

Identity through Nature-Man Interaction: A Synthetic Definition Based on the *Teyyam* Performance in North Malabar

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ABSTRACT Kerala is known as ‘the god’s own land’. Its environment, culture and practices made this, and are true, because Kerala is blessed with a plural culture, marvelous natural setups, and beautiful people. The life of the people shows high adaptability to its natural conditions to cope with ‘man-nature interaction’. The very word, *teyyam*, can bring forth a fascinating as well as a colourful picture. But for the people of North Malabar the word has more than one meaning. The devotees worship and perform *teyyam* as an indispensable part of their religion, magic, etc. The followers strictly follow its code and conducts because, they fear its anger and destruction, and believe at the same time, its pleasing yield well being. The very uniqueness of *teyyam* is that it stands on the ‘interaction’ between man and man, and to his surroundings, i.e. man’s dependency over environment, both the physical environment and the socio-cultural environment. This pattern of relationship also makes the people to treat *teyyam* as their ‘science’ and ‘culture’ inherited from the past, and further their limited technology and know-how insist them to trust heavily in *teyyam* for the common good of the people. It puts the people on a single platform with a common feeling, and that also helps the people to keep their *identity* as a member of this unique ‘social network’.

INTRODUCTION

Kerala is known as ‘the God’s own land’. Its environment, culture, and practices also endorse this truth. Kerala is blessed with plural culture, marvelous natural setups, and beautiful people. The life of the people is very calm and quite, and shows high adaptability, and international standards, at least in the sphere of health and education. All these highly appreciable achievements are due to its natural conditions, and, ‘*Nature-Man interaction*’. We, anthropologists, are very keen about this kind of interactions, and strongly believe that culture, and all behaviour patterns are evolved out of this interaction. And, it also helps us to understand *who we are and who other people are* or, *who is who and what is what*, the *identity* (Chaudhari 2004; Jenkins 2004; Chandra 2005; Chaturvedi and Singleton 2005) of people. So, I would like to examine how the *identity* is evolved from the ‘*Nature-Man*’ interaction with reference to the unique tradition, the *teyyam* performance of North Malabar.

According to Kurup (1977: 5) “The *Teyyam* or *Teyyattam* is a popular cult in Malabar which has become an inseparable part of the religion of the village folk”. Damodaran says that,

“Through teyyam, the people of North Malabar worship Nature, spirits, ancestors, gods,

and goddesses as their local deities...Teyyam perform-mance is the glory of this mode of worship...The teyyam performance is a complex process, which includes the observance of several rituals, and the appearance of the beloved deities in front of believers (2007a: 1, 2)”.

The very word, *teyyam*, can bring forth in the mind of a listener a fascinating, as well as a colorful picture, particularly, its charming attires, superb dance and enchanting music, and equally important, the commitment of the people. It is also true that as far as the people of North Malabar are concerned, the word, *teyyam*, has more than one meaning. According to them, the *teyyam* is everything. Absolutely they believe that, it is their present, past and future, as far as their society is concerned. More than that, *teyyam* is culture, tradition, and environmental relationship. The devotees worship and perform *teyyam*, as an indispensable part of their religion, magic, and even politics. For this reason, it is deemed as a unique religious ritual (Ramachandran 1989; Pallath 1995; Naboodiri 1998; Damodaran 2007a,b,c). It is believed that the *teyyam* possess great power, and is sacred and divine, which is also at once both non-human and supernatural. The followers strictly follow its code, in terms of its rules and behaviour patterns because, they fear that its anger will lead to their destruction, and its pleasing will lead to their well being.

People of North Malabar think that all activities are directly, or indirectly linked with the *teyyam* tradition. For that reason, they consider it both as their designer, and destroyer.

The term, *teyyam*, is used as a synonym to *daivam* (god) (Pallath 1995; Naboodiri 1998; Damodaran 2007a,b). It is always grappled with symbols, and rituals, on the basis of local myths. The basic number of *teyyam* is only *onnu kuraya nalpathu*, meaning one less than 40 hence, 39 but, for a few, the number is still larger, *onnurunalpathu teyyams*, 140 forms (Naboodiri 1998; Damodaran 2007a). According to the information I have gathered from my fieldwork, and also from published materials, the number goes farther, and as many as three hundred to five hundred different forms of *teyyams* are performed in this area.

We can classify *teyyam*, in terms of gender in general, and myth of origin and *tōttam pāttu* in particular. So there are two groups, male and female *teyyams*, on the basis of gender. The females are the dominant ones, at least as far as the number is concerned. In terms of myth of origin and *tōttam pāttu*, it is possible to separate *teyyams* into five categories namely, Gods and Goddesses, Ancestors, Heroes and Heroines, Spirits and Devils, and Nature and Animals (Pallath 1995; Naboodiri 1998; Kurup 2000; Damodaran 2007a,b,c).

There are foreign scholars who consider the *teyyam* as, 'nothing but devil dance', but it is not a 'devil dance'. It is, in fact, a part of people's sacred tradition (Damodaran 1998, 2005, 2007a). There are others, who consider the *teyyam* as an 'art form', and they also do not know its socio-cultural significance and ramifications. In addition to these views, there is also a common feeling which is prevalent among the people that *teyyam* is a 'caste-based occupation' of a few groups. Such assumption may be partly true. Actually, in reality, it presupposes that all that are endowed with life in North Malabar form the 'part and parcel' of the *teyyam*.

Another important truth is that this social etiquette has been unceasingly flowing all the way through centuries, through generations, and it not only perpetuates the culture, but also maintains its 'identity'. There are many rituals and performances all over the world, which are related to religions, but surprisingly, we cannot acknowledge a similar creation such as, the *teyyam*, anywhere in the world.

The society of North Malabar is mainly stratified into three social groups, in terms of religion: Hindu, Muslim, and Christian (Damodaran 2007a: 31). Jainism, and Buddhism are not having an influential presence in this area, today. The above mentioned three social groups have their own life styles, and behaviour patterns. The Hindus (including the triblas) are the dominant ones, and traditionally, they are said to be the real inhabitants, and the *Mapila* (Muslim) and *Christyani* (Christian) are the later migrant groups. It is the dominant Hindus, who came in close touch with the *teyyam* through an attempt at assimilation. This is why the Hindu society overlaps with that of the *teyyam*, that also having the elements of *Animism*, *Animatism*, and *Nature worship*.

There are three types of *teyyam* celebrations (*kaliyāttams*) namely, *prarthanakaliyāttam* (*teyyam* performance whenever an occasion/situation arises), *kalpanakaliyāttam* (yearly/periodic performance in a fixed date and time, and treated as local festival), and *perumkaliyāttam* (*teyyam* festival in big centers, and always with a gap of few years between each celebrations). During performances, several rituals are observed according to the rites and rules of the respective *teyyam*, and in a specific point of time, the performer performs the *teyyam*, dressed in a peculiar manner by using specially designed colourful and magnificent attires. They wear respective attire and decorations (all over the body), and perform certain kind of rhythmic dance (*kalāsam*) (Damodaran 2007a).

METHODOLOGY

The method and techniques executed for data collection and interpretation here in this paper largely drawn from anthropology. Extensive fieldwork was the soul of this study since, both participant and non-participant observation, and unstructured and informal interview supplies bulk of the informations. Secondary sources such as, books, and reports were also make use for obtaining information. The gathered informations were cross-checked and recorded. And finally analysed, and interpreted according to the objective of this paper.

It has long been established that ecology plays a vital role in conditioning the culture of a given area, and that the geographical situation of a locale goes a long way in shaping the needs,

customs, behaviour, and thoughts of the people. According to Redfield, “both man and Nature are the twin-agents of the perennial revolution that shapes and re-shapes the face of the earth” (1955).

It is not only the anthropologists who speak about the importance of environment in the evolution of the human society but also, even Indian philosophers have spoken about it. For example, the *Tolkappiam*, written by Tolkappiar (C. BC 300) (Velan 1955), speaks about the three factors in relation with the formation of a society. These are space and time, local resources or things that are available in the immediate neighbourhood, and the cultural elements that evolve due to man’s utilization of them. So also in the case of the *teyyam*, ecology plays a vital role. The interaction network between human beings and environment produces a culture. The *teyyam* is a proof to this. A study of the *teyyam*, from an anthropological standpoint, reveals us the fact that interaction also gave shape to new modes of adaptations that were necessary for different situations for easy survival.

DISCUSSION

Absolutely, the very uniqueness of *teyyam* stands on the ‘interaction’ between man and man, and between man and his surroundings, i.e. man’s dependency on environment. The environment of which I have spoken of includes both the physical environment, and the socio-cultural environment. This pattern of attachment also makes the people to deem *teyyam* as their ‘science’, and ‘culture’, inherited from the past, and their limited technology and know-how insist to them that they trust heavily *teyyam* for the common good of the people. It also helps the people to discard the stress and strains of day-to-day struggle for survival. Therefore, I have the firm belief that this ritual, the *teyyam*, as a demand of the whole society, is considered as a necessity by the people of North Malabar.

There was a time when *teyyam* performers directly depend on Nature for obtaining the essential commodities to make the *teyyam* attires. All the costumes, and other items, including those for offerings, were obtained from the surroundings, which were copious and cheap. At present, they find it hard to obtain the natural materials from the surroundings. In addition to this, the increasing influences of the market also act as a force to change the traditional mode of

environment-exploitation. Therefore, the performers now show a greater amount of dependency on market, which was not the case in the past, for obtaining essential *teyyam* commodities.

The area, North Malabar, experiences three main seasons: the cold, the rainy, and the hot season every year. The Monsoon renders good supply of water, and the ponds, gullies, channels, rivers and dales, which are in plenty, act as the best reservoirs of water. The area also consists of hilly uplands, valleys, and forests. Most of the mountainous regions are covered with thick forests. The forests provide in abundance with food, fuel, and other materials for building houses, medicines, and for other needs. The environment acts as a multifaceted resource, and contributes for the subsistence, and survival of the people. When the necessary resources are available to all, what should the people to do? Just exploit the resources that are available in their surroundings! Thus, they start to subsist on them, and therefore, the economy of the people pivots around the forest, i.e. the Nature. Subsequently, when the people felt that these facilities are not enough to fulfill their growing needs and drive, they re-adjusted their life style that minimized the degree of *Nature-dependency*.

Even when the degree of dependency decreased, they did not allow themselves to destroy Nature, but were vigilant to preserve it. This had led to *Nature-worship*, and this offered deities a chance to reside, and perform in every nook and corner. In this regard, they came forward to preserve trees in the form of *kāvu* (sacred grove), as one of the sacred centers of *teyyam* performance. Likewise, the references that are made in *tottampāttu* (recited during performance), about certain practices like hunting, gathering, pastoralism, and similar activities definitely reveal the degree of such subsistence, and survival. For example, the *tottam pāttu* of *kuttychāthan teyyam* runs like this: “*ezhala kali yundalo Kalakaderku, a kali maiponae kayariduvonae*” (*Kalakader*, a local Brahmin, have 7 cattle-shed full of cattles, and *Kuttychāthan* was assigned to look after and graze all these cattles). This indicates the then prevalent pastoralism. Similarly, we can find many references about *punam krishi* (shifting cultivation), *nayattu* (hunting), and *meen pidutham* (fishing). In that way the *teyyam* of North Malabar clearly tells us the fact that on a number of occasions humans interacted with the Nature.

A number of *teyyams* were observed as the transfigured Nature-objects such as monkey, leopard/tiger, pig, and snake (Namboodiri 1998; Damodaran 2007a). For example *teyyams* like *Bali Pulikandan*, *Madayil Chamundi*, and *Naga Rajan* represents monkey, leopard, pig, and serpent respectively. Most of the attire and wearings of *teyyam* also made up as in the shape of Nature-objects. In such way, masks (*mugham*), and pseudo bosoms (*molaru*) and nails (*nagham*) are used during performances. The pattern of facial writings (*mughathezhuthu*) also borrowed from Nature. *Kozhipushpam* (cock's comb), *sangum valum* (shell and tail), *anachuvadu* (elephant foot), and *kurangirutham* (siting monkey) are few examples for such Nature-based pattern of facial writings. These facts clearly confirm there is a *Nature-Man* interaction exists in the sphere of *teyyam*.

The sacred performance needs ritual functionaries, who can carryout various performances hence, considered as, '*sacred specialists*'. The ritual processes of contacting, and offering in a particular manner are already established things, in respect to each deity. Altogether, the worship, the performance, and the offering exercise are of complex nature that needs a 'middleman'. The people successfully surmounted the operational difficulty of approachability by assigning certain persons the task of establishing liaison with the supernatural, through their divine *teyyam* performance.

However, *teyyam* has existed in harmony with ecological settings, it also made possible some sort of social relationships. Thus, it often describes symbolically the actual social relations, status, and the role of the individuals in the society. This relationships, and social positions have been working on a special kind of social network in which each caste is tied up with some obligations. In another word, every one has his own role to play in each performance. For example, the celebrant and the devotees celebrate and worship, and the performer performs *teyyam* (Damodaran 2007a,b).

The traditional economic structure of North Malabar has a special kind of system that characterizes a '*service-return*' relationship, and under this system, each caste within a territorial division is expected to give certain standardized service to the families of other castes (Damodaran 2005, 2007a). Every one works for the respective family or, group of families with which he has

'hereditary ties'. His forefathers worked for the same families, and their descendants will continue to work for them because, the caste is the determinant of the occupation or, service. The server in return will get certain economic benefits. For example, the Malayan, a traditional performer of magic, medicine, midwifery, and the *teyyam*, renders his services to families residing in a territory with which he has hereditary ties. In return, he gets cash or, kind. The system has also been shown to follow the pattern that each and every caste constitutes two-way interaction: one way, they render service to others, and on the other way, they receive certain benefits. In that sense, the performance of the *teyyam* provides a means to its performer's existence. Earlier, this kind of *master-servant* relationship (*Jajmani* system) was quite common in Kerala but, latter this pattern could not continue forever, due to political reasons. The introduction of a revolutionary act, 'Kerala Land Reforms Act', by the government of Kerala, under E.M.S Ministry, disturbed the feudal set up, as well as the occupational homogeneity of the state. But surprisingly, it is noticed that the age-old pattern of extending services between castes remains, not in severity, in *teyyam* performance. That is also noted as a pattern of behaviour against the modern innovations, and way of living.

It is true that the society and its culture have been subjected to change, and yet, the people in this area still blindly carry out almost all the rituals and practices related to the *teyyam* performance without diluting it. Due to this reason, the 'so-called' untouchables are the only people permitted to perform the *teyyam* in different sacred centers (Pallath 1995; Namboodiri 1998; Damodaran 1998, 2005, 2007a,b,c). Hence, it reflects the performers' *identity* too, because, they are simply identified as, the *teyyam* 'executors'. In vise-versa, the performances of the *teyyam* also reflect the 'caste identity'. So, a few *teyyams* are customarily identified as, the *teyyams* performed by certain castes. *Malayante teyyam*, *Vannante teyyam*, and *Pulayante teyyam* can be considered as the examples to this. For that reason *Vishnumurthi teyyam*, *Puthiya Bhagavathi*, *Kundora Chamundi*, and *Pulimarnja Thondachan teyyam* are considered as the *teyyams* of Malayan, Vannan, Velan, and Pulayan respectively.

The villagers continue to perform the *teyyam* because, it still encloses a number of positive functions. Once, *teyyam* had socio-economic

significance, and only later on, with the evolution of a multi-caste, pluralistic, and complex society, it came to perform more elaborate duties, political, religious, communicative, and ceremonial, besides its earlier functions (Damodaran 2007a,b). Apart from the above said functions, the *teyyam* also serves the society, as a critique of the socio-cultural discrimination, and which is an instrument to condemn social evils, and is a form of protest and criticism (Damodaran 2007b). Some of the *teyyams* are directly attacking social oppressions and exploitations (eg: *Pottan teyyam*), and there are also *teyyams* that indirectly oppose such discriminations (eg: *Vishnumkrithi*, *Kuttich than*, etc) (Damodaran 2006). This liberty to criticize discriminations such as, 'untouchability' and 'pollution', gives the oppressed people some 'satisfaction', and 'relief'. Even though this, significance of the *teyyam* is fading away to certain extent, but still has its holds in the socio-cultural milieu of North Malabar. The myth, the rituals, and the whole performance of the *teyyam* itself glorify a few of the past stories of man, and his socio-cultural activities such as, hunting-gathering, nomadism, pastoralism, agriculture, as well as other elements such as, social structure, social status, social discriminations, and protests. The endurance of this old tradition namely, the *teyyam*, connects the past with the present, and keeps up a cultural continuity of this region, the rural and the urban areas. The sacred centers of the *teyyam* also act as linking agents to connect the performance and the people, and the society and its culture, even today. On the other hand, it is also alive as a more popular cultural phenomenon in North Malabar, which helps in maintaining the *socio-cultural identity* through observing certain widespread rituals and performances, that have been inherited from the distant past, and evolved from the *Nature-Man* interaction (Damodaran 2005, 2006, 2007a). Thus, for that reason, the *teyyam* is apt to survive as an important and living part of the socio-cultural sphere.

CONCLUSION

The *teyyam* puts the people on a single platform with a common feeling of belonging and co-operation, upholding the people to keep their *identity* as a mesh of social network on the one hand, and the part and parcel of the whole performance, on the other. So, this power of the

teyyam magnetizes my prime, and serious attention. *Teyyam*, when viewed in its total form reveals us the fact that, all aspects of *teyyam* reflect in an adequate measure, the symbiosis of *Nature* and *Man*. This fact gets substantiated when the deities are associated with their forest base, and the agriculture-nourished economic life. So, I am of the opinion, that the *teyyam*, and its performance, hold a profound influence in regulating '*Nature-Man*' relationship that paves the way for shaping the *identity*. It has been exposed to certain modern forces of change, and innovation, which in turn have affected the working of the traditional interaction pattern, in the life of the people, and their culture, by weakening their interrelations. It is also true, at same time, that the *teyyam* performance exhibits a high degree of flexibility and dynamism, which gives it an extraordinary capacity to 'readjust' with the modern changes, and 'modify' to cope with the present day life-situations in the new environment. Therefore, it becomes a necessity to appreciate, and apply the unique nature of the *teyyam* as, a 'safeguard' against the 'compartmentalization' of our society, and use it to protect our 'secular feelings' against 'non-secular feelings' as well. In addition to this, I believe that the *teyyam* has a capacity to discard the 'identity crisis', which we are facing in a fast changing 'globalizing' world, by giving a *social-identity* to the people of North Malabar. In the words of Brubaker and Cooper:

"The term "identity" is made to do a great deal of work. It is used to highlight non-instrumental mode of action; to designate sameness across persons or sameness over time; to capture allegedly core, foundational aspects of selfhood; to deny that such core, foundational aspects exists; to highlight the processual, interactive development of solidarity and collective self-understanding; and to stress the fragmented quality of the contemporary experience of 'self', a self unstably patched together through shards of discourse and contingently 'activated' in differing contexts. (cit. Jenkins 2004: 8)".

Teyyam, thus, remains as a great cultural phenomenon in North Malabar, offering to the people of the region with many benefits, by performing give in functions. Hence, it will always remain as a highly useful segment of the culture of North Malabar.

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