theyyam festival is a costly affair," said Ravi Varma, a member of the Chirakkal Kovilakam of Kannur, (a family associated with the origin of Theyyam as a ritualistic art form).

Honouring persons from myths and folklore as Theyyams serves as a means of atonement towards people who have been wronged in the past. The fact that everyone, irrespective of caste and social standing, bows down to the Theyyam is sardonic, given that the performer, who usually belongs to one of the lower castes, has to get permission to become the Theyyam from an upper caste patron before each performance. It was intriguing to observe how the Theyyam performer, belonging to a lower caste, could interact freely with anyone during the event, commanding respect and uttering unfiltered truths. Theyyam then serves as a way for society to evade the

need for substantial change. While Theyyam may speak uncomfortable truths, one cannot help but wonder what would happen if these figures were allowed to roam and speak freely, unrestricted by societal norms. Would their unfiltered expression pave the way for true transformation or reinforce the thinking that has perpetuated our existing iniquity?

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¹³ Gopi, A. (2021). "Gods and the Oppressed: A Study on Theyyam Performers of North Malabar." *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*, 13(2), 199-207.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2455328X211008363>

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