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Theyya Kōladhāri – The Divine Performer

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Abstract:

Theyyam is one of the most traditional ritualistic performing art form of North Malabar which includes Kasargod, Kannur and Calicut districts. It is a collaboration of mime, dance, music, dance and literature. Theyyam unfolds the stories in the past and frags the spectator to a different world, unrevealing the pasts and stories of ancient times. Theyya Kōlam is of different types and there are around 400 Theyyams, each defined with its own style, music and literature and choreography. All Theyyam cannot be performed by every caste. Each cast has the privilege to perform particular Theyyam according to tradition and customs. Each caste develops its skill to perform the Theyyams allotted to their caste.

Aim: This research paper aims to delve into the cast system in the Theyyam artist and the Theyyams they perform.

Keywords: Theyyam, Kōladhāri, Kōlam

Introduction:

Theyyam is a ritualistic performance, primarily done by communities like Vaṇṇān, Malayan, Pulayan etc. based in the districts of Kasargod, Kannur and some regions in Kozhikode in North Malabar. A Theyyam performance is a religious ceremony in which a performer goes into a trance, dances as though possessed, and ultimately becomes a deity. The Theyyam artist is revered as a dancing deity, a people's god, by a large number of spectators, regardless of caste or religion, and is an essential component of the culture of northern Kerala. Traditionally, the caste system has governed and ingrained itself into the rituals and practices of a typical Theyyam performance.

Theyyam Artists:

People from various castes and tribes perform Theyyam. The Theyyam ritual is rooted in the caste system and is performed in sacred groves, ancestral homes, or community-owned shrines etc. The performers are accompanied by drums and helpers. Each cast should only execute the Theyya Kōlam that is assigned to them.

The castes, which have the privileges of Theyyam dancers, are

Among these Kalandis and Paravan performs in Wynad. Pampathar and Nalikeyavar have their performance in Uduppi and Kundapura areas which are now in South Karnataka in the old Thulunadu area.

Vaṇṇān:

This cast is really fortunate to be able to perform the most exquisite and magnificent dancing cult of Mother Goddesses. They follow a matriarchal system, and they are the village pediatricians and also have a rich tradition in country medicines and practice.

On the twenty-eighth day of the Malayalam month of Kaṛkkitakam, Vaṇṇān-s visits every home with Āṭi, the goddess Pārvati's form. This Theyyam is performed in every home yard and is meant to remove all negative things and impacts from each home. Small boys, around ten years of age, generally perform this. This small Theyyam features facial makeup, a coronet, red clothing, and small hand bells. Additionally, during the Ōnam festival, they visit each house in a tradition called Ōnatthappan. It is similar to Āṭi Theyyam, but they carry a bow called Ōnavillu in their hands.

These boys grow to become adept Theyyam artists through decades of practice and meditation. A majority of Theyyam-s are performed by this caste, with ninety percent representing Mother Goddesses. These Kōlam-s excel in martial arts, fire dancing, and artistic performances.

It is a customary practice to honor excellent performers among these artists by bestowing title names in a ceremony conducted by a group of chief countrymen and the king. This function of honoring is generally

known as Āchārappēṭal. The honored artists receive a silk cloth and a golden bangle along with the title. The titles include Maṇakkāṭan, Peruvaṇṇān, Madiyan Chiṇṇam, Nēnikkam, Pullūrān, and Kaṇṇmōṛtti. Although the royal power no longer exists, these traditions still persist today.

The Theyyam season ends in the Malayalam month of Eṭavam with the Perum Kalaśam. However, the Vaṇṇān caste has the special privilege of performing two Theyyams at any time, regardless of the season: Muttappan and Puthiya Bhagavati. Muttappan, performed in house yards, Maṭappura, and Poṭikkaḷam, is also the worshipping deity of the Vaṇṇān caste. The Theyyams named Vairajātan, Kṣhētrapālakan, and Vēttakkoru Makan can only be performed by Vaṇṇān-s who has received honorary titles from authorities, as per tradition. Vaṇṇān-s are Theyyam dancers who sincerely devote their entire lives to these divine performances.

Malayan:

Malayans believe that they are the descendants of Abhiprapancha Muni, who was reincarnated as Paṛvata Malayan to cure certain illnesses of Lord Siva. He succeeded in this mission after performing Yāgā-s and other Karma-s. They were given the name Malayan because they were born in the Mala, or mountains. Their main habitation centers range from Kasargod in the north to Vadakara in the south.

The Pāṇā-s are believed to have ancestral ties with the Malayans. Malayi women are renowned obstetricians and often accompany their male counterparts to the Theyyakkāvu, assisting them with Thōṭṭam songs. Both Malayans and Malayi-s are expert singers. Malayans also excel in playing the Chenda drum. Many Theyyams involving complex and dangerous rituals are performed by Malayans. Among them is Thēchāmuṇḍi, who jumps 101 times into blazing embers mounted up to almost seven meters high. Another Theyyam, Agnikāṇṭakāṇan, dances wildly with blazing torches on his crown and sides. A further daring Theyyam is Guḷikarājan, who wears a very tall crown and performs on bamboo pole stilts nearly two meters high.

The customary honorary titles given to them include Panikkaṛ, Peru Malayan, Pādathron, Muthudan, Bkka, Vadakkan Kōran, Perumchellūran, Āllaṭon, Parappaen, Gōdavarman, Kavenadan, and Mingunna, among others. Most of these titles are awarded after performing the dangerous and risky Thēchāmuṇḍi.

In the month of Kaṛkkīṭakam, Malaya boys visit houses in the form of Vēṭan Theyyam (Hunter). These small Theyyams wear small crowns, facial makeup, and various body ornaments. The accompanying drummer sings a song narrating Arjuna's meditation and his eventual attainment of the divine weapon.

Pāshupaṭāsthra from Lord Siva disguised as Vēṭan the hunter. Vēṭan dances in the front yard of each house to drive off the evil forces and effects. Vēṭan rings his hand bell and bless the house hold and people and receive money or rice as offering which he keeps in his Pokkanam (cloth bag).

Vēlan:

Another community of Theyyam dancers is that of Vēlan-s. It is believed that they have their roots in the Māvilan-s who migrated to Kerala from Kundapura in Karnataka state. Their language is Tulu and the clan deity is Bhadrakālī. They own the right for Theyyam dance in the village Kāvu or Tharavadu in the same area. They perform only a few numbers of Theyyams. Their main Theyyam is Kundōra Chamundi. The legend behind this Theyyam goes like this, after murdering Dārika; Mahākālī was bathing in the river Kāvēri. At that time Kundōra Tantri, with his black magic put Kali in a copper pot. But showing her prowess she broke the copper pot and displayed her bravery.

Tantri paid her due respect by showing reverence and thereby she became famous in the name of Goddess Kundora Chamundi. Tuḷu Thōttam is sung before the performance of this Theyyam ensuring the narration of the legend. The rites and rituals followed through a thousand years are strictly observed by Vēlan-s. They consider Theyyattam as very divine and as a dedicated karma without giving over much importance to excessive drum beating or rhythm. Their musical accompaniment comes from a kind of instrument called Kaṭṭikkombu. This is a wind type musical instrument made out of Kaṭṭikkombu.

The expert Theyyam artists in Vēlan-s also get honorary surnames awarded. The name given to an excellent performer is Kēyōrān.

The presences of Vēlan-s in many villages are not seen now. So they are to be searched and brought from other places. The new generation, not knowing Tuḷu language, cannot perform Tuḷu Thōttam also. In the old palm leaves kept by certain Tharavadu about the customary rites and rituals of Theyyattam Māvilan is seen recorded instead of Vēlan. From this is believed that Vēlan-s and Māvilan-s were one and same once upon a time.

Māvilan:

The Māvilan-s belongs to the aboriginal community living on the eastern hillsides of northernmost Kerala, maintaining their primitive lifestyle and culture. According to Dr. Hermann Gundert, these aborigines dance in temples and make baskets. The Vēlan-s of the Mala (mountain) is referred to as Māvilan. The Māvilan-s observes many primitive rituals associated with births and deaths. Moreover, they are experts in 'Punam' cultivation.

They have their own Theyyakkāvu and perform Theyyams using artists from their own caste. Chenda and Ṭudi are used as musical accompaniments during their Theyyam performances. The Theyyams of the Māvilan-s feature costumes and ornaments made from natural materials. They perform thirty-nine Theyyams, and in each main Tharavadu (ancestral house), they annually perform Kāranōn Theyyam (grandfather) in

honor of their ancestors. They also perform Māppiḷa Theyyams (Muslim Theyyams). The best Theyyam artist is honored with the title “Chinn̄am.”

The funeral of Māvilan Theyyam artist involves two stages. First, the dead body is moved from the house to the yard outside. Then, the body is adorned with the facial makeup, light ornaments, and costumes of the last Theyyam the artist performed. Before burial or cremation, the artist is symbolically transformed into Theyyam through this ritual.

Kōppālan:

They are retaining the Thuḷunāṭu culture in its original and inhabiting in the hill areas of Kasargod district. The word Kōppālan is derived from Kōṭṭupālakkār which means the one who live by selling products made of the areca nut palm. Some others believe that they deal with ‘Kōppu’ – the costumes and ornament of Theyyam and hence the name Kōppālar.

They are known as ‘Nalkedaya’ in Tulunadu. ‘Nalke’ in Tuḷu language means ‘to dance’. As they dance with Theyyam costumes and ornaments in the front yard of each house they also got the honorable name ‘Nalkēthayār’.

The ‘Bōṭamkeṭṭu’ of Kōppālar-s are come up to more than thirty eight. The Theyyams they perform can be divided in to four. They are the ones, who became Theyyam after their death with their super human powers, Heroes who die untimely, those who are related with animals and the ones who had connections with the history of the locality.

In the month of Ādi and in the harvest season, Kōppālar in the figure of Theyyams visit every house for its protections. Aṭṭigalanchan, visits in the month of Kaṛkkīṭakam. Kōppālar-s present some special dance forms like ‘Mathira’ and ‘Kanyappō’ on special occasions. They own the privilege of Theyyattam in most of the Kāvu-s in the Northern most part of Kerala.

The most celebrated Kōppālan-s in Theyyam get honorary titles and gold bangles from the ancestral home of the Nāduvāzhi, the local king. They get the title ‘Kāleyappadi’. The Koppalan who receives the gold bangle should get due recognition from the Maipādy king after offering one hundred and one ‘Paṇam’ (hundred and one rupees) and ‘Neyyamruth’ to him. The one who got the honorary title is there after reverently called as ‘Ācharu’. Sometimes the same artist may receive more than one bangle from different places for his performances. Such an accomplished artist becomes ‘Dodda Ācharu’ – The Grand Guru for all other Theyyam artists.

Anjūttan and Munnūttan:

The Munnūttan community lives and performs Theyyam in the Thalasseri, Vadakara, and Koilandi areas of North Kerala. It is believed that the Vēlan and Munnūttan originally belonged to the same caste but developed separate identities based on their habitat and occupation. In this region, people commonly use the term "Thira" instead of Theyyam.

The newer generation of this caste believes they are 'Vēlan Anjūttan,' which also originated from the Velan caste. Many scholars suggest that Anjuuttan was originally an honorary title that later became the caste name. Historically, they lived in areas such as Payyanur, Cheruvathur, Nileshwaram, Koilandi, Vadakara, and North Kottayam. However, their numbers have significantly declined over time. Despite this, they are held in high esteem in society as Theyyam performers.

They are devotees of Devi and hold exclusive rights to perform Thaipparadēvatha. At Kunnathurppadi (the abode of Muttappan Theyyam), they perform Puralimala Muttappan and Thiruvappan rituals, which are carried out by a member of this caste. In some Mucchilōttu Kāvu, the sacred image of Mucchilōttu Bhagavathi is also carried by the Anjūttan.

The Anjūttan seek assistance from the Vaṇṇān for facial makeup and wearing holy ornaments. They also form marital alliances with the Vaṇṇān. Historians have noted that, in ancient times, the women of this caste were skilled in obstetrics. Boys in the caste receive Theyyam training at a very young age.

The Kalanadikal or Kalanadiyans are an aboriginal tribe that migrated to Wayanad. These Theyyam performers reside in Pulppalli, Muthanga, Palavayal, Pakkam, and Thekambara. They strictly preserve and maintain their tribal heritage and create a sacred atmosphere at the Theyyāttam centers.

The main Theyyam-s performed by them includes Poothandi Theyyam, Pakka Theyyam, Malakkaringali, Kalimala Thamburan, Kandanpuli, Karan, and Purakkadi Theyyam. Their performances are marked by utmost devotion and sincerity. While their Theyyam-s may not be visually striking, devotees deeply believe in the power of these Theyyams to bless and curse. During the month of Kaṛkkīṭakam, they perform Changranthi or Kolamkettipattu.

Pulayan:

The Pulayan is a revered community that upholds the rich tradition of Theyyāttam, which is a Dravidian form of worship. They are highly skilled in agriculture and are known for their expertise in Theyyam performances, preserving the traditions and rituals of bygone centuries.

Even by the age of twelve, boys in the community are often trained in Kalāśam and traditional songs, preparing them for their debut performances. A Pulayan Gurukkal performs the puja for the debut ceremony

in the presence of relatives and friends. During this event, the boy is adorned with a Thalappāli (holy headpiece) and Thiru Muḍi (crown). Accompanied by the rhythm of the Ṭudi (a small drum), songs such as Pūppāṭṭu are sung.

A decorated Pandāl (shamiana) is set up in front of the Chāla (Pulaya's hut) for the ceremony. There is a proverb in the community that says, "After this debut, he becomes half a Pulayan." Performing this debut is a compulsory rite of passage before a boy takes up a job to earn a livelihood.

The Pulayan do not perform Theyyāṭṭam in the Kāvu (shrines) of other communities or castes. Instead, Theyyattam is exclusively performed by the Pulayan-s in their own shrines. Their Theyyattam begins on the tenth day of the month of Tulām, a day considered holy and referred to as Pathamudayam (Tenth Sunrise). On this day, Kalichekon Theyyam is the first performance. The Koottam (procession) moves around the village houses, carrying a tall, decorated palm leaf umbrella and accompanied by the musical sounds of the Thudi (small drum) and Kinnam (brass plate). The Pulayan believe that this Theyyam, Kalichekon, is the protector of cows, hence its name.

The Pulayan-s also performs a type of black magic ritual called Marikkaruvanattam, intended to ward off evil forces known as Mari and Mamayam. This ritual is typically performed during the month of Kaṛkkitakam, a time marked by heavy rains and famine. As part of this rite, four Theyyams—Marikkaliyan, Mamayakkaliyan, Marikkalachi, and Mamayakkalachi—begin house visits on the 28th day of Kaṛkkitakam and conclude their journey at the seashore. It is believed that this ritual drives away the evil forces.

The Pulayan-s performs 35 Theyyams in total. They do not have oracles in their Kōṭṭam (shrine). Each Kōṭṭam worships deities associated with one or more Tharavadu (ancestral lineages), and the leadership in performing Kaḷiyāṭṭam is taken by those Tharavadu. For Theyyam performances, expert performers from within the caste are always invited. The Kōlam (Theyyam figures) representing the spirits of clan ancestors, or Karanavars, are given special preference.

Cast of the Kōladhāri	Theyyam which performed
Vaṇṇān	Āryappunganni, Āyitti Bhagavati, Ūrppazhachi, Narambil Bhagavati, Nāgakanni, Padakkati Bhagavati, Puliur Kāḷi, Vayanattu Kulavan, Vishakhandan etc.
Malayan	Bhiravan, Karimkuṭṭichātan, Guḷkan, Mūvālamkuzhi Chāmuṇḍi, Panjuruli, Uchiṭṭa etc.
Vēlan	Kannitheyyam, Kundōra Cāmuṇḍi, Kuṛathi, Mōndikōlam etc.
Māvilan	Vaṇṇāthi Pōthi, Tūva Kāḷi, Karimanal Cāmuṇḍi, etc.
Kōppāḷan	Ālāda Bhagavati, Kāppāḷatti Bhagavati, Padinjārē Cāmuṇḍi, Puli Chāmuṇḍi, etc.
Anjūṭṭan and Munnūṭṭan	Muthappan, Pōrkkali Bhagavati, Ashtamachāl Bhagavati etc.
Pulayan	Karuvāḷamma, Kallandattu Bhagabati, Padamadakki Thamburaṭṭi, Veḷḷūkurikkaḷ etc.

Conclusion:

In North Malabar, Theyyam is not just a form of entertainment but a deeply spiritual experience. One notable aspect of Theyyam in North Malabar is its inclusivity, it transcends the cast barriers. People from all walk of life, irrespective of their cast or social status, participate in and attend Theyyam performances, fostering a sense of community and unity.

Theyyam came to be composed of after Malayalam became a mature form of literary expression. These songs were transmitted oral from generation to generation, though their authorship remains unknown.

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GLOSSARY:

Kōladhāri or Kōlakkāran= The person who perform the ritual Theyyam

Theyya Kōlam = Who dressed up like God

Kaṛkkitākam = last month of the Malayalam calendar, which is used in Kerala. It falls in July or August, and is also known as the "Ramayana month"

Āṭi Theyyam = This Theyyam visits the village house in the month of Kaṛkkitākam are believed to ward off scarcity in the households to shower prosperity

Perum Kalaśam = The Kalaśam represents the divine Mother Goddess, which is the most significant festival of the temple involves the worship of Goddess

Paṛvata Malayan = Malayan who lives in the mountains

Pāṇā = This community Pāṇā-s are known for their melodious music

Theyyakkāvu = Place where Theyyam Performs

Thōṭṭam = It is a series of ritualistic songs and a highly acrobatic performance that precede the Theyyam ritual in Kerala

Tantri = Tantri is a Vedic head priest in Hindu temples in Kerala and coastal Karnataka, India. They are responsible for setting rules, performing rituals in temples

Thuḷunāṭu = A region on the southwestern coast of India

Thaipparadēvatha = Mother Goddess

Theyyāṭṭam = Theyyam performance

Kaḷiyāṭṭam = Yearly Theyyam festival