

Redefining the Legacy: Exploring the Ethnic God-Head Sree Muthappan Theyyam of Kannur

BHASURA SANGEETHIKA M.

ABSTRACT: Theyyam, one of the well-known folk traditions in Kerala's North Malabar, is renowned for its vividness and people's devotion. The inhabitants of North Malabar view theyyams as an inseparable part of their culture. In this land of Theyyam, more than 400 manifestations of divine figures, historic, and mythical heroes are staged annually in various kaavus. Each has its own costumes and makeup and ways of presentation. Among this one hundred and twelve are still very important and famous. Several communities that perform Theyyam include Vannan, Malayan, Maavilan, Cheravan, Velan, Pulayan, Paravan, Anjoottan and Chinkatthan. These communities belonged to the lowest strata of society. Muthappan Theyyam is one of the famous deities in Kannur District and is believed to be the Theyyam of common man and his ancestral worship. Devotees from all walks of life are visiting one of the famous shrines of the Muthappan Theyyam, Parassinikadavu Madappura in Kannur, considered as the permanent abode of the deity of Muthappan. The ritual performers of Muthappan Theyyam belong to the Vannan community of Kerala. It is interesting to note that the puja rituals, rites and administration for Muthappan are performed by the Thiyya community. This paper elaborates the evolution and cultural importance of the ethnic god-head Sree Muthappan Theyyam of Parassinikadavu Madapura. This Madapura has an important position among the ritual centers of Kerala.

KEYWORDS – *Daivam, Theyyam, Muthappan, Ethnic God-Head*

Introduction

The folks of Northern Kerala practise a form of worship known as *Theyyam*. It comprises a unique fusion of signs, customs, and artistic forms, particularly dancing. Ghosts and good and evil spirits appear in this beautiful art form. According to K K N Kurup, “the *Teyyam* or *Teyyattam* is a popular cult in Malabar which has become an inseparable part of the religion of the village folk”.¹ *Theyyam* or *Theyyattam* is a well-known Hindu rite of worship practised primarily in the *Kolathunadu* region in North Kerala. Since it is a living cult with centuries-old traditions, rituals, and customs, nearly all caste and class Hindus in this area are included. *Theyyam* is an uncommon dance and music fusion that highlights significant aspects of tribal culture. *Theyyam* is a corrupted form of *Daivam*, which refers to God.² *Attam* is a dancing term. *Theyyattam* translates to “God’s Dancing”.

Theyyam performers are from the lower caste and hold a prominent place there. The natives of these districts worship *Theyyam* and ask for blessings from him. Believers view the guy dressed as the *Theyyam* as a visual manifestation of God and ask for his blessings because they think God enters into the body of the *Theyyam* performance. Hence, *Theyyam* has a clear cultural and social impact on people’s lives. It has a solid connection to Kerala’s heritage and culture. Modernisation brought about by globalisation has significantly altered every aspect of daily life in Kerala. Many of Kerala’s indigenous art forms have fallen by the wayside and appear to no longer be as crucial to the culture there. *Theyyam* is another Kerala traditional art form that has fallen short of its former splendour.

Theyyam can be visualized as a symbol of Dravidian Culture that existed in Kerala prior to the Aryan culture.³ *Theyyam* or *Kolam* worship is a simple mode of worship than idolatry. *Theyyam* is the perfect example of all that we conceive of God in our mind. Irrespective of religion, caste or community *Theyyam* has now become a part of faith for all.

Evolution

Sree Muthappan Theyyam is the most prominent among the different

forms of *Theyyams* in North Malabar. He is considered the incarnation of Lord Vishnu and Siva, born in the ancient period. Sree Muthappan is known under names like Thiruvappana or Valiya Muthappan, Vellatam or Cheriya Muthappan, Ambala Muthappan, Puralimala Muthappan etc. Devotees from all walks of life visit one of the famous shrines of the Muthappan *Theyyam*, Parassinikadavu Madappura in Kannur, considered the permanent abode of the deity of Muthappan. For the People of Kerala, especially the Malabar, worshipping the deity is one of the most worshipped *Theyyam*. Occasionally, most of the houses make the offering of the *Theyyam* performance of the Muthappan- 'Vellatam' in their houses. The observances concerning the Muthappan *Theyyam* have an ethnic and caste content. The ritual performers of Muthappan *Theyyam* belong to the Vannan community of Kerala. Interestingly, the Thiyya community performs the puja rituals, rites and administration for Muthappan.

The traditional story of Sree Muthappan describes the background of the deity. In the village of Ayipuzha in North Malabar, a Brahmin family was known as the Ayyankara Mana. The Brahmin landlord was the ruler of a province known as Eruvessi. The Brahmin couples were distraught that they did not have a son to help them in their old age, take over the kingly duties, and manage their estates. Most importantly, light their funeral pyres and do the necessary funerary rites after their death. So, they continually observed vows and visited the Shiva Temple in Payyavur and also made offerings at other nearby Shiva temples.⁴

The legend narrates how God Shiva and Goddess Parvati were pleased with the prayers of this childless couple for a son and also moved by the request of *Narada* to Shiva. Lord Shiva sent his wife Parvathi to the Ayyankara Mana. She, therefore, took the guise of a *Kurathi* (low-caste female fortune teller) and visited *Patikutty Amma*. The *Kurathi* pacificate *Padikutty* and read her hand and predicted that she would soon have a fulgent son. *Padikutty* happily sends *Kurathi* gifts. However, the following day as the *Padikutty* went to the nearby river for her customary morning ritual ablutions in '*Thiruvanchira*', she saw a pretty male baby lying on a flower bed. She took the child home and brought him up as their son.⁵

The Kurathi convinced the Brahmin family that the baby was a gift from the God Siva and decided to bring him up as their son. They called him Ayyankara Unni, who later became renowned and worshipped as Sree Muthappan. Joy filled the Mana, which had been pervaded by sadness and gloom due to the lack of an heir for the royal couple.

The days passed, and the couples didn't become aware of it. They observed some changes in their son's behaviour. They found that the boy's interest was more in hunting and hunting weapons than in learning Vedas or reciting *mantras*. He demanded his parent's bows and arrows. The Brahmin parents bought him excellent archery equipment. The boy always visits the jungle near their house to hunt with his bow and arrows. He was also interested in fishing. He began to bring meat to the Mana, roast it in a fire, and eat. *Thottampattu* says: *Madhu mamsathinu alpapriyanakakondur brahmaswam paricherinju Palazhiku samarpichu*.⁶ The activities of Muthappan caused problems in his household with its strict vegetarian practices. He would then take food to the poor and mingle with the low-caste untouchable communities. As these acts were against the Namboothiri way of life, his parents requested him to stop this practice, but the boy was reluctant to their demand. The Ayyankara landlord was fed up with the activities of his son. Patikkutty, the mother of Ayyankara Unni, attempts to convince Ayyankara Unni and tries her best to transform the behaviour of Ayyankara Unni and dissuade him from his way of life.

The Ayyankara Unni was already known about the mental suffering and pressure upon the mother. One night he reached home and conveyed to his mother that he knew how rudely the ruler and the Brahmins were approaching her and of their criticism of his behaviour. Ayyankara's landlord warned him and scolded him, infuriated. Anger burnt within Ayyankara Unni, and flames began to come from his eyes and consume nearby trees. The Ayyankara Unni revealed his divine form (*Visvaroopam* or Cosmic All-Pervading Form) to his parents.⁷ What the ruler and his wife then saw was not their son but a god with flaming eyes and armed with a bow and arrows. It was similar to the act of Siva, the supreme God with his formidable third eye, which, when opened, can turn to ashes

anything before it. They then realised that the boy was not ordinary but God himself. They prostrated before him, surrendered to him, and implored his forgiveness. Sree Muthappan (Ayyankara Unni) told his feared parents that he did not want to be a reason for creating more tension and sadness in his family and was ready to leave home.

Padikkutty pacified her son to control his anger and to go too far away from the places where humans lived, like hillsides, particularly to Kunnathurpadi.⁸ From then onwards, replaced the location of Sree Muthappan was from Eruvassi to Kunnathurpadi. Sree Muthappan obeyed his mother's words and moved towards Kunnathurpadi hill. Thottampattu of Sree Muthappan *Theyyam* mentioned his journey: *Mayilpeelikondu Thalapothinju Veda Rajavayi Purappettu*.⁹ He wears a bow, arrows, and *churika* (short sword) during his trip. Dogs accompanied Sree Muthappan, and wild animals were his consorts.

The origin of the name Muthappan is as old as the cult itself, which is evident from the construct of the term. The etymology of the word Sree Muthappan is controversial. Sree Muthappan may mean a pearl of a god (*Muthu* means “pearl”, and *Appan* is often used to indicate a divinity. e.g., Ayyappan, the famous God of Sabarimala).¹⁰ In one legend, the word “Muthappan” was interpreted as Grandfather.

There are two gods involved in Sree Muthappan *Theyyam* rituals. It was the Senior Muthappan and Junior Muthappan. Senior Muthappan was the original Muthappan, and the other was the junior Muthappan who came to be associated with Muthappan later on. The legend says that Patikutty was aware of the danger from his eyes, and she asked the Sree Muthappan to wear a blindfold when anger awakens. From this day onwards, he becomes visible with a blindfold. That is why the Senior Sree Muthappan *Teyyam* is visible with a blindfold and must be led by the priest or his companion, the Junior Sree Muthappan.

The legend said when Sree Muthappan travelled through the jungle, he reached Puralimala near Peravoor and met a sage who had long been meditating with Siva. Sree Muthappan greeted him; the aged sage opened his eyes and saw Shiva before him. The sage calls Sree Muthappan ‘Nayanar’ (an honorific term), and Sree Muthappan calls him Cherukkan

(meaning young boy in Malayalam) and accompanies him. Sree Muthappan and the Cherukkan performed the Cosmic Dance (*Shiva Tandava*). After the dance, the Sree Muttappan revealed Cherukkan's reasons and means for his appearance in the world and the future. These two became ontologically one, just as the *Paramatma* (transcendental soul) and the *Jivatma* (the phenomenal soul). The aged hermit took on the form of Junior Muthappan, a representation of Shiva, and after that, the two gods are always seen together in images well as rituals associated with the Sree Muthappan cult.¹¹

Now Sree Muthappan is called *Thiruvappan*, and the junior Muthappan is called *Vellatam*. Though Sree Muthappan is worshipped as a single deity, it represents an integrated or unified form of two gods: Vishnu (with a fish-shaped crown) and Shiva (with a crescent-shaped crown). It resembles two forms, established in one God, Sree Muthappan.¹²

In this study, it is revealed that the rituals in Madappura, consistent with Sree Muthappan *Theyyam*, are indispensable. The ritual dance and the hunting expose that Sree Muthappan God is closely associated with hunting hills or forests. Moreover, Sree Muthappan is attributed as an ancestral or folk deity closely linked with the forest. The weapons of Sree Muthappan, particularly the sword, bow and arrow, prove Sree Muthappan is a hunter God.¹³ The presence of dogs in Madappura also validates the same. It so becomes dogs accompanying him during hunting. The names of a few dogs which go with Sree Muthappan are used to mention in Thottam. Apart from these, the ritual offerings contain dried meat, a typical product used while hunting. That undoubtedly proves that Sree Muthappan is a tribal God. To supplement, the rituals of Malakettal and Malayirakkal in Madappura confirm his hail to Parassinikadavu and the habit of hunting. In sum, rituals connected to the *Theyyam* performance at Parassinikadavu continue without drastic changes.

Sree Muthappan in history was a man who stepped out from his home, lived with the outcaste, became their leader, and gave them a new identity to them outcastes. After the death of Sree Muthappan, people worshipped him as their God. That evidenced that the Sree Muthappan cult had its origin in ancestor worship. Another fact is that when the

people of the lower castes were denied the right to worship the civilised gods of the Hindu pantheon, the low-caste untouchables were satisfied with worshipping their forms of folk deities or ethnic divinities. Their valiant leaders also formed part of their worship. When these tribal or folk worship patterns became prevalent, the Brahmins adopted some of these into their religion, "little traditions."¹⁴ That is evident in the case of the Sree Muthappan *Theyyam* in Malabar. The Brahmins accepted the "little tradition", the Sree Muthappan and constructed stories about his evolution. To get rights over the cult, they gave a Brahminic connection to Sree Muthappan, which the ordinary people accepted without hesitation.

Cultural Implications

Theyyam is the most outstanding ancient ritual art form in North Malabar. It is not only an art form to the people of North Malabar but also part of their socio-cultural and religious life. There were so many *Kaavus*, *Tharavadus*, *Kazhakams* and *Madappuras* where *Theyyam* is worshipped by the people in North Malabar, blended with a community initiative. Through their sacred presentations, the *Theyyams* have made it possible for the common folk, especially the rural, to experience the fascinating encounters with the God they worshipped. Of the various notable centres of *Theyyam* performance, the Sree Muthappan *Theyyam* adorns a unique place with its amazingly varied rituals and godly characters, being performed on festive occasions with all the traditional costumes and expressions. Devotees of Muthappan arrived here and were supplied with Tea, steamed pear and a small piece of coconut. *Madappura* is a centre of Hindu worship; it is not a temple as prescribed under the Brahmanical religious concepts.

Worshipped numerous deities were over there, and it was attached to a group of people who had authority over the community. The chief persons in Kavus are Uralanmmar, who ruled the Ur or village. Each community has its Kaavu with its Uralans. All matters relating to the community are generally discussed and decided by them. The Kaavus are normally found amid tree groves.

Every caste and religion had unique art forms, social behaviours, and modes of entertainment. Whenever such an art form enters the

mainstream, it becomes the art form of the whole society or area rather than that of a single religion. According to Ragavan Payyanad, different castes have different roles in the *Theyyam* rituals.¹⁵ Most castes either directly or indirectly participate in the ritual of *Theyyam*, which pronounces the existence of human brotherhood. There are separate duties assigned to people of various castes.

In this *Madappura*, the trustees belong to Thiyyas, who make Poojas to the shrine. Brahmins have also possessed a place in the ritual of Muthappan. Brahmins extend the duty of chanting Mantras and hymns to purify the Madappura with water, Punyaham. After the performance ends, Kolakkarans resume their everyday roles in the lowermost strata of society with no special consideration. Kollan and Asari are other lower castes associated with these rituals. They provide firewood which is used in the rituals. Tattan, another lower caste, conducts ceremonial cleaning of the weapons of Sree Muthappan. Malayans were playing musical instruments during the performance of Muthappan *Theyyam*. Other religions, like Muslims, prepared rice for the *Prasadams* in *Madappura*. Among the castes, Vannans played an essential role as a performer of the Muthappan *Theyyam*. Vannans continued the rights to perform Muthappan *Theyyam*.¹⁶ During the performance of *Theyyam*, the Kolakkarans' or performer's words are respected as "divine" and decisions as 'Divine Will'. In short, each and every caste of this area is linked directly or indirectly to *Theyyam* by performing specific prescribed duties based on a service return.

Theyyam is different from other dance forms. In *Theyyam*, religious feelings give liveliness during the performance. The most distinctive features of *Theyyam* are rituals and performances. The performing season of *Theyyam* is usually from early Vrishchikam of the Malayalam year, November-December to mid-Medam, April-May. But in Parassinikadavu Madappura Sree Muthappan *Theyyam* is performed on all days. The rituals and performances of Sree Muthappan *Theyyam* are distinctive. It attracts people from all sections of society, irrespective of religion or caste and promotes the essence of "*Vasudaiva Kutumbakam* - The whole world is one family."¹⁷ It is considered the embodiment of religious tolerance and human brotherhood.

Festivals in Madappura attract thousands of men and women, even from distant villages. According to D.D. Kosambi, the country festivals that draw many villagers from a distance, can often be traced back to a primitive tribal origin, though the actual tribe may have vanished.¹⁸ They all cooperate in celebrating festivals and propitiate common folk God Sree Muthappan. The significant aspect of the festival is the propitiation of the deity in front of the shrine of Madappura. Further, during the festival, the *Theyyams* throw rice over the devotees as a mark of bestowing boons upon them. This symbolic action signifies the advent of prosperity covering cattle, crops, children, wealth and so on.

In Madappura, one can see the Gods communicating with the devotees standing. The interaction with the devotees is a significant phase of the ritual. No doubt, it is a relief to the devotees. Usually, *Theyyam* attends to the devotees in a caste-based hierarchical order. He first speaks with Madayan, giving a coin to Sree Muthappan as a ritual practice. Sree Muthappan will place the coin under his headgear and, after that, treat other devotees. Devotees used to offer cash to Sree Muthappan, the performer at this time. They convey their complaints, difficulties and requests before him. The Gods console the devotees by invariably presenting solutions to their problems and forecasting their future. It is observed that the speech of the *Theyyams* to devotees is not entirely spontaneous, as they speak stylishly.

The story reveals that all these aspects illustrate a high degree of socio-religious tolerance during the ritual. The lower castes can perform the customs and manners in this respect. Another notable fact is that in a period of caste obscurantism, even the Brahmins took part in the ritual performance of *Theyyam*. Everyone involves in this Madappura, in one way or another, at least to get the blessings of Sree Muthappan. The unification of these castes reflects the ideals of Sree Muthappan, aiming to eliminate caste discrimination and promote untouchables, especially scheduled castes and tribes.

The long historical process suggests that a social system evolved in Kerala based on caste hierarchy. The culture in *Theyyam* is of the depressed castes and classes, and the temple-oriented culture is that of the

dominant castes and classes. Still, a nonviolent confrontation occurred between the two cultures. Much of this modern folk religion is extremely ancient and contains traits that originated during the earliest periods of Neolithic-Chalcolithic settlements and artistic expressions.

Theyyam can be interpreted as a pre - Hindu worship ritual, as the deification of ancestors, heroic figurines and extraordinary personages as defining caste configurations and as a form of social protest.¹⁹ In contemporary times there is an urge to link the *Theyyam* deities to the Hindu gods of Shiva and Vishnu. It was mainly due to the growth and spread of Brahmanical religions. It has primarily influenced this living cult, *Theyyam*. These Brahmanical religions also influenced Muthappan *Theyyam*. The different branches of this religion, like Vaisnavism and Saivism, have considerably contributed to the origin of the Muthappan deity.

According to Robert Redfield, the folks and peasantry follow the little tradition, and elites follow the greater practice. The elite group borrows norms and values of little traditions of village people. In this borrowing, they make changes according to their perspectives.²⁰ In the cult of *Theyyam*, Brahmins use interpretations of myths and ritual praxis designed to associate their deities with the greater gods of the Hindu religion. The *Theyyam* is one of the few folk traditions which continue its cultural identity and uniqueness. It also symbolises that segment of the little traditions which have kept up a cultural identity of its own without merging into great traditions to form mixed traditions.

The developmental process of *Theyyam* flourished not in the sophisticated atmosphere of the bigger temple but strictly confined to small local temples called Kaavus, i.e., a small place of worship in the ownership of a particular family or village. These ritual art forms oppose the existing caste system. Moreover, *Theyyam* also declared that the people live without any caste discrimination.

The interesting thing is that they can specify the characters of unfamiliar persons and enter into conversation, covering the latest happenings in their life. That is an influential source to believe in the divinity of these Godly appearances. The growing acceptance of God is that many of

the predictions are happenings as true and solutions to problems are practicable and effective.

For centuries Sri Muthappan *Theyyam* has been a unifying religious factor among these communities. It has also created a sense of deep solidarity within the hierarchical structure of the Hindu organization consisting of different castes and division. As a whole, the *Theyyam* has remained a living force and a link between the old and new religious and cultural concepts.

Conclusion

The popularity of Sree Muthappan *Theyyams* is increasing all over Malabar and even in other states. But the main centres are still concentrated in and around Parassinikadavu and Kunnathurpadi. The actual *Theyyam* ceremony is a culmination of many social acts of performance. These performance acts are participatory. It requires the involvement of the performer, the spectator as the audience and the organisers. Represented visually, they transform narratives into a felt distinctively social experience. That is empirical and emotionally vibrant in the phenomenon. Moreover, the ritual performance is a form of socialised folk theatre. It is associated with folk history and memory.

Most of the myths in connection with the origin of ethnic deities like *Theyyam* have some of the lowest castes or original castes native to the land as the initiators of cult worship. During the next stage of social evolution, some of the higher castes come into the picture and become the guides and supervisors of the same cult practices. During Brahmanisation, the Brahmins manipulated the existing myths to suit their beliefs, deities, rituals etc. The same is the case with the cult of Muthappan *Theyyam*. Though there was an evolution and development of the cult practices through the ages in the worship of *Theyyam*, some of the original rituals, beliefs and practices continued as integral aspects of the cult.

These interesting features find a place in the narrating legends and the rituals of Sree Muthappan *Teyyam*. A study into the religious rituals and performance of the Sree Muthappan *Teyyam* and the special rights, beliefs and aspirations of the aboriginal tribes and castes in the religious

concepts and constitution will provide a deeper understanding of this popular and mass ritualistic centre.

Thus, Sree Muthappan *Theyyam* remains a great cultural phenomenon in North Malabar, offering the region's people many benefits by performing give-in functions. Hence, it will always remain a highly useful segment of the culture of North Malabar. This is a good example of the solidarity and integrity of different communities in this region based on the cult of *Theyyam* and its festivals.

Bhasura Sangeethika M. is a Research Scholar in the Department of History at the University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram.

Notes and References

1. K.K.N. Kurup, "Aryan and Dravidian Elements in Malabar Folklore", *Journal of Kerala Studies*, p.3.
2. Sita.K.Nambiar, *The Ritual Art of Theyyam and Bhutaradhana*, New Delhi, 1906, p. 13
3. P.J. Varghese, *Festivals of Kerala*, Kochi, 1993, p.54.
4. *Interview with Gangan Peruvannan at Parassinikadavu Madappura dated 18 July 2016.*
5. *Interview with Gangan Peruvannan at Parassinikadavu Madappura dated 18 July 2016.*
6. Removed the sacred thread and offered it to Palazhi since he found interest in toddy and meat.
7. Theodore Gabriel, *Playing God: Belief and Ritual in the Muthappan Cult of North Malabar*, London, 2010, p.47.
8. Kunnathurpadi is a village in the distant hills of North Malabar.
9. He covered the head with peacock feathers and started as a tribal chief.
10. Theodore Gabriel, *op.cit.*, p.44.
11. Janardana Poduval, *Sri Kunnathurpadi Muthappan (Mal.)*, Karakkattedam, 2006, p.31.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Theodore Gabriel, *op.cit.*, p.52.
14. Robert Redfield, *The Little Community: View Points for the Study of a Human Whole*, London, 1967, pp.124-158.

15. Ragavan Payyanad, *Folklore Padanangal (Mal.)*, Trissur, 2004, p.29.
16. Raman Azhikode, *Parassinikadavu Sree Muthappan*, 2009, p.10.
17. Karuna Sagar, *Bagavan Sree Muthappan (Mal.)*, Kannur, 1995, p.20.
18. D.D. Kosambi, *The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India in Historical Outline*, Bombay, 1972, p.21.
19. K.K.N. Kurup, *op.cit.*, p.15
20. Robert Redfield, *The Little Community: View Points for the Study of a Human Whole*, London, 1967, pp. 124-158.