

**Goddesses of North Malabar**  
**An Anthropological Study on Kinship and Ritual in North Malabar**

**MASTER THESIS**  
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## Abstract

This study explores the relationship between kinship and the ritual *theyyam* worship of North Malabar region in the state of Kerala, India. personal identity is the *tharavad*, and that the *tharavad* is the locus of *theyyam* roles (and other prerogatives). *Theyyam* is a socio-religious ritual in which mythological, divine, ancestral, animal, serpent or heroic characters are represented, each with its distinct physical shape and story of origin. Moreover, it is an attempt to investigate the relationship between ritual and kinship at a point in time when there is a transformation of the kinship system on which the ritual is constructed. The thesis aims to explain North Malabar, the *theyyam* worship and the kinship system separately and then reaching a common ground of discussion on how the changes in the kinship pattern initiated by colonial legislations reflect on the society and in turn on the ritual performance. The study overall suggests that the encompassing and dominant element in North Malabar. The major way that the *tharavads* can celebrate and express their religious faith or convictions is through the *theyyam* — the *theyyam* being not a cultural spectacle (performance) but religious worship. *Theyyam* is fundamentally a product of collective life and the *theyyam* knowledge will be used by, and kept moving through, networks of kinship and the *tharavad*. The collective *theyyam* knowledge has been in existence for many centuries in the form of stories and songs, maintained through a joint family *tharavad* and passed on from generation to generation. But all the collective knowledge which existed in that system was shattered after the disintegration of the *tharavad*. The reservoir of the collective knowledge related to *theyyam* now resides with the great grand parents whose prominence – along with their goddesses – are fading from the nuclear family oriented North Malabari's day to day life.

The fieldwork on which this ethnography is based was conducted in the region of North Malabar in the northern part of Indian state of Kerala. The methodology used in this research include both archival works and the collection of ethnographic data. How changes in the kinship patterns are interwoven with the ritual practices were captured through fieldwork. Oral sources were tapped by conducting interviews – both individually and in groups – with the aim to trace the history of matriliney in *theyyam*, to gather materials on cosmology in the form of myths related to *tharavad* and *theyyam*, placing specific importance on Goddesses in *Theyyam*; and to understand changes in the caste identities as documented in petitions, writings, letters, government documents, police and court files, newspaper reports, and cinema, fiction included. Primary sources, both unpublished and published records as well as secondary sources, have also been utilized for the research. People's recollections were recorded to the extent traceable.

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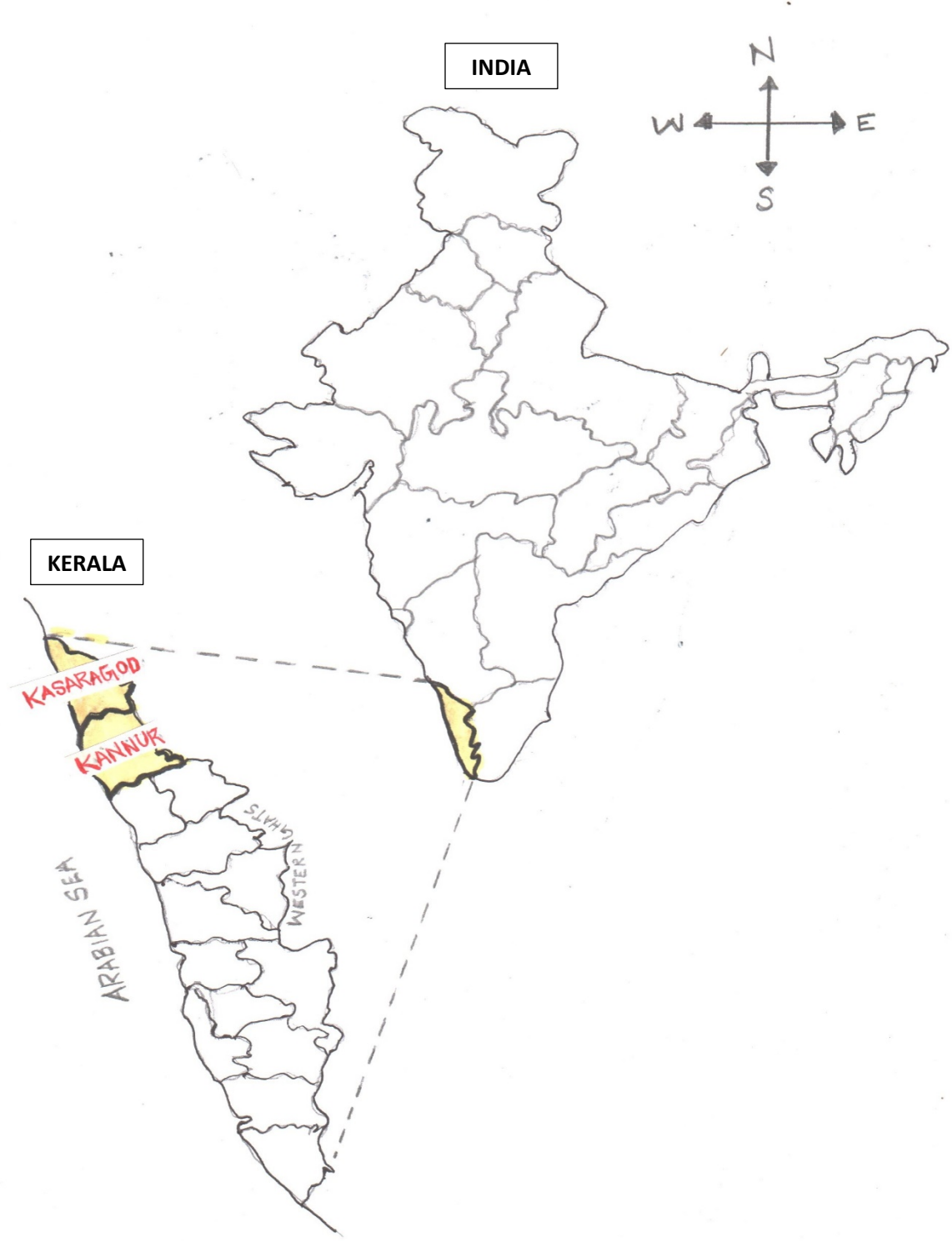
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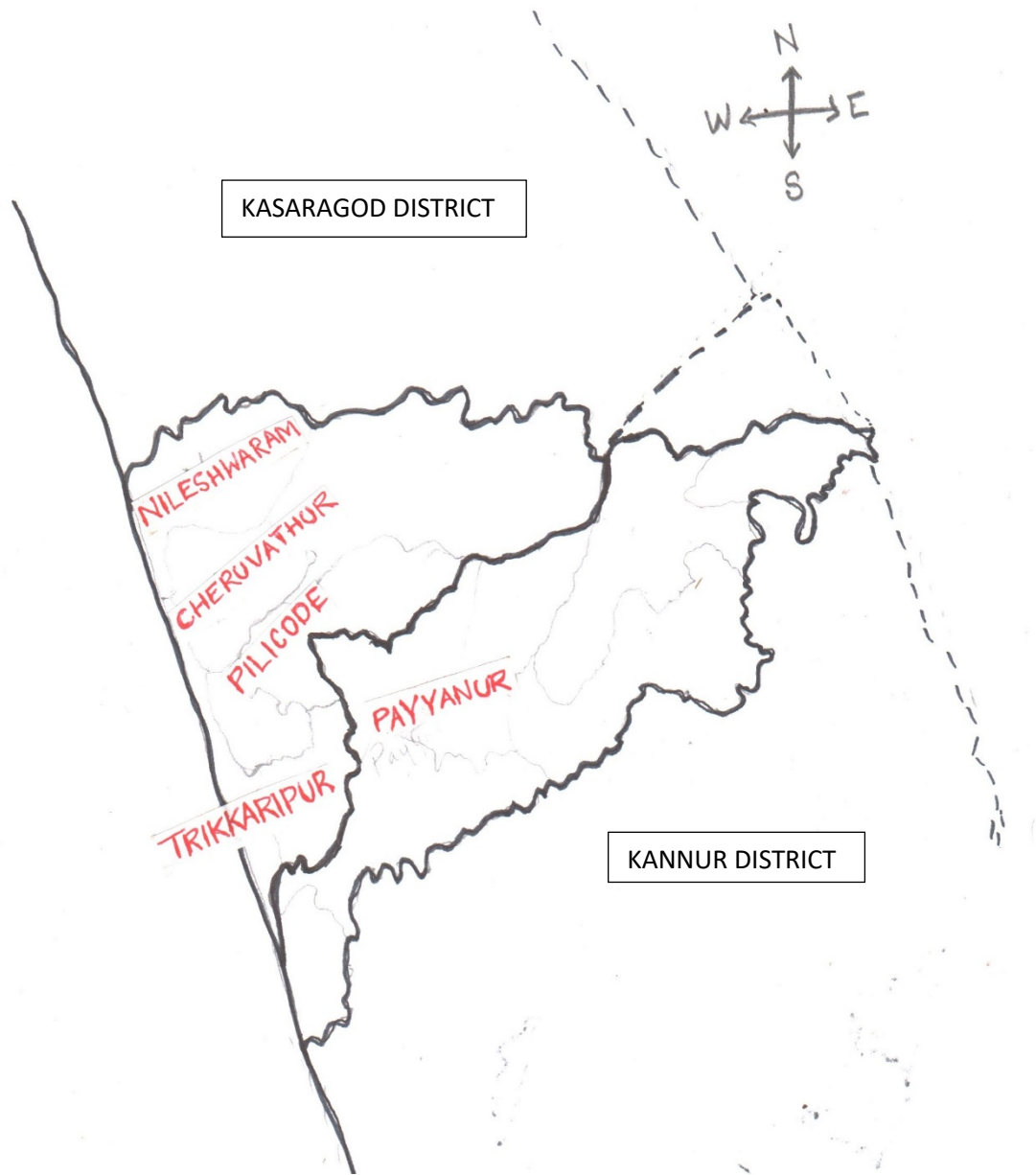


Map of Location- Kerala, Kasaragod and Kannur District



Drawing by author. Map not to scale.

Map of field site of the study.



Drawing by author. Map not to scale.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

This study explores the relationship between kinship and the ritual *theyyam* worship of North Malabar region in the state of Kerala, India. Moreover, it is an attempt to investigate the relationship between ritual and kinship at a point in time when there is a transformation of the kinship system on which the ritual is constructed. The fieldwork on which this ethnography is based was conducted in the region of North Malabar in the northern part of Indian state of Kerala. I aim in my thesis to explain North Malabar, the *theyyam* worship and the kinship system separately and then reaching a common ground of discussion on how the changes in the kinship pattern reflect on the society and in turn on the ritual performance. Changes in the structure and practices of families in Kerala have had wide ranging implications. Alterations in marriage, inheritance and succession practices have changed dramatically the workings of erstwhile matrilineal groups. About twenty items of legislation which marked the gradual revocation of a legal framework of matrilineality were enacted between 1802 and 1976. Among the *theyyam* worshipping castes the majority were matrilineal castes. It is evident that the shift in the *theyyam* worshippers' perceptions of their life and social relations bring changes in how the people conceive *theyyam* over time. *Theyyam* has undergone a shift in its thrust from a folk religion or religious devotion to performing art, from worship to an object of aesthetics and gratification, hence a commodity over a period of time.<sup>1</sup> My thesis overall is an exploration of the gaps in social life where ritual and everyday life are said to be intertwined and an attempt to bring out the factors which produce the gaps, by way of participant observation and ethnography.

#### 1.1 North Malabar

Malabar was an administrative district of Madras Presidency in British India, consolidated during the 1800s, and in independent India's Madras State. The Arab voyager Al-Biruni (970-1039 AD) appears to have been the first to coin the term Malabar. The arrival of the Europeans popularized the name 'Malabar'. The district lay between the Arabian Sea to the west, the South Canara District to the north, the Western Ghats to the east, and the princely state of Cochin to the south. The name Mala (meaning hill)-bar (a synonym for continent or country in Persian and Arabic) means the "hill country". The greater part of North Malabar (except Mahé) remained as one of the two administrative divisions of the Malabar District until 1947 and later became part of India's Madras State until 1956. On 1<sup>st</sup> November 1956, the

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<sup>1</sup> The same view is expressed by Komath (2013: 2).

state of Kerala was formed by the States Reorganization Act, which merged the Malabar District with Travancore-Cochin as part of the linguistic recognition of states. North Malabar refers to the historic and geographic area of present day Kasaragod and Kannur Districts. Except from the coast-fronts expanded by the Europeans it was sparsely populated and mountainous; part of it was forest when Gough was conducting her fieldwork (1947-49) on Nayar Kinship (Gough 1955: 45). North Malabar begins at Kora River in the south and ends at Manjeswaram in the north of Kerala and traditionally comprises the erstwhile princely principalities and fiefdoms of Kolathunadu and the southern parts of Tulu Nadu (Kumaran, n.d.:16). During the ancient and early medieval periods, North Malabar retained its distinct political identity. At no time did the Chera dynasty (3rd century BC – 12th century AD) impose full control over the area, which today retains many distinct cultural features (Menon 2016).

The ruling kings of Kolathunadu, also known as Kolathiri, were descendants of the Mushaka Royal Family.<sup>2</sup> The Mushaka Kingdom rose to become one of the major political powers in the Kerala region, after the disappearance of the Cheras of Mahodayapuram and the Pandyan Dynasty in the 12th century AD (Menon 1990: 32). Up to the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Mushaka kings followed a patrilineal system of succession and thereafter they gradually switched over to matriliney (Menon 2007: 147).<sup>3</sup> The reason for this transformation is still debated among the historians. The old Mushaka Country came to be known as Kolathunadu by the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Menon 1990: 32; Rajendran N, c1979). The kingdom of Kolathiri basically had two matrilineal divisions, Udayamangalam kovilakam and Pallikovilakam. Later, over time, due to lineage-feud, each of these lineages partitioned along 5+3 matrilineal divisions of the Kolathiri family and had rulers of the respective parts/ *Kūr-Vāzhcha* (part-dominions), namely Kolattiri, Tekkālankūr, Vadakkālankūr, Naalāmkūr, and Anjāmākūr (Babu 2013: 39). The administration of Kolathunadu was divided into various segments of authority, each of which performed functions similar to those of the superior powers but on a smaller scale (Gough 1955). This includes the “*samantans*” (a title for those who represent the king in different local regions),<sup>4</sup> “*nāduvazhis*” (local Chiefs), who were heads of “*nādus*” (districts), below whom in the administrative hierarchy were “*desavazhis*” (headmen) who were heads of hamlets or parishes called “*desams*” (locality or village divisions of *nādus*), and below them again were other local potentates called *mukhyastans* (Babu 2013: 61). Perhaps because of its difficult environment, North Malabar did not approach the degree of political centralization achieved in

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<sup>2</sup> The Ezhimala kingdom of Tamil Sangam age dates back to the period between 300 BCE and 200 CE (a corpus of Tamil literary texts believed to have been written between BC 300 to 500 AD). The period of erecting megalithic monuments in Kerala also corresponds to this period.

<sup>3</sup> Mushika Vamsa Kavya, written by the Sanskrit poet during the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century AD, gives information.

<sup>4</sup> These people ruled the region as a king with acknowledging *Kolathiri*. At times they questioned the power of *Kolathiri* and led riots against the king. According to *theyyam* literature they lived in houses known as as ‘*madam*’, ‘*edam*’, ‘*naalukettu*’. For detailed description see 2.2

the central area until 1792. Within the small kingdoms *nāduvazhis* fought each other and rebelled against their Rajas, allying themselves with different rulers as suited their needs of the moment. Neighbouring *desavazhis* sometimes fought each other within the *nādus*, while within the *desams*, *kudipaga* (lineage-feud) persisted (Gough 1955: 54). Authority was decentralized, shared, and pluralistic. The nature of political power in this region in the medieval period was a complex one, with the Nambutiri *sanketham*<sup>5</sup> resisting the power of warlords, on the one hand and, on the other hand a set of powerful vassals who had allegiance to an overarching *Kolathiri swaroopam*.<sup>6</sup>

From 1689 onwards British interlopers were invited for trade by *Kolathiri*. According to Rajedran N (1979) in 1722 *Kolathiri*, through a royal writing, granted to the East India Company all the trades and farms within his territory from Canharotte down to the Pudupatnam river, excluding the areas where concessions were held by the Dutch who were based at Kannur. The British were also authorized to 'punish, prevent and drive away any other stranger' who interfered with their concessions. Debt trap was an important instrument which the British used to secure the monopoly of trade in Malabar (Rajedran 1979).

The history of European expansion in India begins with the landing of Vasco da Gama at Kozhikode (Malabar) in 1498 AD (Menon 2016). From 1766 to 1792 multiple military invasions by Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan, plunder and systematic forcible religious conversions were carried out in North and South Malabar alike. Fearing forcible conversion, a significantly large section (Chieftains and Brahmins) of the 'Malabar' region, including the *Kolathiri*, fled with the material wealth of the temples in their dominions, to take refuge in the erstwhile Kingdom of Travancore (Babu K 2013). During this period Tipu Sultan outlined new schemes of social reforms. There was a breakup of the administration order and attempts were made to establish a centralised ruling. The invasion of the kingdom of Mysore provided the English East India Company with more chances to tighten their control over *Kolathiri* in the form of military support against the invasion.

In March 1792 Malabar was formally ceded to the British. The British entered into agreements with the local Rajas of Chirakkal, Kottayam and Kadathanad and all of them acknowledged the full sovereignty of the Company over their respective territories. The onset of British rule subordinated both Brahmanic and

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<sup>5</sup> A protected territory with an independent way of life. Nambutiri *sanketham* maintained an independent way of life with an institution of body guards known as *changatham* ('friendship') usually *nairs* who functioned as suicide body guards protecting mainly traders.

<sup>6</sup>*Swaroopam* is a usage from *theyyam* literature which means kingdom.

kingly authority and directed the power to the centralized control of the British who established direct ruling in Malabar. The British Government divided the province of Malabar into two administrative divisions – the Northern and Southern, presided over by a superintendent each at Thalassery and Cherpulasseri – under the general control of the supervisor and chief magistrate of the province of Malabar who had his headquarters at Kozhikode. It was on the foundation laid by the Mysore rulers that the British built their administrative and political system in Malabar (Menon 2010: 83). The Malabar District being a part of the erstwhile Madras Province, participated fully in the mainstream of the Indian Freedom Struggle.<sup>7</sup> Different political groups such as the Indian National Congress and the Congress Socialist Party assumed leaderships in different anti-colonial movements such as the Salt-*satyagraha*, the boycott of foreign textiles, etc. At the peak of the Independence struggle Malabar witnessed the rise of Communism as a political party.<sup>8</sup> In North Malabar the Congress Socialist Party and later the Communist Party coordinated the lower and the depressed classes into their anti-colonial movements. Later, in 1957, Kerala became the first region in Asia to elect a communist government through parliamentary procedure. A spirit of liberation rose from these movements, against political and social constraints, oppression and untouchability mainly related to the caste-ism of the medieval past.

The fieldwork upon which this study is based was conducted in the region starting at Payyanur towards the North and ending at Nileshwaram of North Malabar. The places Payyanur, Trikkaripur, Pilicode, Cheruvathur and Nileshwaram are geographically closely located. Payyanur comes under the District of Kannur and the places Trikkaripur, Cheruvathur and Nileshwaram are part of the District of Kasaragod. The river Paadiya (Kuniyan) separates these districts. This region lies east-west with a coastline and a sandy coastal area in the west and small midland laterite hills and hillocks merging with highlands in the east. The grasslands in the laterite hills of North Malabar are classified as 'low elevation dry grasslands', characterised by remarkable diversity. Scrub jungles form the protective cover of the hill slopes, those slopes merge into the plains where the rivers flow through diverse geographical areas such as wetlands, the muddy swamps of the Mangrove trail, tidal creeks and waterways – with a unique ecosystem of two high tides and two low tides each day, and different types of marshes. The rivers Perumba, Kuniyan, Olavara, Karyamkode (Thejaswini) and Chithari run through these regions. Along with a number of natural inlets and manmade canals which connect with the rivers they define the boundaries of villages and also provide water for agriculture. The climate here is subtropical with two seasons: the summer and the monsoon. The monsoon comes in two stretches: *edavappathi*, from June to mid-September and

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<sup>7</sup>For details see Menon (2010a).

<sup>8</sup> See Dilip M Menon (2007) and Nossiter (1982) who trace the social history of communism in Malabar.

*thulaavarsham* from mid-October to late November. The lands are suitable for crops such as cardamom, pepper, and cinnamon, besides being suitable for cattle grazing. Compared to other parts of Kerala, the geographical nature of North Malabar is not greatly suitable for common paddy agriculture due to the salinized water during the tides in river. But people here have used other methods for cultivating paddy.

The names of places in these regions have their origin in their peculiar geography, or the caste based communities who used to dwell in those places. Evidence indicates that the region was populated by semi-nomadic tribal people who were engaged in hunting and gathering, shifting agriculture and pastoralism (Balan 2007; T & Nair 2007). These appear to have been megalithic cultures involved in rituals of heroes and the worship of ancestors and this may have influenced the emergence of *theyyam*. The migration of Nambutiri Brahmins to Payyanur approximately in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries AD established the northern-most Nambutiri Brahmin settlements in Kerala which were influential in changing the region from a nomadic to a sedentary society rooted in Brahmanic ritual power and hierarchical values. A place known as Pattena in Nileshwaram is a Tulu Brahmin centre. The regions under study have witnessed the migration of different peoples into and out of the region. The immigrants included people forming into higher and lower castes involving agricultural labourers, cattle-rearers, traders, artisans, warriors and petty landlords. The immigration changed the face of the nomadic settlements based on the geographical peculiarities.

Payyanur was one of the first places where a land survey (one of many) was conducted in 1795 and a court was established (1805) for land registration and settling land and other disputes (Vadakkiniyil 2009). These regions have a long tradition of Sanskrit learning around its several branches of knowledge (*Sastras*). Local elites combined this knowledge with their training in the educational system introduced under colonial auspices – an important dimension of their reformation as a bureaucratic class employed in the colonial order.

The present day Payyanur is a municipality with three administrative villages: Vellur, Payyanur and Korom. Cheruvathur is a Panchayath which is a growing town in the Kasaragod district. Neeleswaram is a municipality and a major town in the same District. Even though they are closely located now, these places have different socio-political backgrounds due to the peculiarities of topography; each place was somewhat isolated from the nearby human settlement. These regions were ruled and populated by different matrilineal people, something which makes the selection of the region more special. The Poduval in Payyanur, Thirumump (Thazhekkattu Mana) in Trikkaripur, the caste Adiyodi in Pilicode and

the Nairs in Cheruvathur are all matrilineal groups that established settlements in the specified regions, even though they are scattered now.

## 1.2 Theyyam

Theyyam is a form of worship practice in North Malabar. The variation in the form can be seen in Malabar as *thira* and as *Bhoothamkettu* in the South Canara District of Karnataka. *Theyyam* is a socio-religious ritual in which mythological, divine, ancestral, animal, serpent or heroic characters are represented, each with its distinct physical shape and story of origin. Bodies of *theyyam* specialists become the vehicles (in dance, possession, speech, act) for the manifestation of deities or spirits (Vadakkiniyil 2009:2). This sacred performance is believed to bring about wellbeing for the society and the family. Most people in North Malabar, regardless of their caste and class, participate in the worship of *theyyam*. *Theyyam* is simply one manifestation of an entire complex of religious and cultural values in this region (Freeman 1991).

As a living cult with centuries-old traditions, rites and customs it embraces almost all castes, classes and divisions of the Hindu community in this region (Kurup1977). People see and adore the *theyyam* as God. Performance is only a part of *theyyam* worship. The manifestation of the *theyyam* in its most complete and ordering form is achieved in events when the *theyyam* performer is masked and dressed in the regalia of the deity (Vadakkiniyil 2009). The religious, economic, political, social and cultural activities of humans, and even nature-human interactions in a “given space and time” are much grappled with in every aspect of *theyyam* (Damodaran 1998, 2008). *Theyyam* is a magico-religious observance which is highly conditioned by myth, says Damodaran (1998:70). The myth and legends of *theyyams* were once converted into the form of poems or ritual songs (*thottam*). These stories differ in each cult, depending upon its origin and how these forms emerged. Careful study of a variety of *theyyam* myths has made it clear that in many cases, the origin of the *theyyam* deities lies directly in the divinization of deceased human beings (Freeman1991). According to Dilip M Menon (1993), the study of some of the popular *theyyams* who are still worshiped, albeit in different contexts, will give us an idea of the beliefs within which the *theyyattam* were situated.<sup>9</sup> He traces out how the folk tradition (in north Malabar) continued to be linked to people’s lives in a vital way until the first decades of the twentieth century and he approaches the *theyyattam* as one of the strategies by which a living space is created by the dominated through which they attempt to stave off the exercise of arbitrary authority by those in power. He observes that “the *theyyattam* attempted to secure retribution for downright murder by deifying the victims and inserting them into a pantheon of

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<sup>9</sup>*Theyyattam* means the dance of *theyyam* or performance of *theyyam*.



deities shared by all castes” (Menon, D.M 1993: 192). According to Menon, “*theyyattam* sought to create a moral community through the establishment of senses of limits in social norms – thus far and no farther. By deification of victims, it created a collective imagination of what was just and unjust”. Thus *theyyattam* was the site for the transmission and dissemination of culture within a society marked by the spatial separation of castes (Menon, D.M 1993: 189). Even though *theyyam* practices belong more to the past than to the present, for Vadakkiniyil(2009) *theyyam* is a rite that is able to maintain its relevance in a constantly changing and socially differentiating world as a dimension of its internal ritual dynamic (Vadakkiniyil 2009).

According to the nature of *theyyam* and its associated myth in particular, it is possible to classify *theyyam* into different types, namely the *theyyam* of God and Goddesses, ancestors (heroes & heroines), spirits and devils, and nature or animals (Damodaran 2008; Pallath, 1995). Dilip M Menon (1993) observes within the constellation of Gods worshipped within the *theyyattam*, a possibility to broadly divide them into four. There is the aspect of Shakti<sup>10</sup> – Bhagavati, Chamundi and Kurathi – who form the most prominent of 350 or so deities worshipped. The second category includes the variation of *Siva – pottan, gulikan, bairavan*, etc. Here too a considerable degree of mixture is evident, with ghosts, spirits and local heroes being performed as manifestations of Siva. The Vaishnava *theyyams* in the third category are not as important as the first two. The fourth category of heroes and heroines are always performed as aspects of one of the earlier divisions (Menon, D. M. 1993:187-217). Snake worship, warrior worship and tree worship dating from the centuries before the Christian era, continued to form an integral part of the *theyyattam* pantheon (Kurup 1973:18-19). According to the *theyyam* performers I encountered in the field, based on the form of worship *theyyam* can be divided into *theyyams* of *veeraradhana/prethaaradhana*(hero worship and the worship of restless souls), *nagaraadhana*and *mrugaraadhana*(worship of snake spirits and animal spirits), *Purana/Ithihasakadhaapathrangal*(puranic and epic characters), *daivamsha roopangal*(*theyyam* with godly elements), *ammadaivangal*(mother goddesses of agriculture, fertility and war deities), *prakruthishakthi, manthra, rogamoothikal*(*theyyams* of certain natural forces, sorceries and smallpox-like ailments).

Freeman (1991) distinguishes and interprets three main categories of *theyyam* and he says the three categories of beings – gods, human beings and invisible beings – are referred to as comprising ‘*alukal*’, a word meaning ‘people’, usually used of human beings, but in this context signifying that these beings are clearly individuated entities with personal identities and that they possess certain extra-physical powers that men do not. He observes a kind of hesitancy or initial inability of many informants to distinguish

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<sup>10</sup> Female goddesses.

immediately between men and gods. He identifies the reason behind this: because many Gods in fact derive from human beings and because the powers of gods and men are transformable and transferable, they are essentially the same stuff(Freeman 1991: 106-107).

*Theyyam* are performed mainly as religious offerings of four major categories of people. The main and most prominent category is the local community. The second comprises *tharavador* lineage shrines, the third category is the single family and the fourth consists of non-resident Keralites. And there are three types of *theyyam* celebrations (*kaliyattam*): *prarthanakaliyattam* (*theyyam* performances whenever a situation arises; several rituals are observed according to the rites and rules of the respective *theyyam*), *kalpanakaliyattam* (yearly periodic performances on a fixed date and time and treated as local festival), and *perumkaliyattam*(a *theyyam* festival in major community centers).

Although during the ritual performance of *theyyam* the 'entire society' takes part, irrespective of caste/religious boundaries, the caste system in *theyyam* can be specifically marked. The whole function of *theyyam* performance is controlled by the upper castes. They hold the key positions at all organizational levels of *theyyam* (Damodaran 2008:238-287).It is important to note that the *theyyam* gods have more in common with each other as fellow-*theyyams* than they differ, according to the rather epiphenomenal human association with caste. Even though the backward castes and the outcastes also organize their own *theyyam* performances, they are bound to seek the permission of “*koyma*”, the title given to the representative of the upper castes. Upper castes, such as the Nambiar, have their own separate temple within which Brahmanic rites were performed while *theyyam* rites were performed outside in the temple courtyard.

### **1.3 Kinship and the lineage relation in the *theyyam* ritual**

Everything related to *theyyam* is organized around the matter of caste, lineage and kinship and particular *theyyam* ritual organisations have strong caste as well as lineage associations (Vadakkiniyil 2009). Caste hierarchy and the differentiation of rank and status among the lineages of local caste communities are central to the ritual performance of *theyyam*. If we divide the *theyyam* worshipping castes into categories, the main categories are first of all the category of *theyyam* worshipping castes who have no rites through which to articulate *theyyam* in their bodies, and secondly the ritual performing specialist castes who are bound to perform *theyyam* for the first category of worshippers. There are around 28 *theyyam* worshipping

castes and 11 *theyyam* ritual performing specialist castes. Every village in North Kerala was bound to perform it in connection with the lineage shrine (known as ‘*palliyara*’, ‘*kavu*’, ‘*kottam*’, etc.) or in the courtyards of the *tharavad*.<sup>11</sup> The *theyyam* worshipping centres are very different in nature when compared to other Indian Hindu Temples.<sup>12</sup> Most *theyyam* performances are for single lineages or lineage clusters; however, there are occasions of an individual *theyyam* being performed in one’s household on the observation of a vow (Vadakkiniyil 2009:3).

The community shrine belongs to two or more sub-lineages and these sub-lineages are ritually subordinate to the shrine. Rank orders exist among these sub-lineages. The constitution of one shrine into one incorporating different sub-lineages in dynamic relation is a key to the preeminent position of the assembly point of the community. For example, Thalayanneri is the community shrine for the Thiya caste. Pulayakottam is the community shrine of the Pulaya caste. Other than the community shrine each sub-lineage or *tharavad* has its own *theyyam* shrines. Moreover, each caste has its own prime deity known as *kuladhevavatha*; each lineage and sub-lineage in that caste has a prime deity or house deity known as *paradhevavatha*; each village where different caste people dwell has a prime deity known as *gramadhevavatha*. For example, the *theyyam* Vairajathan is the *kuladhevavatha*<sup>13</sup> of the Nair caste in Chervathur; Paadarkulangara Bagaathy is the *paradhevavatha* of Kallara Kambikkanath Kaliyanthil, a Nair *tharavad* in the same region. All castes and their lineages worship at their own *theyyam* shrines but will participate in the *theyyam* rites of others as well (Vadakkiniyil 2009:31).

Importantly, the majority of the castes involved in the ritual and the specific *theyyam* performances are by origin matrilineal and their caste identity is decided through the matriline.<sup>14</sup> Vadakkiniyil (2009), focusing on the *Perumkaliyattam*<sup>15</sup> in the Muchilot Shrine of Poonthuruthi, observes the building of Muchilot Bagavathi’s<sup>16</sup> potency as one in which the problematics of relationality become manifest, largely in the context of lineality and affinity. The festival for Muchilot Bagavathi might be seen as giving rise to the political order of *tharavad* as quintessentially a ritual order. Vadakkiniyil explains the central importance of the *tharavad* in the *Perumkaliyattam*. For him, within the *Perumkaliyattam* and other rites related to *theyyam*, the *tharavad* in fact emerges or is effectively apotheosized as engaged in the generation of existence in its totalizing multiplicity (Vadakkiniyil 2009: 171). Those ritual spaces

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<sup>11</sup> *Tharavad* is used here to represent ancestral house. The genealogy of *tharavad* is discussed in Chapter 2, section 2.

<sup>12</sup> For details, see chapter 3, section 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Kulam* means caste or clan in the Malayalam language.

<sup>14</sup> Dinesan, V 2009: 31; Iyer 1912:1-22, 103-121, 122-150; Iyer 1909: 28-29, 185-209, 277.

<sup>15</sup> A *theyyam* festival where a group of *theyyam* gather at a shrine.

<sup>16</sup> A *theyyam* Goddess of the Vaniya caste.

associated with ancestral homes are still being preserved as the ideal worship centres of *theyyam*. And these houses owned the supreme power positions in the society. The ritual spaces were not simply located in the divine dwelling houses of the goddess but also at the regulatory centres controlling the spiritual and physical life of the society. The ancestral houses had invested with the control over the land and the traditional rituals practiced in the respective community. The rights to represent deities are strictly regulated and divided between the castes and communities. Even with each community certain families have special rights to certain *theyyams*. The *Muchilot Kavu* belongs to Vaniya community, the *Poomala Kavu* to Thiyya, the *Kannangattu Kavu* to Yadava, and the *Kottam* and *Kalari* to the Nair, Pulaya and Valanjiya communities.

The main castes in the research area discussed here count more than fifty and the caste hierarchies have their own variations in different regions. The majority of the castes worship *theyyam*. Among the *theyyam* worshipping castes, there are some which follow patrilineal laws for inheritance but the majority of the castes are matrilineal in nature. The main focus here is the mode of inheritance of the rites related to the *theyyam* ritual or ritual performance. Each caste has different main lineages which are called *illam* or *kiriyam* in the North Malabar vocabulary.<sup>17</sup> These lineages or clans can be patrilineal or matrilineal. These lineages again divide into sub-lineages. For example, the Vaniya caste is a '9 *illam* caste' which means that it has nine main lineages; they have their inheritance through the matriline. If we consider these castes as communities, each community is constituted by different main lineages, *illam*, and these lineages belong to the *kazhakam*, the main body of authority of the particular community. There is a pyramidal relationship here. For example, the Kushava caste (pot-makers) which has a patrilineal mode of inheritance is a 6 *illam* caste, belonging to 4 different *kazhakams*. The present day *kazhakam* is meant to bring a centralised system and ruling authority for the same caste people from different places of the region and their lineage shrines or *theyyam kavu*.<sup>18,19</sup> When the ritual performance in main community

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<sup>17</sup> The word *illam* has different connotations in different regions. Here it means a clan-like structure. In other parts of Kerala, *illam* means the houses occupied by Nambuthiris. Nowadays people in this region use the word *illam* to represent the dwelling houses of Nambuthiris. See the discussion on *illam* in Chapter 2.2.

<sup>18</sup> Kavu is explained in chapter 3, section 3.

<sup>19</sup> We can see the use of word *kazhakam* for the geographical divisions during the *Perumals* governance dates back to 800-1012 AD. Then the *kazhakam* was constituted by four local kingdoms known as *thara*. Each *tharavad* had four head chieftains. Four *thara* constitute the upper body *naalpadu* and four *naalpadu* constitute a *kazhakam*. A *kazhakam* had 64 members as representatives of each *thara*. Four *kazhakam* constitute a *perum'kazhakam*. In North Malabar each caste has its own *kazhakam*, that is, the important *kavu* holds the position of *kazhakam* and other shrines of villages or lineages were under the control of these *kazhakams*.

shrines are organized by the members of that group everyone from the sub-lineages are supposed to take part (at least one representative from each sub-lineage has to be present).

#### 1.4 Literature review

The main theme of my thesis is the Kerala matrilineal kinship – manifest in the *tharavad* and the *theyyam* – which has been extensively studied by researchers. Much of the literature on matrilineality in Kerala has come from the discipline of anthropology. Gough (1952, 1955, 1961), Fuller (1976), Dumont (1983), Mencher (1962), Moore (1985, 1988), Jeffrey (2004/2005, 1990), Arunima (2003, 1996) have all made significant contributions to the study of the matrilineal system and the *tharavad* in Kerala.

William Logan (1951) tried to map out the matrilineal system, the agrarian relations, and the invasion and interventions of foreign powers. In part two of the book *Matrilineal Kinship* (Schneider and Gough, eds., 1961), Gough concerned herself with the problems of variation in the structure and functions of descent groups, residence, patterns of interpersonal relationships, and marriage preferences in the matrilineal system. Here, Gough (1961) dealt with the kinship systems of the Nayar of Central Kerala and of the Nayar of north Kerala. Gough has also described the Thiyyas of north Kerala who were traditionally the share-cropping tenants of the Nayar and the Brahmin and were also matrilineal. Fuller's work (1976) is based on his empirical research carried out in the southern part of Kerala, and he discusses the disintegration of the matrilineal joint family system and the changes it had brought about in the twentieth Century. The study is predominantly centred on the Nayars of southern Kerala which depicts the customs and practices prevalent there but not much is said about the Nayars of Northern Malabar. Jeffrey (1994) has made a study on the decline of Nair dominance in Travancore and the book traces the social changes, especially changes in the matrilineal system, that have occurred in Kerala during the nineteenth century. Though the study centred mostly on the Nayar communities, it also provides a general account of the social and political history of the area during the period of change.

K. Saradamoni's (1999) book, 'Matrilineality Transformed' is mainly based on legal interventions regarding matrilineality. Her study deals with matrilineality in Travancore, and shows that matrilineality was not restricted to Nayars, but was practiced by a large number of castes and communities and, furthermore, there was no standard form of matrilineality which was followed by everyone. She is of the opinion that changes in matrilineality were taking place over time and the major factors that affected women were the changes that had dismantled the *tharavad*. Robin Jeffrey (2004/2005) sketches the way in which matrilineal society in Kerala operated in the first generations of British imperial domination and how it collapsed in the twentieth century and he explores the legal, structural and sentimental legacies of matrilineality. According to

him, between 1896 and 1976, at least twenty items of legislation were passed to modify and ultimately abolish matrilineal practices relating to ownership and inheritance of properties and the legal guardianship of children. He says matriliney ended completely on 1 December 1976, when the Kerala Government promulgated the Kerala joint Hindu Family System (Abolition) Act passed in the previous year, but in Kerala the sentimental and the material are intertwined in the ancestral maternal home.

The same is noted by Arunima (1995), and she says “though the legal discourse that emerged during 19<sup>th</sup> century redefined and strengthened the matrilineal *taravad* in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, the colonial government itself legally abolished it in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, validating patrilineal nuclear families as the legitimate forms of kinship and descent” (Arunima 1995: 157). Arunima has argued that the identifiers of matrilineal kinship in colonial law such as residence, impartibility and the inalienability of property were not essential parts of customary practices in pre-colonial interpretation of matriliney often militated against the rights that were historically available, particularly to women and junior members, within the *taravad* (Arunima 1998: 116-119). Arunima (1996, 2003) in her work tries to answer the question of why matrilineal kinship was abolished in Kerala. Her attempt provides an account of the changing history of colonial Malabar and she posits that the change in the matrilineal *tharavad* is a result of the transitions in family law initiated under Company rule. The analysis suggests that the crisis within matrilineal families in the late nineteenth century was not merely a set of changes in customs and laws in Malabar, but also a search for a wider identity which, among the Nayars, spelt their desire to move out of the narrow confines of the family. The book offers a good account of the legal abolition of the matrilineal household.

Vineetha Menon (2012) addresses the transformation from matriliney to patriliney in the case of two communities in Northern Malabar occupying two poles in the social structure: one tribal community, and the other, the only matrilineal Brahmin community in Kerala known as *Thirumumb*. She describes how the move towards patriliney has been visible in almost all communities which previously had matrilineal family norms and how there has been a strong renewal of ritualistic tradition.

The literature on *theyyam* in Kerala is vast. Researchers have approached *theyyam* from different angles such as worship, ritual and rite, folk art, performance, cultural product, etc. The documentation of *theyyam* is constantly increasing in Malayalam, the native language. In English, the main texts are by Freeman (1991, 2003); Ashley (1979, 1993); Ashley and Holloman (1990); Kurup (1973; 1977; 1988); Balan Nambiar (1993); Menon (1993); Paliath (1995); M P Damodaran (2008,2009) and Dinesan Vadakkiniyil (2009, 2010).

Ashley (1979, 1993) narrates the *theyyamkettu* through a detailed analysis of the performance of *theyyam* specialists on the day of ritual performance. His works fall mainly under the rubric of performance studies; the narrative offers a visual experience through its systematic explanation of each act of the *theyyam* specialist while he commences the ritual performance. We can extract the attitude of the performers of 20 years back from these narratives. Kurup K K N (1973; 1977; 1988) approaches *theyyam* as a tool used by the low castes against the oppression and suppression faced by them. Damodaran (2008) considers *theyyam* to be a reliable tool for reconstructing the history of North Malabar. Blackburn (1985), when he explores the death and deification involved in the folk streams of Hinduism, speaks about “folk Hinduism” and he considers *theyyam* one among the cults of folk Hinduism. I find this idea and Blackburn's explanations very important, since I consider *theyyam* a folk religion which has undergone a classical restating under the kingly state of Kolathunadu.

The anthropologist Freeman (1991) has conducted the most thoroughgoing research on *theyyam* practices as such based on cultural anthropological analysis. He argues that a clear separation between divine power and political power does not apply in the *theyyam*-based North Malabar culture, and that there are marked continuities with the past in the way social relationships are construed through the perpetuation of myth and ritual as well as through the use of the metaphor of battle as reflecting the inherently contestatory nature of social life. According to him, *theyyam* worship is demonstrably part of those ancient and cognate patterns of institutionalized spirit possession that were shared as a religious paradigm across the cultural zone of south India that we identify in kinship and linguistic terms as “Dravidian” (Freeman, 2003). The ethnographic works of Freeman and Vadakkiniyil (2009, 2010, 2014) are extremely valuable for my studies. According to Vadakkiniyil (2009), *theyyam* can be grasped as a domain of potentiality through which participants are imbued with agency to act effectively, often creatively or innovatively, in a quotidian world. According to him, *theyyam* is a rite that is able to maintain its relevance in a constantly changing and socially differentiating world as a dimension of its internal ritual dynamic.

Another important work which is very important to my thesis is a journal article by Olaf H Smedal (2011) where he deals with the nature of group recruitment, especially descent. He opens the way to the kind of approach to *tharavad* and the rules of membership of the then existing matrilineal group and the current group recruitment that I will essay. The narration of the events of *theyyam* ritual performance is not a central aspect of my thesis which is rather concerned to narrate the experiences, attitudes and perceptions of *theyyam* worshipers and *theyyam* performing specialists among different generations at a point in time when there is a transformation of the kinship system on which the rites of *theyyam* heavily depends. It

also explores *theyyam* in the context of the reordering of power relations in society as response of altering the structure of the *tharavad*, and the very kinship system itself.

### **1.5 Fieldwork and Method**

The area chosen for the Study is Payyanur, Trikkaripur, Pilicode, Cheruvathur and Neeleswaram located in nearby districts Kannur and Kasaragod of Kerala State. Payyanur and Neeleswaram, two important towns in Kannur and Kasaragod district respectively are the two ends of my field area. These regions are the centre of North Malabar and key centres of *theyyam*. Another criterion for the selection of these areas is the presence of settlements of former matrilineal caste groups such as the Poduval in Payyanur, the Thirumump (Thazhekkattu Mana- Nambudiri) in Trikkaripur, the Adiyodi in Pilicode, the Nairs in Cheruvathur, and the Kshatriya in Neeleswaram.

I am born and brought up in an area of Northern Kerala. *Theyyam* is a part and parcel of my childhood and adolescent days. Visiting the ritual spaces alone, or with family and friends was a routine of those days of mine. Conversations with members of then old generations, with *theyyam* specialists, and listening to *theyyam* related myths were among my most interesting childhood activities. I used to get scolding from my family relatives for wandering behind *theyyakkar*(performers) and talking to strangers especially to unknown males only because being a girl and a grandchild of a reputed family in the region. My parents' family were then matrilineal. As the present research focuses on changes in the matrilineal system over a long historic period and their reflection on the *theyyam* ritual, the methodology consists of both archival works and the collection of ethnographic data. How changes in the kinship patterns are interwoven with the ritual practices were captured through fieldwork. Oral sources were tapped by conducting interviews – both individually and in groups – with the aim to trace the history of matriliney in *theyyam*, to gather materials on cosmology in the form of myths related to *tharavad* and *theyyam*, placing specific importance on Goddesses in *theyyam*; and to understand changes in the caste identities as documented in petitions, writings, letters, government documents, police and court files, newspaper reports, and cinema, fiction included. Primary sources, both unpublished and published records as well as secondary sources, have also been utilized for the research. People's recollections were recorded to the extent traceable. After completing a preliminary exploration of the field, keeping in mind the overall research topic, I have focused my attention on specific castes and their system of inheritance and roles in *theyyam*.



## 1.6 Chapterization

Chapter 1 sets the stage for this thesis by offering a preliminary account of the *theyyam* ritual and kinship and how the two are connected. This is followed by the literature reviews related to the study, a description of the methods employed, and a description of the field area. Chapter 2 is an attempt to sketch the background to the existing caste system and matriliney along with the disintegration of *tharavad* and examining its reflection on caste identity and the *tharavad* in general. The major ethnographic descriptions and analyses are presented over the coming chapters. Chapter 3 traces the perceptions and attitudes of the *theyyakkaran* and the worshipers and their memories and experiences. The sociological and historical background of *theyyam* and the present-day status of *theyyam* are explored in this chapter. The 4th chapter focuses exclusively on the analysis of field material and represents an attempt at examining how the changes in the kinship pattern reflect on the society, and in turn on the ritual performance, by explaining the change and transformation that have taken place in the perceptions and actions of the local world of *theyyam*. Here I also focus on how females in different generations articulate, internalize, and identify *theyyam*.

## Chapter 2

### **Kinship, its socio-political shift and the changing pattern of caste identity**

The chapter is in five sections. Section 1 provides a framework for the formation of the caste system so as to provide a firm understanding of how the land and caste are related. This section sets the background for the subsequent discussions. Caste was an important element in forming a village during pre-independence days. Caste determined the services that a person had to provide in the village as *kulathozhil*.<sup>20</sup> Each village had at least one *tharavad* to provide the services that their caste offers. The reciprocity among different *tharavad* made the village self-sufficient. In Section 2, I explore the less known aspects of the relationship between the *tharavad* and the two modes of inheritance, in the context of previous literature which posits the *tharavad* as a matrilineal joint family. Here I approach the *tharavad* as a house, the membership of which demands certain conditions. In North Malabar, neither the individual nor the mode of inheritance or kinship had more importance, instead the *tharavad* – as a house – was the fundamental social unit shaping the identity of the individual in society. The disintegration of the *tharavad* and changing family structures and practices in Kerala is analysed in Section 3. Section 4 discusses the contemporary phase of the house-*tharavad* and family. The whole chapter is summarised in section 5. This chapter contains a lot of information from the past, so secondary, published materials were used along with the *theyyam* literature and information from the field.

#### **2.1 The caste System**

The region under study was once populated by semi-nomadic tribal people who were engaged in hunting and gathering, shifting agriculture and pastoralism. The original occupants of the land were the indigenous people of hills: pre-Dravidian tribes such as Pulayan, Mavilan, and Koppalan. They had their own tribal self-governance. The development of the Kolathiri kingdom and its hegemony along with the formation of caste groups all over the agrarian regions during the migration and settlement of Nambuthiri Brahmins subjugated and dominated the tribal self-governance. The castes formed in the presence of Brahmins preserved the essence of their tribal living. We can still trace the elements of the tribal past in the castes of North Malabar.

According to Elamkulam (1970: 311), it was in the period from the 8th to the 11th century that Kerala was enclosed in the straitjacket of the caste system. Till then, social stratification in Kerala was based on

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<sup>20</sup>*Kulam* means caste and *thozhil* means occupation. That is, *kulathozhil* is the caste based occupation which is passed on from generation to generation.

functions and not on birth. The advent of Brahmins and the projection of the Aryan concept in the earlier period and the advent of new migrants of Parasurama Brahmins or Nambuthiri Brahmins gave a new boost to caste formation (Narayanan 1986: 145). The agrarian relations that existed in Kerala since the turn of the Christian era down to the first millennium AD, it is argued, were centred around communal settlements based on co-operative labour (Gurukul, 1992). The communal settlement was sometimes imbued with a rudimentary specialisation of crafts and exchange and the overall socio-economic scenario of the region is best represented in the '*tinai*' concept of Tamil heroic poetics (Gurukul, 1992). The people of '*tina*' were class-based descent groups dispersed into domestic segments (*kutis*) around each one's clan settlement ('Ur').<sup>21</sup> Agricultural production was mainly confined to riverbanks and other wet lands. The presence of Brahmins in the courts of chieftains and their influence upon them is evident in the Sangam literature (Veluthat 1978: 3).<sup>22</sup> During the sangham period, Brahmins had received lands as an offering. But they were not successful in enrooting their authority in Kerala. In the 9<sup>th</sup> century, Brahmin migration took place at a faster pace and they built Brahmin villages along with their farm centres (Balan 2007: 210). Brahmin migration and settlements on the river side influenced the pace of Kerala history. Kerala society witnessed the formation of caste groups all over the agrarian regions during the 9th and 10th centuries (Gurukul 1994: 401). It could be stated that the caste system in Kerala was a by-product of the development of an agrarian society and an economy mainly based on paddy cultivation. The caste system joining hands with the complex *Janmi* land tenure system reached its growth in the 9th, 10th and 11th centuries (Narayanan 1986). The Brahmin temples functioned as centres and institutional foundations to aggregate the assets of the Brahmins at a single point (Balan 2007: 213). Kings had donated land for the functioning of newly built temples.<sup>23</sup> In North Malabar the "temple culture" also became the turning point of social life. New customary practices were established with temples among different governing bodies

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<sup>21</sup>The *Tinai* concept differentiates economic systems in five sub-segments namely *Kurinji* (hilly backward areas), *Palai* (the parched areas), *Mullai* (pastoral tracts), *Marotam* (wetland) and *Neital* (littoral land). The concept includes the people and their mode of subsistence in the respective economic types. Accordingly, the Velar and the *Kuravar* (hunters and shifting cultivators) inhabited *Kurinji*, the Maravar (warriors) the *Palai*, the *Itayar* (pastoralist) the *Mullai*, the Ulavar ploughman) and the Paratavar (fishing community) the *Neital*. Of all the forms of production plough agriculture was superior to others in terms of technology. See Gurukul (1993:94).

<sup>22</sup> Sangam literature are the poems written during the Sangam period which is the period in ancient southern India (known as the *Tamilakam*) spanning from c. 300 BCE to 300 CE. This collection contains 2381 poems composed by 473 poets, some 102 of whom remain anonymous. The period during which these poems were composed is called the Sangam Period, referring to the prevalent Sangam legends claiming literary academies lasting thousands of years, giving the name to the corpus of literature. Sangam literature is primarily dealing with everyday themes in a *Tamilakam* context.

<sup>23</sup> Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai has done a detailed study of scripts written in *vattezhuthu* and *kolezhuthu* regarding the land donations to the Brahmins by the then kings in 9<sup>th</sup> century. *Vattezhuthu* is the olden scripts believed to originate from the ancient Brahmi scripts; used in the same centuries to convey the kings' orders through the inscriptions on stones. A lot of stone inscriptions have been found from Malabar.

such as *naaduvazhis*, *dhesavazhees* and other chieftains of local communities besides the main king, the *kolathiri* of 'Kolathunad'. The lands offered to temples were controlled by '*ooraalas*' who were mainly Brahmins.<sup>24</sup> Brahmins could even enroot the belief that it was they who held the supreme authority of the Vedas and all other branches of knowledge. *Kolathiri* was unable to establish a centralized ruling. So, there were regions that enjoyed the self-governance. When the Brahmins gained ownership of the land, the people there were left with only two choices: either work for the Brahmins or leave the land. The fourfold classification of the Varna system leaves a gap in Kerala as there is no counterpart to the Vaisyas in the Kerala social order. At the top of the social hierarchy were the Nambudiris (Malayali Brahmins). The Kshatriyas came next in the order. A group of *Antarala jatis*<sup>25</sup> constituted by the Ambalavasis (temple servants) and *Samantans* were placed below the Kshatriyas. Then there were the Nairs who formed the militia of the country. The lower castes, like Kammala (artisans), Thiyya (toddy tappers), and Mukkuvar (fishermen) were placed below them and the lowest were the agrestic slaves, Cherumar or Pulayar, Parayan and others (Rao 1972: 118). As time passed the system came into force that Nairs should keep a distance of 16 feet from Brahmins, the Thiyya 16 feet from Nair, the Pulaya 32 feet from Thiyya and Nayadi 32 feet from Pulaya. This hierarchy also finds its deviation in North Malabar. Here, the Thiyya community also possessed lands and formed the militia along with the Nairs. Due to the geographical peculiarities of North Malabar, consisting of midland laterite hills, adjacent to the sea, and rivers that allow saline water to spread over a large area during spray tides, it became very difficult for Brahmins to start paddy cultivation and single crop farming.<sup>26</sup> So the Nambutiris were unable to establish solid ruling centres in North Malabar and they became a minor part of the population, yet they occupied a distinct position in the social order. As I mentioned in the introductory chapter, the migration of Nambutiri Brahmins to Payyanur (approximately in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries AD) established the northernmost Nambuthiri Brahmin settlements in Kerala and there is a Tulu Brahmin

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<sup>24</sup> Each upper caste which has close relations with Brahmins has its own temples where the rituals related to worship are performed by Brahmins. The lower caste (the castes below the Nairs in the caste hierarchy) people were not supposed to enter into these temples till the temple Entry Proclamation Movement took place during the 1930s and 1940s. In 1947, the Madras government led by T Prakasam passed the proclamation. The temple entry proclamation was the end result of the many crusades led by social activists against the casteism and the racial prejudices during the Independence Struggle.

<sup>25</sup> These people were given the land ownership by Brahmins as *viruthi* ('balance') for their services in temples.

<sup>26</sup> The Mooshika Vamsa Kavya, written by the Sanskrit poet during the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century AD, gives evidence about the multi-crop farming that existed in the region where the people followed Punam Krishi; they adhered to outdated agricultural practices and depended on the monsoons for irrigation. Agricultural land lay fallow after harvest. At the beginning of the next growing season, the bushes that cover the land would be cleared and the plant material burned to prepare the land for the next cycle of rice cultivation.

centre in Nileshwaram. These are the only settlements they managed to establish in North Malabar. The Brahmins could not substitute for the king and they could not rule the majority of people in the region; their direct governance was limited to their settlements. They were not able to influence much on village structure or governance either, other than in their *sankethams*.<sup>27</sup>

Since the monocrop paddy cultivation could not be of much importance in North Malabar, a different caste feudal system began to develop. In the region under study, the majority of landlords belonged to the upper castes of the Shudra class or *antarala jatis*. As in other parts of Kerala, Brahmin landlords and the Devaswam Brahmaswam system were relatively less conspicuous in the region under study. So, the cultural dominance of the area was developed along with the *theyyam* worship of tribal origin, not with Brahmin systems. In each small region of North Malabar, the affluent *tharavad* have precedence in the upper rungs of the caste hierarchy among the other dwelling castes and *tharavad* in the region gained a prominent position in the social hierarchy. For example, consider the village Vadakkumbad located in Cheruvathur; the Nair caste is the prominent dwelling caste in the region. The other dwelling castes are lower castes compared to the Nairs in Vadakkumbad. Here the affluent Nair *tharavadukal* gained control over the land and held prominent positions in the social hierarchy. This power was gained by the initiative of the ruling king. In Annur, a place located in Payyanur, the Poduval caste possessed the prominent position in society because the Poduval has been the upper caste among the other dwelling castes in this region.

*Kazhakam* are the socio-religious centres of the castes in the North Malabar, where the *theyyam* ritual is prevalent. According to the *theyyam* literature, there are four *kazhakam* to look after the sixty-four villages of North Malabar. All *kazhakam* are centred in the worshipping places. Although these *kazhakam* are socio-religious units for worship, they are not temples as prescribed under the Bhramnical religious concepts. The smallest units of administration were called 'thara'. Four *tharas* constitute a *nalpad* and four *nalpad* form one *kazhakam*. Four *kazhakam* make a *thrikkuttam*. Each *thrikkuttam* was attached to another worshipping space, that can be a temple and the leaders of *thrikkuttam* were known as *Achans* who assemble in a *kottil*. Different levels of assemblies were held according to the gravity of the decisions

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<sup>27</sup>A protected territory with an independent way of life. Nambutiri *sanketham* maintained an independent way of life with an institution of body guards known as *changatham* (meaning friendship), usually Nairs, who functioned as suicide body guards protecting mainly traders.

to be taken. There are two *kottils* in North Malabar, one at Payyanur and the other at Andallur near Telicherry. It is believed that the last *thrikkuttam* was convened some hundred and odd years ago. *Kazhakams* have their own territorial jurisdiction. They control the socio-religious activities of the particular castes who fall within the territorial jurisdiction of each *Kazhakam*. Male and female members of the *Kazhakam* pay a subscription for the religious as well as social functions of the *Kazhakam*. Defaulters are excommunicated. Each *Kazhakam* also functions as the centre for settling disputes. It often punishes the culprits by way of imposing fines. Excommunication is not uncommon while settling the disputes. Inter-community and intra-community disputes are also redressed by the *Kazhakam*. Being the centres of worship, *Kazhakam* also host several festivals.

The economy and society of the Sangham period characterised by subsistence production based on redistribution and reciprocity and co-operative labour of the kinsmen were gradually transformed into a society based on Brahmin landed households and then into a temple-centred one. The land grants by the chieftains to the Brahmins at the transitional stage from kinship reduced the distance to the caste and society and gave rise to a new system of production relation transcending the framework of kinship (Gurukul 1994: 395).<sup>28</sup> This type of land tenure, emerging during the period between the 5th and 12th centuries has been described by scholars as the Kerala Agrarian system.<sup>29</sup> Each caste's social relationships were associated with the '*kaanam*' system or on the basis of the ownership of land.<sup>30</sup> The *ooralas*, the

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<sup>28</sup> See also Kunjan Pillai (1970): "There is enough evidence to show that it was not Parasurama but the economic structure of the epoch that created the landlords. Most of the land was owned by nonNampoothiris before the 9th – 13th centuries. During this period many landowners bestowed lands on Nampoothiris and Temples".

<sup>29</sup> "This system of production cannot be equated with the relations of production under feudalism in so far as in the latter the tenants enjoyed full administrative and judicial authority over the inhabitants. The Karalar (cultivators) had no such rights. The Pulayas and Adiyalas, the primary producers were quite unlike the European serfs of old but just landless labourers. Therefore the system is peculiar and can be called the Kerala Agrarian System"(Varier and Gurukkal 1991: 169-70).

<sup>30</sup> *Kanam* is a kind of land mortgage. "The traditional land system in Kerala has been called *janmi-kudiyam sampradayam* or *janmam-kanam-maryadai*. *Maryadai* means the conditions regarding land rights. *Maryadai* had no standardised form applicable throughout Kerala. These terms generally denote landlord-tenant relations, but an explanation of their nature depend on the interpretation of the terms *janmi*, *kudiyam* and *maryadai*. The geography of Kerala, with its hill slopes, terraces and valleys, dictated a localised pattern for this expansion with several independent, isolated settlements emerging and growing into self-contained units of authority which followed their own *maryadai*. It has also been observed that no other parts of India and few other places in the world presented such a bewildering variety of land tenures as Kerala" (Oommen, 1971: 10). According to Jeffrey (1976) in 1913, after much simplification there were still several kinds of land tenure and 387 permutations. He says "though all-important rights connected with the land were vested in the hands of the higher castes, they never asserted their rights in a way that infringed on the rights of the inferior leaseholders".

main landowners of temples and villages lease their lands to ‘*kaaralas*’, the middle agents. The ‘*adiyala*’ community (the lower castes) were the actual tillers of the soil. *Adiyalas* submit the crops to the *kaaralas* who give them to the actual landowners, the *oorala*, after taking their share. After Independence and the establishment of a constitution, the Indian government recognized and introduced a new categorisation of castes. They are General, OBC and SC/ST. The castes placed at the upper ladder of the caste hierarchy are included in the “general” category; the castes below the Nair come under Other Backward Castes (OBC) and the lowest in the lower castes are classified as scheduled castes (SC) and tribal peoples under the category scheduled tribes (ST).

Table: 2.1 The categories based on the caste after Independence and the establishment of the Indian constitution.

General Category	Other Backward Castes	Scheduled Caste	Scheduled Tribe
Nambutiri Brahmins	Ezhuthachan, Yogi,	Vannan	Mavilan
Poduval	Vannathan, Veluthedath	Malayan	Vettuvan
Marar	Nair, Vilakathala Nair	Velan	Kurichya
Menon	Maniyani, Vaniyan,	Anjoottan	
Nainar	Saliya, Tiyya,	Kopalan	
Adiyodi	Chakkiliyan, Mukayar	Pulayan	
Nambiar	Kaniyan, Aasari, Kollan		
Nair etc.	Moosari, Thattan etc.		

The main castes in my field area count more than fifty and the caste hierarchies have their own variations in different regions. Some castes follow patrilineal laws for inheritance but the majority of the castes are matrilineal in nature.

## 2.2 Matriliney and *Tharavad*

The castes involved in *theyyam* worship count more than 30. The inheritance and devolution of rites, material items and immaterial goods among these castes can take place in two ways: matrilineally or patrilineally. The prevalent systems of inheritance and succession are, in local terms, referred to as the *makkathayam* and *marumakkathayam* systems. These systems are called ‘*dhaayakramam*’ in Malayalam; here ‘*dhayam*’ means ownership or right or inheritance and ‘*kramam*’ means order or law or procedure so ‘*dhayakramam*’ means the mode of inheritance. Here the inheritance can be not only the property (e.g., land, buildings, personal belongings), but also ritual rites and other ritual-related positions. I am translating these words so as to make clear that the direct translation of the word "kinship" to Malayalam doesn't indicate the mode of descent or inheritance in Malayalam. In *makkathayam* the sons inherit property and rights. The daughters had no room in their natal home after marriage. As wives, she and her offspring would then belong to her husband's house. In *marumakkathayam*, inheritance and succession are traced through females. The female remained as the centre of the family. The marriage of male or female does not occasion any change of membership in the family in *marumakkathayam*. A female member and her offspring inherit the right to succession. *Marumakkathayam* literally means ‘inheritance through sisters' children’. The word ‘*marumakkal*’ in Malayalam means ‘nephews and nieces’. I consider the word *marumakkathayam* itself to be gender neutral.

Importantly, in North Malabar *marumakkathayam*, unlike what is the case in other *marumakkathayee*<sup>31</sup> castes in other parts of Kerala, every girl quits her ancestral house as soon as she reaches *pudamuri*,<sup>32</sup> i.e., when a mate can be found for her, while all the males remain in their ancestral house and bring their children and wives to live with them. Here the ancestral home becomes a place of refuge for females into which they and their families are received when their husband dies or discards them. The children of male members could not claim the rights on property or inheritance of their father; their rights are entirely in that of their mother's family. That is, in the sense of inheritance and caste identity they belong to their mother's family. The oldest members, both male and female, were considered to be the heads of the family; any decision on family-related matters were taken by the common agreement of both heads. The eldest male member of the family represented the family in public spheres and was termed *karanavar*. This Malayalam term can also refer honorifically to an elderly male or to the

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<sup>31</sup>The individual who follows *marumakkathayam*.

<sup>32</sup> *Pudamuri* is a term that replaces marriage and is used to denote the union of two individuals where the man gives a white cloth to the woman. Thereafter they can have sexual union.



head of a lineage. So, the use of the term to address an elderly male is prevalent among both *makkathayee* and *marumakkathayee*. In *marumakkathayam* the *karanavan* (in the sense a "male head") is the maternal uncle and in *makkathayam* the *karanavan* is the elder paternal uncle. I argue that in *makkathayam* and *marumakkathayam* the oldest male is addressed as *karanavan*.<sup>33</sup> In North Malabar, the term *karanavan* is used in a different context. A *karanavan* is recognized as the head of a number of social units, depending on the context in which the term is used. For example, the term could be used honorifically to address an elderly person in a social gathering but he does not need to be a *karanavan* of a *tharavad*. Importantly, it is the colonial judicial system which associated *karanavan* exclusively with the *marumakkathayam* joint family. *Karanavan* was commonly used in the records of codified laws on inheritance and succession by the British to denote the head of the joint family in *marumakkathayam*.

The wife of the eldest male member of the family has a certain kind of authority over and is respected by other members of the family, even though her influence cannot compare to that of the eldest female member of the family. The eldest female member can be the mother of the eldest male member (*karanavan*) of the family or the sister (elder sisters of the *karanavan* tend to have more power than the younger ones) of the eldest male member. She is addressed as *tharavaattamma* by people outside the family. Here, *amma* means "mother". Compared to the women in *makkathayam*, *marumakkathayee* women could participate in many aspects of public life. The upper caste *marumakkathayee* women were literate. They recited Krishnagadha, Ramayanam, and Mahabharatham written on palm leaves. In joint families, women were associated with different labour domains. In the lower castes, women also participated in the '*kulathozhil*' (hereditary labour); when men went fishing, carved vessels and wove cloth, women managed the business side by selling the products. However, women within *makkathayam* had none of these privileges. The divorce, remarriage and marriage of widows were not permitted in the majority of *makkathayam* castes.

The educational tactics for living and survival were developed by each labour and caste group. *Ezhuthachan* or *panikkar* – the one who teaches the basics of writing – could be encountered in almost all castes, especially in financially superior joint families, organising classes on the house premises. After class, students had to undergo a short ritual bath in the pond with clothes on, before entering their homes,

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<sup>33</sup> To substantiate my argument, I can point to evidence from the *theyyam* literature (*thottam*) and the oration of *theyyam* which provides different examples of the *theyyam* addressing the senior-most member of the different *illam* as *karanavar*. Both *makkathayees* and *marumakkathayees* have *illam*.

to eliminate pollution after touching or sitting with other caste pupils. The major subjects of learning were Sanskrit, Ayurveda, martial arts, spells and tricks, astronomy and sorcery.

The literature on *marumakkathayam* is mainly concerned with the social and economically dominant Nayers from Travancore and Central Kerala although other castes also identified themselves with the system, for example toddy tappers Thiyya, the *adiyala* caste Pulaya, Moppila (Muslim groups) etc. The origin of *marumakkathayam* has been a topic of different opinions and inferences. The historians differ widely in analysing the origin of *marumakkathayam*. Extant and tangible historical records that pinpoint the origin of *marumakkathayam* are very few. The *Mooshika Vamsa Kavyam* mentions the shift from *makkathayam* to *marumakkathayam* during the governance of Kunji Varma, the 97<sup>th</sup> king of the Mooshika Kingdom (Rajesh P K 2014: 64), around 9<sup>th</sup> century AD (M G S Narayanan 1996: 41). A definite period of origin is yet to be established. Some of the aborigines and indigenous people of the state like certain tribes of Northern Kerala (Kurichyans, Pulaya, Vettuvans) were said to have followed the *marumakkathayam* system. So, some historians state that *marumakkathayam* is native to the soil.

Whatever might be the mode of inheritance, I could infer from the field that everyone dwelled as joint families. What is important here is that the size of the family can vary depending on the wealth they possess to run the family. The *adiyala* (*adiyan* is the singular male word and *adiyathi* female word; *adiyanmar* a local variation of the word) castes people had to leave their families whenever there is a scarcity of workers in the farming fields of other regions. For example, Sree Paadiyil Kottam, a *theyyam* performing space of the lower caste Pulaya, was established on immigration of a Pulaya woman, as per the order of the chief of Azheekkal, a place near Kannur, on a request from a well-known *tharavad* in Payyanur. The genealogy of this Pulaya *tharavad* finds its roots in Virunthi, a Pulaya women from Azheekkal, a place sixty kilometres away from Payyanur. It is believed that Virunthi brought different *theyyams* along with her, transplanted them from Azheekkal, and built the new family of Pulaya near Annur in Payyanur. Sree Paadiyil Kottam now serves as a centre of worshipping space for the five lineages that originated from Virunthi.

The houses were referred to according to the caste of the dwellers. The *adiyalan*'s (lowest in the lower caste) houses were called '*chala*', the houses of the caste Viswakarma and Thiyya were called '*kudi*',

members of the castes associated with temple servants lived in ‘*poomadam*’, and the Nairs’ houses were addressed as ‘*bhavanam*’. The supreme authority of the same caste lived in ‘*idam*’. The king lived in palace called ‘*kovilakam*’ or ‘*molom*’, the Brahmins in ‘*illam*’ and the Brahmins of great honour lived in ‘*mana*’. *Samantans* extended their powers from the dwelling houses addressed as ‘*madam*’, ‘*edam*’, or ‘*naalukettu*’.<sup>34</sup>

It is not clear when the people here started to use the term *tharavad* to denote their ancestral house. Keralolpathi<sup>35</sup> speaks about *tharavad* in order to discuss the main lineages of Nambudiri Brahmins (Pavithran 2007: 8). The Nambudiri Brahmins are *makkathayees* except the *Thirumumb* family of Payyanur. These groups could not use the title Nambudiri.<sup>36</sup> The use of the term *tharavad* is evident in the *theyyam vaachal* (oration) when the *theyyam* addresses the matrilineal castes. In *theyyam thottam* the term *veed* is used more to denote the *tharavad*. *Veed* means ‘house’ in Malayalam. In Vishnamoorthi *theyyam* recites the term *tharavad* in the *thottam*. Here Vishnamoorthi is portrayed as a Thiyya boy named Palanthay Kannan. From this we can understand that not only Nairs but other backward castes also use the term *tharavad*.

Different anthropologists have approached *tharavad* in different dimensions. Kathleen Gough (1961) argued that the *tharavad* is a matrilineal social organization (matrilineage) descended from a common ancestress (Gough 1961: 325). According to Moore (1985), members of *tharavad* have responsibilities other than economic ones, including the management of deity worship, life cycle and calendrical rituals, inter-‘jati’ and land tenure rituals, and day-to-day activities. Arunima conceives of *tharavad* as “the primary focus of examining the complex relationships between caste, class, gender and kinship”

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<sup>34</sup> This means those *samantans* were persons from different castes – not exactly *kshathriyas* or Brahmins.

<sup>35</sup> This is the reference guide explaining the origin of Malayali Brahmins in the Brahminical society. This book along with Sankara Smrithi back supported the customs and rituals of Nambuthiri community. This literature has also influenced the *theyyam* literature. According to the historian MGS Narayanan, this book may have been written in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It is Hermen Gundurt, the linguist, who published the Keralolpathi from Mangalore in 1843. Then Pavithran T collected and published two different Keralolpathi in 2007. One of these is collected from *theyyam* performers. *Theyyam* performers narrate Keralolpathi during the *thottam* recitation. *Thottam* is explained in the third chapter.

<sup>36</sup> These are the only *marumakkathayee* among the five sects of Nambudiri Brahmins believed to have come to exist in Kerala. According to Aiyappan (1982: 155) the ruling clans of Kerala are all matrilineal, and it is likely that the Nambudiri Brahmins of Payyanur *makkathayees* originally changed their system of descent, inheritance, succession and locality of marriage to suit their high-ranking administrative role.

(Arunima 2003:9). The Madras Marumakkathayam Act (1933) defines *tharavad* as ‘the group of persons forming a joint family with community of property governed by the *marumakkathayam* law of inheritance’. Everyone in the region talks about their *tharavad* whether they belong to *marumakkathayam* or *makkathayam* including Mappila *marumakkathayees* (who are Muslim).<sup>37</sup> What I have concluded from the data collected is that *tharavad* in the present day is understood as an ancestral house; it always made people nostalgic about the olden days when the joint family consisted of all the living descendants from a single common ancestor.

When the number of members increases in a *tharavad* in the *marumakkathayam* system, *thavazhis* are formed based on the mother-children relationship. Here *tha* means ‘mother’ and *vazhi* means ‘lineage’. The property rests mainly with the female members. Upper caste *tharavad* used to hold large tracts of land as property belonging to the *tharavad*. Being common property, each member had the right to enjoy it. The consent of all the members was essential to divide the property when a new *thavazhi* emerged. The daily expenditure of the *tharavad* members was also met from this commonly held *tharavad* property. The position of *karanavar* passes from the male member to the next senior most male member; often, this would be his brother or perhaps the eldest among his sisters’ sons. The position of *tharavattama* passes to the next oldest female in the *tharavad*; this can be the mother of the eldest male member or the sister of the eldest male member. But what is important to note is that *tharavattamma* and *karanavar* handled the family affairs together.

In North Malabar, different versions of *marumakkathayam* existed. There are variations in practicing *marumakkathayam* among different castes, mainly in terms of residence patterns, role arrangements and rituals related to marriage, birth and death, etc. Household formation or residence formation is one of the fundamental areas of the family system. In my research area, the residence pattern changes from community to community.<sup>38</sup> The residence or household formation has been influenced by several factors. For instance, the *marumakkathayam* systems followed by the Nayars and the Thiyyas were entirely different from each other, mainly in their residence patterns and lifestyle. Among the Nairs and other

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<sup>37</sup> It should be noted that the Muslims in North Malabar follows *marumakkathayam*.

<sup>38</sup> I use ‘community’ instead of ‘caste’ because a caste may or may not have different subcastes depending on the needs of village. I would argue that in North Malabar, community identity has been more decisive than caste identity for a long time. This community identity formed around *theyyam* worship. The *theyyam* worship is basically attached to the house; a cluster of houses forms *illam*; a cluster of more than two *illams* forms a community.

upper castes women can marry outside of their castes on the condition that the bridegroom's caste is higher in the caste hierarchy (hypergamy). In the case of the Thiyya, women do not marry outside of their caste due to the fear of losing the ritual positions that may be inherited by their offspring. At the same time, we should note here that sexual unions are not allowed for members of the same *illam* of the same caste since these *illams* are exogamous by default and their members are identified as being brothers and sisters. Both *makkathayees* and *marumakkathayees* have *illam*. For example, the Kaniyan caste is an 'other backward caste' that follows *makkathayam* and it consists of 6 *illakkar*.<sup>39</sup> While the Nair family prefers to provide clothes for the bride by themselves, in the Thiyya caste the clothes for the bride are supposed to be brought by the female members of the bridegroom's family.<sup>40</sup> Excepting the Nambuthiri Brahmins, divorces are common and remarriage of widows are permitted. Generally, the main indulgence that the female members enjoyed in the *marumakkathayam* system concerned their inheritance rights and being carriers of their *tharavad* name. Both male and female children take their identity from the mother permanently. In short, according to the traditional practice, descent is through the female members. That is, the caste of the offspring should be the same as that of the mother. In the matrilineal system, women enjoy more power than they do in the patrilineal system. In the matrilineal system, women have the right to own property, and they are not forced to leave their house after marriage. Compared to patriliney, matriliney offers greater systemic variation.

Consider an age-old Nayar *tharavad* from Chervathur, the Kambikkanath *tharavad*. This *tharavad* was once a joint family. When the number of *tharavad* members increased, the *tharavad* split into three different lineages, namely Keezhilath Kambikkanam, Vayalaacheri Kambikkanam and Kallara Kambikkanam. Then Kallara Kambikkanam again split into Meethaleveettil Kallara Kambikkanam and Kallara Kambikkanath Kaliyanthil. As they separated from each other, they conducted a ritual ceremony called *balikala*. After this ceremony, these *tharavadukal* (plural of *tharavad*) are not expected to participate in the death or birth pollutions of the others.<sup>41</sup> The Kambikkanam is an *illam* among the 450

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<sup>39</sup>Their *illam* areas follows: Perumanayillam, Vilakku Thalikaiyillam, Kambiliyillam, Nichiladam Illam, Vilakkillam, Paattillam.

<sup>40</sup> The term 'marriage' has its Malayalam term 'vivaham', or 'kalyanam' but these were not in use in former times. Instead they used terms such as 'pudamuri, pudavakodukkal, mangalam' etc., signifying different marriage ceremonies. Tying the *thali* string is a recent ceremony which is included in the marriage of all castes.

<sup>41</sup> *Pula* (pollution) observation is compulsory to all members of the lineage. This is observed during birth as well as at death. In the region under study people use different terms for the birth related pollution, 'vaalaima'. The number of days to observe pollution varies in different castes. Nairs observe 12 days of *pula* and 16 days of *vaalaima* while the Poduvals observe 13 days of *pula*, Adiyodis observe 11 days of *pula* and 16 days of *vaalaima*, and Thiyyas observe 4 days of *pula*. The bath taken to remove *pula* is known as the *Pulakuli* rite. During *pula*, *tharavad*

*illams* of the Nair caste. That means the marital ties are not allowed between members of the *tharavadukal* coming under Kambikkanam which is now an exogamous *illam*.

I mentioned in the previous chapter that each village in North Malabar was separated and isolated during the pre-colonial era due to the geographical peculiarities. As a consequence, each village's social relations – understood as relations between castes – are peculiar to the respective villages and consequently one should be wary of any generalisation. Certain castes were more dominant in certain villages and of much less importance in others. The participation of different castes is integral to the *theyyam* performance. The majority of the *theyyam* are linked with at least one *tharavad*, as *paradevatha*. Here people are identified with their *tharavad* names whether they are *makkathayee* or *marumakkathayee*. And membership to one's *tharavad* depends on the mode of inheritance the particular caste follows. This can be, as I have attempted to make clear, according to the *makkathayam* or the *marumakkathayam* system. I have already pointed out that in *marumakkathayam* male members bring their wife to their *tharavad*, and their wife enjoys the respect from the *marumakkal* (nieces and nephews) of the male members. The nieces and nephews of the male members call her *ammayi* and the male member is addressed as *ammavan*. *Ammayi* and her children are members of the house and they can share the daily bread even though they have no right over the *tharavad* related rituals and properties. No single member of a *tharavad* can claim the ownership of the property a *tharavad* poses. The properties were under collective ownership. Resource acquisitions by *tharavad* members would go to the *tharavad* and would be treated as the part of the joint family wealth.

However, in ruling families of the past, the ruler should own some material properties such as land with a house, a special room, a coat, etc., to which other members of his *tharavad* had no right and which would be passed on to his successor. This is called *sthanam* property. *Sthanam* in Malayalam means a position of dignity. This *sthanam* property was considered necessary for the maintenance of the dignity of the *tharavad* head. This was very common not only in ruling families but it was also created when a family became very influential and wealthy. This was because other members decided that the head of the family should be able to maintain a certain state; for that the family members agreed to set apart a certain

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members are not allowed to enter into temples or worshipping spaces. If one touches a person who has *pula*, s/he should immediately take a bath.

property for him. There are also examples of *sthanam* property being established for the eldest female members.

So the right to live in a *tharavad* does not depend on the mode of inheritance, i.e., the children can live in their paternal house for a long time. This paternal house is addressed as *achanveedu* or *achamveedu* which means ‘father’s house’ in English. The children are supposed to move to their *tharavad* if their parents separate or upon death of their father. Among the castes that follow *marumakkathayam*, some are upper caste land-owners, other, less wealthy backward castes and – lowest in the lower castes – those who owned no land and who lived in a small hut on the land of their masters near the farming fields at the outskirts of the villages. Here we should note that *adiyalas* do not possess land and hence they have no identity related to the land as owners. Instead they share a collective identity related to the name of the place at which they live – or even the title of their master/mistress, for example Azheekkod virunthi; here Azheekkod is the name of the place the mistress came from.

I would like to direct your attention to the discussion about *illam* and *tharavad*. I consider *marumakkathayam* and *tharavad* to be two different kinds of entity: *marumakkathayam* – a principle that organises inheritance and succession – is recognised through blood relations,<sup>42</sup> whereas house-land (property) relations are organised by the *tharavad*. What I am trying to say is that caste *makkathayees*, too, refer to their house as a *tharavad*. And the mode of inheritance of *tharavad* properties – as well as the ritual rites – depends on the mode of inheritance each caste follows. If there is a common worshipping space for the clan, then the inheritance of ritual rites is through the *illam* which is main-lineages in a caste. What this boils down to is that a *marumakkathayee* can have multiple group membership. To take some examples:

1. *Tharavad* membership- through the mother. Here matrification is necessary and sufficient for inclusion into the group.
2. *Achanveed* membership- through the father; the father and his *tharavad* members should recognise the sexual union of the parents. Here matrification is not necessary for the criteria for inclusion into the group (but patrification is).

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<sup>42</sup>Blood relations are recognized through the *illam*. Both *makkathayees* and *marumakkathayees* have *illams*.

3. *Illam* membership- through mother and the mother should be a member of the *tharavad* which belongs to the particular *illam*. However, membership is recognised only if the mother's union is as per the rules dictated by the particular caste. Here matrification is necessary for *marumakkathayees* but not sufficient for inclusion.
4. Community membership- two or more *illam* form a community.
5. *Caste* membership- through mother. Here matrification is necessary and sufficient for caste membership.

The principle of inheritance and succession and the principle of descent was the same in the society of North Malabar but the criteria for the different kinds of group membership differed. Consider a dwelling space – a house: for some members of the house it is their *tharavad* and for other members it is their *achanveedu*. Here the *tharavad* and the *achanveedu* are not distinct units but is constituted by a single structure ‘the house’. So an individual can be the member of the house in two ways (or, to put it the other way round: the house can have two kinds of members). This house is always open for the children of female members. The female members can send their children to live in their house or the female members can live in this house and send the children to live in their father’s house. Or the female member and her children can live in the house and their partners can visit them and stay there (usually the male members spent one night or very few days (nights) in the wife's house).<sup>43</sup>

In *makkathayam* the house is exclusively dedicated to male members and their sons. The in-married female members can visit their parents, stay in their house for up to two days but they are not supposed to leave their children under the guardianship of her natal house.

For the upper castes and other backward castes, the *tharavad* is an ancestral house with collectively shared landed estate under the guardianship of a *karanavar*. In *marumakkathayam* the *tharavad* includes the children of male members and children of female members equally taking their bread from the same land which will devolve only to the female members and their children. Here only the first generation children of male members were considered to be members of the house. And these children would be expected to become a visiting member to their *achanveedu* (their father's house) after the death of their

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<sup>43</sup>It is basically the up to the female members themselves whether or not to remain in her natal house Her preference is mattered here. Very influential and wealthy families prefer that their female members stay in the *tharavad*.



father. In *makkathayam*, the children of a female member (that is, one who is born to it) have no room in the joint family, i.e., the *karanavan* (her brother) has obligation only to his sons and his brothers and their sons – not to his *marumakkal* i.e., his sisters' children. Individuals are identified with their *tharavad*.<sup>44</sup>

The use of the term *adiyaan koottam* or *illam* title stood for the term *tharavad* among *adiyalas* (the low-caste agricultural labourers).<sup>45</sup> In North Malabar, the Pulayar (plural of Pulayan) are *marumakkathayees*. The name of the *adiyaan koottam* somehow associates the name of their masters' *tharavad* or the space they belong to with the title of their *adiyaan koottam*. For example, Kavukoyyathi: this name is taken from a *theyyam thottam* of Pulaya. These *adiyala* women belong to Madai Kavuvu – an important *theyyam* worshipping centre – and the *kavuvu* in her name stands for Madai Kavuvu. In the above paragraphs, I have written about Azheekkod Virunthi, a Pulaya female who once came from Azheekkal to Payyanur. Whenever there was a scarcity of *adiyalas* or *adiyanmar* the *karanavar* requested the other *karanavar* (who had a surplus of *adiyalas*) to send *adiyalas* to work for them. The *theyyam* literature has several examples of the transfer of *adiyalas* from one *karanavar* to another.<sup>46</sup> Even though they, too, have joint families, they should be ready for a separation whenever it is demanded of them.

Thus house – mainly containing a joint family and not simply a nuclear family – was considered the basic social unit in pre-colonial time. Importantly, each joint family house-*tharavad* had a *theyyam* worshipping space associated with a family deity, mainly goddesses, called *paradevatha*. People in the village were identified with their *tharavad* by adding their *tharavad* name as the surname. Then only comes the importance of caste identity.

The house here, the '*tharavad*', is a corporate body holding an estate made up of both material and immaterial goods. As I attempted to clarify above, for some members of the house, it is their *tharavad* and for other members it is their *achanveedu* (paternal house). Here the *tharavad* and *achanveedu* is constituted by a single structure: 'the house'. *Makkathayees* have no place in their mother's house but in

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<sup>44</sup> At present, however, members of the younger generation tend to delete their *tharavad* names.

<sup>45</sup> These words are not in use nowadays. Instead they use *tharavad* for their ancestral house. However, *adiyaan koottam* is a very common term in the *theyyam* literature. The *thottam* song of the *theyyam* Pulimarinja Thondachan provides the evidence of the use of the term.

<sup>46</sup> These transfers are not considered as a trade in slaves.

North Malabar they are considered as the visiting relatives to the mother's house. Cross-cousin marriages were possible but with conditions. For *marumakkathayees* a male member can marry his maternal uncle's daughter (MBD); for *makkathayees* the male can marry both maternal uncle's daughter (MBD) and paternal aunt's daughter (FZD). The above discussion pertains solely to North Malabar; there are many differences in traditions and customs from the rest of Kerala.

The main mode of worshipping god is through *theyyam* so I would follow the way *theyyam* addresses the castes. Each caste is differently addressed by *theyyam*, see table 2.2 below.

Table: 2. 2 A few examples of caste and titles used by *theyyam*

Caste	Mode of inheritance	The titles
Nair	<i>Marumakkathayam</i>	Naalu (4) thara naannoottiyambathu (450) illam akambadi
Thiyya	<i>Marumakkathayam</i>	Ettillam (8 <i>illam</i> ) karumane..  Ey thande..
Vaniyan	<i>Marumakkathayam</i>	Ombathille.. (9 <i>illam</i> )
Yadavar	<i>Marumakkathayam</i>	Aaru kiriyame.. (6 <i>kiriyam</i> )
Aasari (carpenters), Moosari (artisans who make copper tools) ,Kollan (artisans who make iron tools), Thattan (artisans who make gold ornaments)	<i>Makkathayam</i>	Naanku varnae...
Kusavan (pot makers)	<i>Marumakkathayam</i>	Aanthoor Nayare..  Kutti sambradaye...

### 2.3 The disintegration of the *tharavad*<sup>47</sup>

Payyanur was one of the first places where a land survey (one of many) was conducted (1795) and a court was established (1805) for land registration and settling land and other disputes (Vadakkiniyil, 2009). This is where I wish to start my discussion on the disintegration of the *tharavad*.

In March 1792 Malabar was formally ceded to the British. The British entered into agreements with the local Rajas and they acknowledged the full sovereignty of the Company over their respective territories. Colonial influence in changing the social structure is evident in the laws which were crucial in changing the traditional social structure and institutions such as marriage, kinship, the system of inheritance, etc. The ritual hierarchy of caste reflects the traditional relationship of each caste to the land, which was a fundamental determinant of wealth, power, and social status in North Malabar.

The systems of land tenure in Kerala are extremely complex. At one point, The Malabar Land Law, for example, recognized 28 different kinds of tenure, ranging from perpetual, irredeemable leases to tenancy-at-will. For analytical purposes here, however, a land system of ideal type may be constructed. The *ooralis* of temples and villages leased these lands to '*kaaralas*'. The '*adiyala*' community contained the actual farmers of the land. *Adiyalas* submitted the crops to the *kaaralas* who gave it to the actual owners, the *ooralais*, after taking their share. The landowners were also involved in farming apart from handing over the land to the *kaaralas* or *adiyala*. There were also land tenure systems such as *janmam*, *kanam*, *verumpattum*, and *kunjikkanam* (Balan 2007). Landlords had to maintain certain obligations, mainly regarding the division of the produced crop. There was no unfair collection from the landlord's side. The *adiyala* caste Pulaya serfs were attached to the plots upon which they lived and were held as ancestral property. They received, at fixed periods during the year, a traditional payment in kind. The service castes of the village, the washer men, barbers, and artisans, likewise received a traditional payment in kind. The lineages of the servant castes, whether matrilineal or patrilineal, held both the duty and the right (*desam avakasam*) to perform these services in the village of their birth. These service rights, however, often cut across village boundaries, and the obligations involved service to the appropriate upper-caste household

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<sup>47</sup>The discussions of this section are mainly based on the inferences made from the text books LLB students regarding legal system where different case that was filed during colonial period is discussed. The authors are Aiyar (1922), Kaleeswaram & Suchithra (1995), and Madhavan (1941). I am indebted to Kaleeswaram & Suchithra (1995) for their book *Commentaries on Marumakkathayam Law*.

when required. Customary payment was in kind, and each servant family held a house site from the landlord by hereditary right and was provided with the materials of his craft.

But after the British rule was installed, the system was changed. Desolation and forced collection of money and crops increased. When the British took over the administration, the centuries-old system of land proprietorship was lost. The new rulers appointed middlemen to collect revenue for lands. In most cases, these go-betweens ignored the welfare of the farmers and exploited them to the full. As a result, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century like in other parts of Malabar, farmers' groups/associations and agricultural movements began to rise in north Malabar also. The Regulation XXVI of 1802 by the British administration under the Madras presidency provides that landed property paying revenue to Government shall be registered by the Collector (Chakravarthi 1927: 62-65). With this regulation proper land registration had begun.

Land was mainly owned by each *tharavad*, not by a single member but by a group of people. Soon disputes erupted. The concerns of the colonial government with land and revenue and their new law deeply affected the *marumakkathayeetharavads'* internal and external relations. Here one should note that the landlords are mainly from the upper castes and these upper castes are *marumakkathayees* (adhering to the matrilineal principle) in North Malabar, including the Brahmin landlords. The main *makkathayees* (with patriliney) belong to the other backward castes who were tenants of the land or who were engaged in other kinds of labour. Hence the land-related disputes always appeared in relation with the *tharavad* coming under *marumakkathya* system. As I have mentioned earlier, social relations of different castes in a village were based on their relationship to the land during the pre-colonial era. The attitude towards land of the people who enjoyed the joint family system (*tharavad*) changed after land registrations began. Along with the land registration act there emerged a new category of property right in North Malabar: self-acquired property. Before this, ownership over the land was viewed as control in the form of stewardship over sources of economic income or wealth. But then this changed and the land itself became a property that could be sold. This means that the land as a source of economic income has itself acquired an economic value. and it made the members of the joint families conscious of the concept of 'personal property'. Before the British, when the land was transferred it was not just the land, the things in it or the rights on the land that were transferred, but also the tenants and other agricultural labourers like *adiyalas*. Then, during the colonial period, the concept of individual land ownership became more dominant than the concept of collective land ownership. This led to changes in the structure of the

*tharavad* and in the power relations within the *tharavad*. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Malabar was the most litigious district in the Madras presidency due to the land-related disputes.<sup>48</sup>

The British established a judicial structure above the prevalent local judiciary. Along with this a new judicial code was also established. As the British were unfamiliar with the customs and practices prevalent in the region, they sought advice from religious leaders and upper caste Nambudiris. The local customs and practices were not incorporated into the new judicial structure, however; instead a highly Brahmanical code came into being. Out of the many schools of the law that were prevalent in India, the British codified law in India on the *Mitakshara Law*. The British jurists compared *marumakkathayam* with *mitakshara* law which is a Hindu law (Aiyar 1922: 1).<sup>49</sup> Because the *marumakkathayam* was seen as an anomaly compared to the *mitakshara* law, it was not recognised as a different school of law. Crucially, *mitakshara* law is concerned with the patrilineal joint family where the female has no right to property and must leave her home after marriage; it allowed the division of joint family property. Next, the courts equated the *tharavad* with the Hindu joint family as being similar in structure and the point of difference being the reckoning of descent and inheritance.<sup>50</sup> By the substitution, descent being traced through the female line instead of the male and the *karanavan* instead of the father being head of the family, the matrilineal system was equated with a patrilineal one. In addition, European judges were influenced by their training in European and Roman law and the marriage and family system prevalent in Europe.

The customary law of inheritance was codified by the Madras Marumakkathayam Act 1932, Madras Act No. 22 of 1933 published in the *Fort St. George Gazette* on 1 August 1933.<sup>51</sup> Here, the *karanavan* was compared to the head of the Roman family and the exclusion of female heads was seen in the judgements simply because no female could become the head of the Roman family (P V Balakrishnan 1989: 205-225). The right to manage the *tharavad* property by the female member of the *tharavad* was not recognised by the court. The court assumed that the women's right to manage property would have to be ascribed to those instances when such property rights had been transferred to them (by devolution) from

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<sup>48</sup> Report of the Civil Administration of Madras Presidency 1882:63.

<sup>49</sup> According to Aiyar (1922), the *marumakkathayam* law governed the indigenous inhabitants and on the migration of Brahmins to Kerala *Marumakkathayam* law modified *mitakshara* law. The author is a late judge of High Court of Judicature at Madras during colonial times.

<sup>50</sup> In a case cited in Madavan Nair K 1941: 203.

<sup>51</sup> This act defines and amends in certain respects the law relating to marriage, guardianship, intestate succession, family management and partition.

male members of the *tharavad*, i.e., arguments concerning the rights of female *tharavad* members were considered specific to the case which the court was then hearing. Variations in the power relations emerged among the members of the *tharavad* due to the introduction of the new system of land registration. Here are some of the outcomes of the customary law of inheritance that the British enforced:

- The terms *tharavad* and *karanavar* became associated with the matrilineal joint family in the court official records, hence over time the association was strengthened.
- The court gave absolute power to *karanavans* in the *marumakkathayam tharavad*.
- The term *anantaravan* (nephew) is far more frequently used in records, the term *anantaraval* (niece) hardly occurs.
- *Karanavan* is able to alienate the lease of or mortgage the *tharavad* property without seeking a common agreement.
- *Bharya chilavukal* (means expenditure for wife which is more than running expenses) *puthravakasam* (the rights on material properties reserved to sons') were included in the *tharavad* expenditure.
- The *karanavan* became the legal guardian of the members of the *tharavad*
- The *anantaravan's* (nephew's) right of maintenance is seen as merely a right to be maintained if he stayed in the *tharavad* with obedience to the *karanavar*. If he leaves the *tharavad* without the consent of the *karanavar* his right to maintenance is forfeited.
- The self-earned income of the *anantaravan* lapses into the joint property of the *tharavad*.
- The *karanavan* could decide on the rituals and ceremonies to be held by the *tharavad*.
- Male members started establishing *thavazhi* with the wife and children and it slowly started gain preferences over the original concept of *thavazhi*.<sup>52</sup>
- An alternate concept of family in the modern sense of the term began to gain ground.

The wealth acquired by a person which should go to the *tharavad* to be enjoyed by all started to be considered as personal property. The out-married male members, other than cross cousin marriages wanted their personal wealth to go to their wives and children. Here a new term emerged: *puthravakasam* property. Having become conscious of the idea of 'personal property' – along with new imported concepts

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<sup>52</sup>*Thavazhi* division would take place as result of an increase in the number of members in a *tharavad* or the expansion of family properties to other areas. As noted above, the matri-oriented *thavazhi* ('mother lineages') were established by mothers, their sisters and their heirs.

of family and marriage from Europe,<sup>53</sup> a substantial proportion of *marumakkathayees* demanded and campaigned for such laws that disintegrated the *tharavad*.<sup>54</sup> The English-educated individuals were being convinced of the ideological superiority of the English law and system. To this must be added that the revenue taxation imposed by the British government led the *tharavad* into debt. In some instances, all the properties of *tharavad* would have to be sold as the result of the debt incurred. Then the other members filed petitions against the sale of properties to which the members had rights. The courts in Malabar refused to consider the partition of *tharavad* property while at the same time accepting the fact the members had a right in the joint family property (Kaleeswaram & Suchithra 1995: 81- 87). This led to the growth and acceptance of the idea of the 'share' each person had in the joint family property. The British courts through their judgements strengthened the right of *tharavad* members to have a share in the joint property and also strengthened an alternate concept of family form. Successive acts of Parliament after Independence had also been passed confirming the rights of individual members of their share of family property.<sup>55</sup> Each joint family was partitioned; family members challenging each other in court was becoming a common sight. At the same time a number of affluent joint families became paupers due to the court expenditures.<sup>56</sup> The educated (male) members of the family sought gainful employment away from the family, bringing their wife along to set up a nuclear family household elsewhere. We can see cases filed about people claiming a portion of the *tharavad* properties as their share since nothing was spent on them as they did not reside in the joint family (Kaleeswaram & Suchithra 1995). By the end of the colonial law a whole new concept of 'family' had taken solid root among the educated individuals of the upper castes, which in due course led to the establishment of a nuclear family headed by the father or the sons.

In the span of the first two decades after independence from the colonial rule the transition to a nuclear family became complete. According to the legal system the matriliney ended completely and officially on 1<sup>st</sup> December 1976 by the establishment of the Kerala Joint Hindu Family System (Abolition) Act.

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<sup>53</sup> For instance, the Malabar Marriage Commission (1891) uses the notion of 'marriage as a contract' embedded in the European concepts of marriage to conclude that "the principles of *marumakkathayam* law do not recognise the institution of marriage".

<sup>54</sup> See Robin Jeffery (1990) for a detailed discussion on this.

<sup>55</sup> The Hindu Succession Act, 1956; The Hindu Marriage Act 1955, The Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act 1956.

<sup>56</sup> Kaliyanthill *tharavad* is an example of this kind. According to my informants this *tharavad* was about to be confiscated by the court.

Interestingly, some cases still pop up in legal legislation.<sup>57</sup> These laws disintegrated the joint family-*tharavad* properties, mainly land. The elementary family became the nuclear one. Social mobility that comes with modern education introduced by the foreigners and employment opportunities that come with the institutionalised academics have acted as the catalyst of the disintegration of the joint family.

I am moving on at this point to discuss the lower caste people who did not own land but lived in comparatively small joint families. In North Malabar, during the colonial era, the upper castes were mainly the landlords, the other backward castes were the cultivators, and *adiyals* were the labourers. The *Janmi-Kudiyani* system during the colonial era offered no laws to protect the cultivating tenant/homesteads from eviction. The social customs then prevalent gave pre-emptive powers to the *Janmis* to evict the *adiyan* at will, something which often led to human rights violations against them. The *adiyals*, who were mere agricultural labourers and other backward castes to whom land was leased for *Pattom* (share-cropping) or *Verum Pattom* (simple lease mostly held by Tenants-at-Will) had in fact no legal protection against such evictions during the British Rule. During the 1950s, there were several efforts in Kerala to get rid of the *Janmi-Kudiyani* land-tenure system and to implement equitable distribution of land. One of the key legislations the state undertook to ensure land for the landless was the Kerala Land Reforms Act, implemented in 1970. By this Act, the *Janmi-Kudiyani* system was brought to an end. The Act was introduced with some amendments on the fixation of a ceiling on land holdings. The Act also gave proprietary rights to cultivating tenants and protected the *adiyala* from eviction. During the land reform act the cultivator castes got more prominence than the labourer castes. The proper implementation of the Act is another story. According to the Act, the government was to distribute surplus and revenue forest land to Kerala's landless poor. Till date, the Act has not been fully implemented, resulting in a huge number of landless people in the state. Nowadays a number of *adiyals* live together in new settlements set up by the state called colonies. There is a colony in Annur, in my field area.

To show what really happened to the great upper caste joint families I can adduce one example from the field; joint families that were once the ruling centre of the region and had acres of land as their property. In the pre-colonial era there were sixteen *Manakal* (plural of *mana*, houses of Nambuthiri Brahmins of

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<sup>57</sup> The act says "Joint family system amongst Hindus of Kerala was abolished with effect from 01.12.1976 by Act 30 of 1976. Thereafter birth in family does not give rise to rights in property."



great honour) of *Thirumumb* families. These are the only *marumakkathayees* Nambuthiri in Kerala *marumakkathayam*, and they were supposed to inter-marry among the same sixteen *manakal*. A few of these *manakal* still exist; among them is *Thazhekkattu mana* which was very prominent in the region. They began to organize a *theyyam* ritual of Kurathi theyyam some 62 years back. Among the reasons they state for no longer organising the ritual is scarcity of money: there is no income from the land.<sup>58</sup> This shows that they became poor in the long run under British rule after land registrations began and land reform acts were implemented by the later established governments. Only the title of the *manakal* exists today; the title bearers do not know where the exact *manakal* was situated. I was able to find only three *mana* among the sixteen that can locate the exact compound where their *mana* was situated.<sup>59</sup> The decay of these *manakal* began some 150 years ago. The *Thazhekkattu mana* was completely partitioned in 1940 and the *mana* got dismantled. A much more recent case: In 2011 – through a ritual procedure lasting two days – *Thirumumb* families converted from *marumakkathayam* (matriliny) to *makkathayam* (patriliny). According to my informants there had been various acts of violence towards the women who became the landowners after land registration. Now the members of *Thazhekkattu Mana* live in a small house compared to the *kottaram* in which they previously resided.<sup>60</sup>

## 2.4 The contemporary phase

In my research area, the sight of more than two houses on a plot of land is very common. The majority of these concrete houses have front doors that resemble the age-old affluent *tharavad*'s front door. The owners of the houses are relatives. Each house rarely has more than five members, consisting of a father who is employed; the mother, usually the home maker (or 'housewife', a local term used about women who are not employed outside their house) and their two children as well as a grandparent. Most of their ancestral homes (that is, their *tharavad*) are locked up. Very few people have any interest in agriculture and the number of farmers is decreasing at an alarming rate.<sup>61</sup> The number of people involved in “*kulathozhil*” (hereditary labour) is decreasing as well. Moreover, the region's population is turning consumerist like most other *Malayalees* (people of Kerala whose mother tongue is Malayalam). Family members no longer live in most of the *tharavad* and these *tharavad* houses are changing into centres of worship only, where people visit during the *theyyam* season or on special occasions instead of actually

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<sup>58</sup>They were not cultivators. They leased their land to the other castes during colonial time. During land reformation act these lands got distributed among tenants.

<sup>59</sup>*Thazhekkattu mana, Kunnath mana, Thaliyil mana.*

<sup>60</sup>*Kottaram* means palace.

<sup>61</sup>Agriculture was the main occupation of the people of Kerala till the early phase of 20<sup>th</sup> century.

inhabiting the *tharavads*. Besides this, age-old *tharavads* are being renovated. Most of the centres of *theyyam* ritual, which are attached to the *tharavads*, are losing their significance and the ritual appears to be observed only for its name's sake when compared to the intensity of the rituals at the main community-based *theyyam* shrines. These days, *tharavad*-based *theyyam* worshipping shrines become active only on a yearly basis or according to the season of the performance of *theyyam*.

At the same time the temples where Hindu idols are placed and worshipped are gaining significance in the daily life of the people. The growing revenue and number of daily offerings at such temples, located in Payyannur, Cheruvathur and Neeleswaram can serve as a marker of their increased significance.

Behind all *tharavads* there lies a tale of tensions related to legal disputes over land. Due to the issues related to legal disputes over properties, relationships between members of *tharavad* deteriorate. The prevalence of such damaged family relationships means that relationships among the new generation members deteriorate as well. Tellingly, *tharavadukal* are becoming legally registered incorporated societies (family trusts) and the affairs of the *tharavad* are looked after by a governing body elected by the members. The majority of these trustees consider *marumakkathayam* (matriliny) as their system of ancestry but they have now shifted to bilateral inheritance. Male and female offspring have equal rights to their parents' property. But in the case of inheritance of ritual rights people still follow their *dhayakramam* (the matrilineal mode). There is no joint family property any longer. There is a marked change in giving children a surname and inheritance of the caste identity. *Tharavad* members are leading a nuclear family life, headed by the husband/father, and he decides to which caste the child belongs, i.e., if he wants his child to follow his caste, he adds his caste instead of the child's mother's caste in his or her birth certificate. Within a brief stretch of time the large landowners' homes have become empty.

I have in mind that when I discuss the contemporary phase I should divide the discussion into three. They are the contemporary phase of upper caste families, the contemporary phase of backward caste families and the contemporary phase of Scheduled caste and scheduled tribe families. Backward castes still lead a secluded life in the outskirts of villages. They live together – sometimes in separate houses – but very near and dear. The majority among them are still landless and face discrimination of different kinds even after 69 years of independence. Other backward castes (OBC) live under better conditions compared to

the scheduled castes and tribes since they were tenants during the land reforms. In North Malabar, since pre-colonial times, everyone could get some education. That is why we can see at least one *theyyam* heroine or hero ancestor in each caste as being well educated in terms of that time. When compared to the rest of Kerala, low caste people in North Malabar do not feel all that inferior because they have their own pride related precisely to their *tharavad*. Also, the worship of *theyyam* knit every caste together because in the absence of one caste the ritual is incomplete. I will discuss this aspect in Chapter 3. As regards Other Backward castes, they too live in nuclear families. They have gained better employment in government sectors. Their nuclear houses keep their relations with their first cousins and other near kin. Relatives from both the maternal and paternal side get equal importance. It should be said, however, that these nuclear families are very male-oriented.

## 2.5 Summary of the chapter

The whole chapter is an attempt to approach the *tharavad* as the house of a joint family, which is ritually connected to *theyyam*. This house, and not the individual, was considered to be the basic social unit in pre-colonial time. I have explained *tharavad* in different phases: first, the *tharavad* in pre-colonial North Malabar, i.e., before the establishment of the land registration act by British; next, the *tharavad* after the land registration act, i.e., during the Colonial period when landlords were supposed to pay huge amounts of land revenue; and finally the *tharavad* after the abolishment of the joint family act 1976, i.e., the contemporary phase.

The three basic pillars of North Malabar society were the caste system, the joint family system and village life. In the first section I have discussed how the system of tribal self-governance was replaced by the caste system and how the land tenure and caste systems became intertwined in pre-colonial North Malabar. Each caste's social relationships were in association with the '*kaanam*' system or on the basis of the ownership of land. The upper caste owned the land and they leased it to other backward castes. The main working force in the land were the *adiyals*, the Scheduled caste and scheduled tribes as per the modern day categorisation. In this section I have set the background for the further discussion.

The main discussion of the second section centred on the *tharavad* and the mode of inheritance and descent prevalent in the region during pre-colonial times. The main arguments were that, in North

Malabar the *tharavad* is a house and joint family which belongs to both *makkathayees* (those who reckon descent patrilineally) and *marumakkathayees* (those who reckon descent matrilineally). This joint family was the basic social unit of North Malabar and not the Individual. In *makkathayam* and *marumakkathayam* the oldest male is addressed by the society as *karanavan* and women among *marumakkathayees* enjoyed more freedom and equality compared to the women in *makkathayam*. In pre-colonial times the joint family was known by different terms in different castes. Later on, the term *tharavad* emerged as the general term for 'joint family'. *Makkathayees* and *marumakkathayees* used the term *tharavad* and *karanavan*. By combining different joint families related by blood constitute a main lineage (*illam*); both *makkathayees* and *marumakkathayees* have *illam*. *Tharavadukal* are now becoming legally registered incorporated societies (family trusts) and the affairs of the *tharavad* are looked after by a governing body elected by the members. The majority of these trustees consider *marumakkathayam* (the matrilineal system) as their system of ancestry but one can observe many deviations from the social patterns of the actual *marumakkathayam*. There is a marked change in giving children surnames and caste identity. The nowadays split *tharavad* members are leading a nuclear family life, headed by the husband/father whose caste his child will identify with. Generally, people keep their *tharavad* name as surname. This trend has been changed towards giving father's name as surname to the child instead of *tharavad* names.

The sub-lineages (*tharavad*) make the main lineages (*illam*) which constitute a caste of a region and combined with other lineages of the same caste and different castes they make a village. Caste membership determined the services that a person had to provide in the village. Each village had at least one *tharavad* to provide the services that a particular caste could offer. So the basic social units are the joint families. These families are addressed differently based on the castes of the dwellers. During the Colonial rule the disputes related to land made the term *tharavad* very famous. The land disputes mainly centred around the *marumakkathayam tharavad* because the majority of the ruling castes and landlords were *marumakkathayees*. This led the foreigners to associate the term *tharavad* with the matrilineal joint family. In section 3 I have discussed the disintegration of the joint family through discussing the disintegration of *tharavad*. The reasons leading up to the dismantling of joint family houses are discussed here. There was no single reason that produced the disintegration. The main topic in section 4 was the emergence of nuclear male-oriented families.

### Chapter 3

#### Walking with *theyyam*, *theyyakkaran* (the performer) and the people

*Theyyam* was performed in March 2016 in a temple at Kazhakootam in Thiruvananthapuram, the capital city of Kerala. The district Thiruvananthapuram lies in the southern part of Kerala. This chapter begins with the information collected from the *theyyam* specialists who performed at the temple. Here, *theyyam* was conducted as part of temple's festival celebration. The temple authorities had made people believe that it was necessary to conduct *theyyam* at the temple as per an astrological revelation. But it was known from the performers that it was a fake attempt to give a new look to the celebration and to ensure more participation of people and raise funds. In spite of the fact that *theyyam* can be performed anywhere using 'pathi',<sup>62</sup> today it is even performed without 'pathi' or other rituals which have to precede and follow the performance. Today, *theyyam* becomes an event at many processions and celebrations and a *theyyam* specialist is attracted to perform at these places as he will be able to get more money that way. The community of *theyyam* specialists is facing many types of exploitation. The world around a performer changes very fast and he is compelled to accept those changes. But people from different castes around him consider that *theyyam* and the performers should never change.

I would like to share a thought of one of the informants. During his childhood, he used to go with friends to learn swimming in a river on the boundaries of vast farm fields. But they were afraid to go near the river between 12 pm and 2pm walking through the deserted fields even if they wished to. The reason for their fright was a conviction among people that it was the 'purappad' (setting out for a walk; beginning of a walk or performance) time of the 'Kuliyam' *theyyam*.<sup>63</sup> It was his hobby to misdirect people who are going through the deserted fields and make them walk more. The informant added that many among his friends were also tricked by 'Kuliyam'. Also, they never used to climb a Chembaka (Frangipani) tree because it was believed that the tree belonged to 'Kuliyam'. While walking through certain places people pray to the 'prime deity' (*paradhevatha*) for help from other *theyyangal*<sup>64</sup> who may be going through the same area. It was also believed that if *theyyangal* have any dislike towards those people coming on their way it may end up in troubles for them.

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<sup>62</sup> 'Pathi' is a temporary built worshipping space where the ritual specialist invokes the deity to be possessed by the performer. This should be built by using coconut leaves.

<sup>63</sup> Kuliyam *theyyam* is a male *theyyam* believed to be an incarnation of God Shiva.

<sup>64</sup> Plural of *theyyam*.

*Theyyam* used to walk freely in every nook and corner of North Malabar whether it was day or night, inside or outside homes, wells, ponds, trees and caves. I can say that in reality *theyyam* was a part of the consciousness and unconsciousness of those people living in North Malabar. As consciousness is a combination of internalisation, perception and attitude, this chapter along with the following chapter attempts to describe the changes in the consciousness and the reasons leading to it.

*Theyyams* can be called '*aalukal*' (humans) who live, eat, sleep, walk and drink just like other human beings. What makes them different from normal people is their possession of supernatural powers which can protect or even destruct devotees. Their actions depend on their devotees' need. If worshipped for good reasons they protect a devotee and provide good fortunes. They can also help them in enemy destruction.

*Theyyams* who protect the *tharavad* are called '*dharmadhaivangal* or *paradhevatha*' (prime deity) and those protecting a village are '*gramadhevatha*'. There is a story, told by an informant who is now more than 90 years old, which is passed on from generation to generation and held to have happened in Kallara Kambikkanath Kaliyanthil Tharavad. The Prime deity of the ancestral home was Padarkulangara Bhagavathi and the *theyyam* was installed in a pillar in a special room named '*kottil*'.<sup>65</sup> The incident happened decades ago when the daughter of the *tharavattamma* was in last stage of her pregnancy. As part of a farming ritual the mother had to go to a *theyyam* shrine on a nearby hill top, therefore she asked her sister-in-law who was living nearby to take care of her daughter who was ready to give birth at any time. Before departing for the hill, the woman prayed to the Prime deity at the '*kottil*' and asked to be with her daughter. After the mother had gone, the daughter got labour pains. She called out for help but was not heard by the aunt and then she went straight to the '*kottil*'. Meanwhile, the mother had a feeling that someone was calling her from the bottom of the hill and somehow she completed the ritual and returned home immediately. On reaching home she found that her daughter had delivered a baby in the '*kottil*'. "Who had come for your help my dear," asked the mother. "Mother it was you who took care of me" was the answer from the daughter. Then she realises that it was Padarkulngara Bagavathi (the deity) who was with her daughter like a mother during that hour of pain.

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<sup>65</sup> There is a centre for *theyyam*-worshipping attached to most of the *tharavad*. Unlike the newly built houses, the *tharavad* has a special room called '*kottilakam*' or '*kottil*' (sacred room). The *paradevadas* (family-deities) of the respective *tharavad* are represented symbolically by the wooden pillar placed in the midst of *kottilakam* or the weapons or the stool of *theyyam* kept in *kottilakam*.

This story is included here to show that for a devotee a *theyyam* becomes his/her namesake. Each *tharavad* preserves stories like this where their prime deities became their protector and sometimes their namesake. What makes them two different beings are the supernatural powers possessed by *theyyam*. Though I collected many stories like this, due to the word limit on this thesis I am unable to reproduce all of them here. A *theyyam* becomes the ‘*aparan*’ (‘the other self’) of the devotee in his/her consciousness. The main aim of this chapter is to establish a background for the next chapter which deals with changes to the consciousness while constructing ‘the other’.

### 3.1 The background

As discussed in the first chapter, the '*kolathiri swaroopam*' came into existence in the 14th century. During the 14-15th centuries two main '*swaroopams*' named 'Chuzhali Swaroopam' and 'Alleda Swaroopam' were developed from 'Kolathiri Swaroopam'. It can be understood from the '*thottampattu*'<sup>66</sup> that these '*swaroopams*' have two 'prime deities'. Kolathiri has 'Thayi' or 'Thiruvarkat Baghavathi' as 'Kolaswaroopam', whereas 'Allada' has 'Kalarathri Amma' and 'Kshethrapalaka'. 'Chuzhali swaroopam' has 'Chuzhaliyar/Chuzhali Baghavathi' as '*Swaroopa Dhevathas*'. There is a strong conviction in North Malabar that it was Manakadan Gurukul, a member of the 'Vannan' caste, welcomed by Kolathiri, who officially introduced and revived (*thottichamakal*) the first set of 39 *theyyam*. John Freeman (1990) has dealt in detail with Manakadan Gurukul in his PhD thesis.<sup>67</sup>

As it was made clear in previous chapters that paddy was not the main form of farming in North Malabar and due to this the cultural invasion of the land was not with the arrival of the Brahmin system. A 'caste-landlord-ruler' system came into existence through some affluent *tharavad*. Most of these were *tharavad*

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<sup>66</sup>*Thottampattu* or *thottam* songs are the anecdotes of the deity which are recited in the form of a song with the accompaniment of *chenda*. In Malayalam, *thottam* means feeling, creation etc. These can be considered as hymns with different outfits and accessories; they wake up the goddess and conjure up the spirit in performers' bodies. *Thottam* can at the same time be the performer too. Before the actual performance of the *theyyam* with accessories and clothes on, the performer appears in front of the shrine and sings. This is called the *thottam* of the respective *theyyam*. To reach the final *theyyam* form he has to undergo this procedure.

<sup>67</sup>See Freeman 1991: 60-93.

of upper caste 'Shudra'. For devotion, they depended on tribal sects' *theyyam*. After Manakadan Gurukal, 'thottam' of different *theyyangal* were written by different 'ezhuthachans'.<sup>68</sup> For example, Anidil *ezhuthachan* who lived in Payyannur during 1774-1824 wrote 'Thottampattu' for 'Vairajathan' and 'Madayil Chamundi' *Theyyam*. But these *theyyangal* were also performed before his lifetime because Vairajathan *theyyam* is a hero worship. Vairajathan was a Nair soldier who had largely contributed to the development of '*Allada Swaroopam*'. *Allada Swaroopam* was formed decades before Anidil *ezhuthachan*'s lifetime. It is believed that Koorman *ezhuthachan* wrote 'thottam' for '*Pottan Theyyam*' and Kayyor Thondachan, a *theyyam* specialist from Malayan caste, had expanded it. *Thottam* for Muchilottu Bhagavathi was believed to be written by Manakadan Gurukal.

Therefore, I would say that *theyyam* worship, which has its basis in tribal culture, underwent a rearrangement during the 15th or 16th century under the caste system and the leadership of Kolathiri and later by some local elites.<sup>69</sup> Foreign traders who used to visit North Malabar were amazed to see *theyyam*. Christian missionaries who sowed the seeds of modern school education in North Malabar in the 18th century saw *theyyam* as the devil, as is clear from the letters between them (Kurup 2000: 9). Later generations acquired a higher level of education and could live without depending on their *tharavad*. The colonial rule, which provided jobs in the government service and other public sectors, had a greater influence on them and changed their thought process immensely. K K N Kurup (1995) has observed that all these factors changed the new generation's religious faith and devotional practices and led them to a predominantly Brahminical Hindu faith. For leaders of the renaissance in Kerala *theyyam* was '*Bhootharadhana*' (a worship of the devil) that was to be eliminated.<sup>70</sup>

Communist movements had started to sprout in Kerala in the beginning of the 20th century and North Malabar was an ideal place to grow deep roots for them. Still existing 'party villages' in this area are the proof of the hold the Left possesses in the region. The advocates of the Communist ideology had realised that *theyyam* was deeply influencing the people of North Malabar in many ways and therefore they could not reject it just as a superstition. So, they started efforts intelligently to redefine *theyyam* during this time.

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<sup>68</sup>*Gurukkal* and *Ezhuthachan* are titles given by the villagers. *Gurukkal* means the teacher who is very knowledgeable and an expert in using supernatural forces or sorcery. *Ezhuthachan* means the one who teaches the pupil to write, read and do mathematics.

<sup>69</sup>Several scholars of *theyyam* share this opinion (Babu 2013, Kumaran n.d., Kurup 2000, Vadakkiniyil 2014).

<sup>70</sup>For example, Sree Narayana Guru publicly expressed this view and his follower Swami Anantha Theertha who set up a Centre of education for lower castes in Payyanur also held same opinion.



They began to propagate an idea that *theyyam* depicted stories of resistance and oppression of the downtrodden and in this way questioned the 'caste-landlord' system under colonial rule. If we analyse the social science and history books that came out during the 1960s and '70s, we can see that Marxist historians had attributed to *theyyam* symbols of class war. Among their attempts to prove this they pointed to the reverence of bravery (hero worship) practiced in the ritual. Interestingly, *theyyam* was never portrayed as an establishment resisting the caste system and exploitation in the society *prior to* the establishment of the Communist movement. The leftist institutions were subverting the deep-rooted belief in *theyyam* by recasting it as a power of defence and protest. Later, they tried to conceive *theyyam* as a traditional folk art which would make it acceptable to the Marxist-Leftist ideology. As part of this, they presented *theyyam* as an art form at various party processions during the 1970s and 80s. For example, *theyyam* was staged in 1981 at the Communist party's May Day rally at Cheruvathur (Zarrilli 2000: 200). *Theyyam* as a traditional folk art had become one of the main attractions at the *Keraloltsavam* (Kerala's festival) by the end of the 1990s but this ceased later due to some resistance.<sup>71</sup> In the book 'Folk Plays & Dances of Kerala' authored by M Raghavan in 1947, *theyyam* is included under the art section. It was also staged at an art festival organised by the Kerala Sangeetha Nadaka Academy in 1968. Later, as a performing art it travelled to places like Bombay, Delhi and Aluva under the aegis of the Sangeetha Nadaka Akademy.

At the end of the 1960s, a debate was initiated by the performers themselves who called *theyyam* an 'art form'. In 1977, as part of documenting *theyyam*, a seminar was conducted under the leadership of the Kerala Sangeetha Nadaka Akademy and five main requests were submitted to the government of Kerala by the *theyyam* specialists who participated in the seminar.<sup>72</sup>

They were:

1. *Theyyam* should exist as a traditional art form rather than a ritual.
2. The government should make provision to learn *theyyam* under the 'Gurukula' system.<sup>73</sup>
3. The art should be maintained without losing its essence.

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<sup>71</sup> This is an event organized by the Government of Kerala.

<sup>72</sup> Kerala Sangeetha Nadaka Academy (1987).

<sup>73</sup> This is a type of ancient school which was residential in nature with the *Shishyas* or students and the *Guru* or teacher living in proximity within the same house. The students resided together irrespective of their social standing.

4. '*Theyyakolam*' (the attire used when *theyyam* is staged) should be kept in museums.
5. The government should provide financial assistance to the art form.

*Theyyam* was showcased in the 1950s at the Republic Day parade, which conveys the message of 'unity in diversity', as a local art imbuing nationalism. Earlier, Kadhakali and Kalaripayattu were the symbols representing Kerala at the national level. It was staged as an art performance at various public events like India's National Sports meets, 'Apna Ulsav' and cultural fests held in Ahmedabad and Pondicherry. It also became an inevitable part of 'Athachamaya' festivals included in the Onam celebration. In 2016, *theyyam* was also organised as a part of a reception hosted at the Rashtrapathi Bhavan.

In 1980, the Kerala government's publishing department brought out the book 'Dances of Kerala' with photos of *theyyam* on its inside cover and in 1986 they published another book, in English, with *theyyam* images. The restructuring of *theyyam* as a traditional folk art by removing it from its ritualistic and historical background made it possible for someone to hail from North Malabar and become famous. There are many discussions going on *theyyam* to see it beyond just a 'folk religion'. The article 'Theyyathinte Kalapadavi' published by E. P. Rajagopalan (2005) discusses whether *theyyam* is folk or classic, and whether it rather demonstrates the primary conflicts in the classic/folk classification. There were many efforts from the side of the state and academia to study and teach *theyyam* as a performing art, classical art and folk art and the public seems now to have accepted it.

*Theyyam* also becomes a 'brand ambassador' to sell products in the present consumer-based economy. For example, *theyyam* appears in fashion brand Sheematti's advertisement telecast on Television. During the Onam festival, in television visuals sending out Onam wishes, *theyyam* appears in the background on beaches and in other places. It is also used as a product in the tourism sector to attract more visitors to the state. Images of *theyyam* can be seen on the Kerala Tourism Department's website, advertisements and hoardings. The tourism department also organises *theyyam* for tourists. Along with them, the resorts take the initiative to locate the performers who are willing to do *theyyam* for the tourists staying in resorts at Vayanad. Several of my informants did perform *theyyam* as part of travel packages offered for tourists. Images of *theyyam* also become an integral part of most of the newspaper editions coming out from the North Malabar area. To summarise so far, once a part of worship and a folk religion, *theyyam* was later

transformed into a ritual art, a traditional folk (performing) art and has now become a product in the consumerist society. The foundation stones for *theyyam padana kendram* (study centres) were also laid in order to further institutionalise *theyyam*. These centres are appearing in Kodakadu and Madayipara under the initiative of the state government.

### 3.2 The Performer<sup>74</sup>

Different disciplines addressed the person who enacts *theyyam* as artist, *theyyam* dancer, performer etc. In North Malabar the *theyyam* performer is addressed as *theyyakkaran* or *kolakkaran* or *koladhaari*<sup>75</sup> which is not a synonym for artist but for the one who internalises *theyyam* or wears the attire of a *theyyam*. Hereafter, I use the word *koladhaari* for the *theyyam* performer. Importantly, *theyyam* is not an occupation that can be adopted at will. The right to perform *theyyam* can be acquired by the virtue of birth through the lineage of the reserved *tharavad* of a village of *theyyam* performing castes and this tradition is strictly observed in every aspect. The *koladhaari* needs to undergo rigorous training in the characteristic traits of the deity he plays. It is important for the performers to approach physically and spiritually the divine trance in which the *theyyam* is performed. The presence of mind, the ability to take extempore decisions and effectively communicate such decisions in order to help settle disputes that are brought before *theyyam*, and diplomacy in handling the representatives from different communities and positions are required in this ritual performance. The learning of *theyyam* begins from childhood when children follow elders to the performing space. In the course of each journey they learn to sing a '*thottam*' and how to use a *chenda* (drumming instrument) and they become performers (*koladharikal*) for the first time in the Malayalam months of Karkidakam and Chingam by staging '*Kunjitheyyam*.' '*Kunjitheyyangal*', also called '*veedodi theyyangal*', are carried out by boys aged between 8 and 10 years of age. At his first performance, a *koladhari* ties an ornament known as '*thalappali*' over the young performer's head; it has 21 silver pendants on it representing 21 masters (*gurukal*). When a person performs for the first time relatives are invited to the venue.

According to experienced *theyyakkar*, *thottam* songs should not be taught by writing. They say that each *thottam* has its own tune and one should fully understand *theyyam* through the meaning of each word

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<sup>74</sup> I use the word performer to say the one who carries out *theyyam*.

<sup>75</sup> According to DC Books' Malayalam English Dictionary the Malayalam word *Dharikkuka* means to wear, take or understand.

sung. Therefore, it should be learned by hearing and this mainly takes place during childhood. One learns about all the rituals and the *thottam* related to a particular *theyyam* from an experienced performer before playing it oneself. Moreover, each *theyyam* has a special way of being performed (*attaprakarangal*) that varies according to regions. Children learn all of this from experienced *theyyam* specialists. According to the older generation, this learning cannot be done in a day but is a continuous process. When a *theyyakkaran* conceives a *theyyam* he should learn or be taught about the region (places) the *theyyam* represents and where the *theyyam* should shower blessings.

One of the distinctive features of *theyyam* is the monopoly of marginalised communities to perform it. The majority of performers belong to a scheduled caste while a certain section of scheduled tribes also perform *theyyam*. The words of scheduled castes during the performance are venerated by the upper castes as the divine will.

It may be noted that outside the *theyyam* performances the members of scheduled castes and scheduled tribe performers resume their ordinary roles in the lowermost strata of the society with no special distinction or recognition.

Table 3.1: Caste and Categories of *Theyyam* performers

<b>Caste</b>	<b>Category (SC/ST)</b>
Vannan	Scheduled caste
Malayan	Scheduled caste
Velan	Scheduled caste
Anjoottan	Scheduled caste
Kopalan	Scheduled caste
Pulayan	Scheduled caste
Mavilan	Scheduled Tribe
Vettuvan	Scheduled Tribe

*Theyyakkar* belonging to the castes of Vannan, Malayan, Velan and Anjoottan perform *theyyam* in the *theyyam*-worshipping centres of the upper castes. Since the caste of Kopalan, Pulayan, Mavilan and Vettuvan belong to the lower ladder or out-castes in the caste hierarchy, they have no place in the worshipping centres of the upper castes nor in the worshipping centres of other lower castes which are placed higher than the castes Pulayan, Kopalan, Mavilan and Vettuvan. People belonging to the Pulayan caste perform *theyyam* in their own centres of worship known as *kottam*.

The rulers of the old territories had allocated the right to perform the ritual for upper castes to different castes in a meticulous manner: the region was divided into different *naadu* based on the width, length, geographical, socio-political and cultural features of the region. These regions were tenured for performing the ritual to the chieftain of main lineages of those communities as people's birth right (*cherujemman*); accordingly, they should address the chieftain using a customary title. *Theyyam* performers are paid by the communities or *tharavad* for whom they carry out *theyyam*. This payment is called '*kolu*'. The leader of the *theyyakkar* and the organisers fix a definite amount of money as payment before the commencement of ritual performance. In the past the *kolu* was paddy. Besides this payment, *theyyam* performers are also allowed to collect money as offerings directly from devotees during *theyyam* performances.<sup>76</sup> The amount of money these performers collect during a performance has to be shared with the shrine authorities if the performance commences in a community-owned shrine.<sup>77</sup>

The *theyyam* as *nerchakaliyattam* can be carried out at any time of the year (Menon 1993: 198), but usually the performances begin during the time of agricultural harvest and come to an end during the new planting for the next season. The *theyyam* season related to the shrines of the village or lineages starts in the Malayalam month of *Thulam* (October) and lasts until *Idavam* (June) with the *kalasham* of Kalarivathikkal Kshethram at Valapattanam (*kola swaroopam*), Mannan Puarath Kavay at Nileswaram (Allada Swaroopam) respectively. *Theyyam* performers spend the rest of the year with *aniyal nirmanam* (making and repairing costumes), *vaidyam* (traditional medicinal practice) and sorcery.

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<sup>76</sup> In some shrines, for particular *theyyam*, the performers are not allowed to collect offerings as money directly from the devotees. This will be compensated during the next performance.

<sup>77</sup> When the performer collects money from 10 devotees he is supposed to give offerings of 2 devotees' to the shrine.

A *theyyakkaran* should accept the challenge of taking up a *theyyam* he has the right to perform. There is no systematic and institutionalised study for learning *theyyam* and the *theyyam*-related knowledge is mainly acquired through observation and experience by accompanying family members to the performing space and their involvement in various duties. The details of facial make-up (*mukamezhuthu*) are sometimes learned by keen observation through sleepless nights. Children also come together to sing *thottam* and play *chenda* (a tall drum) and thus the techniques of the performance are learned and developed in different ways during childhood. The *koladhaari* of important *theyyam* are trained by the Chieftain, an experienced *theyyakkaran* who is an elder man usually above 50 years and retired from the duties of *koladhaari* (the age might stop him performing *theyyam* because of his health condition). *Theyyam* performance is a team effort. Each team consists of around 10 to 15 persons comprising of performers, costumers, face painters, craft makers, singers and instrumentalists. Importantly, all members of the team have experienced each activity and each performer must acquire each of these skills. The functional distribution of activities is allocated as per requirements. Preparation before a performance takes a long time. Prior to performing an important *theyyam* the *koladhaari* leads a secluded life – sometimes in a hut named '*kuchil*' especially made for the *koladhaari* – for observing extreme purity of mind and body which may take 3 days to 41 days before the day of ritual performance. He takes simple vegetarian food including grains, fruits and tender coconut water to keep his body steady for the ritual commencement. Around 11 to 36 hours are needed for creating each attire and different embellishments. The face makeup and the costume may take 4 to 5 hours. The headgears come in different types; some are more than 30-feet high. A *theyyam* performance can last between a little as 5 minutes to more than 12 or even 24 hours during which the *koladhaari* may not be able to take food or water, something which strains his body. During the season, the *theyyakkars* work continuously through day and night for weeks (which may lead to much psychological and physiological stress). Consumption of alcohol is a prerequisite for a particular variety of *theyyam*. When there no ritual performance is imminent the *theyyakkars* sit together and learn '*thalangal*' (music), '*kalasangal*' (body postures and movements), memorizing different components of the ritual and methods to commence the ritual during a *kaliyattam* in '*Kavu*'. When the *theyyam* season is over, the *theyyakkars* must follow a well-planned lifestyle to regain the health and acquire a balance in living. There are many dos and don'ts a *theyyakkaran* should know and follow in his lifestyle during the off-season in order to balance and preserve good health. This includes some home-based Ayurveda way of life.

*Theyyakkars* from the Vannan, Malayan and Velan castes perform *theyyam* for other castes. Vannan have the right to do most of the *theyyam* as they are at the highest level in the caste grouping among performers. Some 90 per cent of their *theyyam* performances are as '*paradevathas*', the prime deity of a

*tharavad* or community shrines and the majority of them are Mother Gods. Moreover, they also carry out *theyyam* of courageous forefathers of these *tharavad*. The caste Vannan follows *marumakathayam* and do traditional jobs like Ayurveda treatment and stitching. People from the Vannan caste are called 'Etillakar'; this means that they have 8 exogamous *illam*. Vannathis (the females of Vannan) had the duty to wash clothes of upper caste people in the village and gave them back to each home. In return, they will get a fixed amount of paddy from each 'tharavadu' (ancestral homes). They provide washed clothes which are called '*maattu*' which are usually worn soon after impurities related to a death, birth and menstruation are gone.

*Kunjitheyyams* of Vannan are called '*karkidakothi*' (*aadi*) *theyyam* and visit all houses in the village on the 28th day of the Malayalam month of Karkidakam. Karkidakam is a month of heavy rain and almost all lower caste people suffer from poverty during this month. And in the month of Chingam, they visit homes with '*onathar*', another *kunjitheyyam*. It is considered mandatory to have a Vannan joint family in a village in order to do all the rituals without any obstruction. Manakadan gurukul is the 'Kulaguru' of Vannan and he was the one who officially revived (*thottichamakal*) the 39 original *theyyangal* known as '*kuttiparadevathakal*'. All *theyyams* which come after '*kuttiparadevathakal*' are in a sense secondary. In each village, a particular *theyyakkaran's* *tharavad* has given the right to perform *theyyam* in the locality. There are different customary titles given to the performer who inherit the right. This is known as '*cherujanmam*'.<sup>78</sup> These names are given by '*Swaroopams*' of each place. Once a person gets a traditional title after a ceremony called *acharapedalhe* is no longer addressed by his personal name; he will always thereafter be addressed by his customary title.

Vannan also practice '*Konthron pattu*' and '*Pullu noku*' which are rites for removing unwanted spirits from a body. They are the ones who also sing '*Kalampattu*' – a prayer to have a child in a family, and also '*Kurunthinipattu*' for pleasing '*Nagadevathas*' (the Snake Goddess).<sup>79</sup>

Malayar have the right to do *theyyams* after the Vannan caste as they come second in the caste grouping. They are called '*Ombathillam kanaladimar*' They are *makkathayees* with 9 *illam*.<sup>80</sup> Females among them

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<sup>78</sup> '*Manikadan*', '*Peruvannan*', '*Madiyan chingam*', '*Nenikam*', '*Pullooran*', and '*Karanamoorthy*' are the titles given to *koladhaari* of some *tharavad*. Some titles are named after their village, such as '*Eramangalan*', '*Aalappadamb'an*', '*Kuttoor'an*', '*Velloor peruvannan*', '*Madayi peruvannan*', '*Poozhathi peruvannan*' and '*Kottapuram peruvannan*'. Others are given traditional names after their '*illam*' names, for example '*Thaliyil peruvannan*' and '*Kandamchirakal peruvannan*'.

<sup>79</sup> These rituals are very rarely carried out at present.

<sup>80</sup> The nine *illam* of the Malaya caste are Kallyott, Kottukudi, Paalaamkudi, Panikiriyam, Puthanarikkiriyam, Veluppamkiriyam, Parithipillikiriyam, Melakkodikiriyam and Uthranikiriyam. *Paniker*, *Perumalayan*, *Padathron*,

were working as midwives in other caste homes. They always look forward to having a *theyyam* specialist in a boy in the family and a midwife in the girl child. Though they followed *makkathayam*, childbirth usually took place at the mother's home and a ceremony was held to convert a baby boy into a 'Malayan' 41 days after the birth. The eldest person in the family would chant '*moolamanthram*' (religious hymns) into the child's ears to make him a Malayan. '*Malayi koothu*' is a *theyyam* which is usually performed by females among them.

'*Vedan*' is the first '*kunjithayyam*' a Malayan performs in the Malayalam month of Karkidakam. '*Kothamoori attam*' is another form of *theyyam* which is performed by Malayar visiting homes during the time of harvest in the month of Thulam. They are also experts in witchcraft, namely '*vasam*', '*odi*', '*sathambanam*', '*maaranam*', '*vidweshanam*', '*pathalavrithi*' and 'magic' and also hold '*Kanneru pattu*' in the homes of other castes to protect them from evil eyes.

Another community named 'Anjoottans' also performs *theyyam* at some places other than Vannan. They follow '*marumakathaym*' and are mainly seen in Payyannur, Cheruvathur and Neeleswaram.

People from the Velan caste also perform *theyyam* along with Vannan and Malayan at other community's 'Kaavu'. Velan is a caste evolved from a tribal section named Mavilar. Traditionally they do bamboo weaving and make home and farming items. Unlike other *theyyakkar*, they have only one customary title: '*keezhuran*'.

Though 'Mavilan', 'Koppalan' and 'Pulayar' belong to the *theyyam* community they perform only for themselves and they are at the bottom of the caste system. In spite of the fact that their *theyyam* are not well known like the others, they adhere to certain strict rituals in worshipping a *theyyam*. The majority of the upper caste middle class people living in the area of the study still believe that *theyyam* performers are only people belonging to the Malayan and Vannan castes.

### **3.3 The ritual spaces and other castes engaging with the ritual**

People of a village, irrespective of their castes, inherit some special rights and powers related to '*kaliyattam*' which are passed on to them through their *tharavad*.<sup>81</sup> Each village will have only one

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*Muthudan, Baka, Vadakan Kooran, Perum chellooran, Alladon, Parappen, Godhavarman, Kavenadan and Mingunna* are the customary titles of Malayar.

<sup>81</sup>A team of '*Koyma*', '*Achanmar*', '*Komaram*', '*Anthithiriyam*', '*Kootaykar*', '*Kudakar*', '*Samudhayikal*', '*Thadyakaran*', '*Thaliakaran*', '*Virakan*' and '*Valyakkar*' should accompany a performer during Kaliyattam.



'*tharavad*' charged with this power. A set of rights known as '*cherujanmavakasam*', a word most popular among the *theyyam* community, belong to each *tharavad*. A person inherits these rights not only because of his caste but by being a member of a specific *tharavad* to which the right is given by the ruler of the village or *Swaroopam*. *Kaliyattam* happens through the collective efforts of these *tharavadukal* representing different caste communities. The whole preparation work is divided amongst various communities. For example, the carpenter family in the area does the maintenance work of the performing spaces. The 'Nanguvarnakar' (blacksmith) family is responsible for polishing the weapons and other utensils. '*Nottirikunnavar*' is the person who passes sword and weapons from 'Palliyara' to a performer and this right belongs to the 'Yadava' sect. '*Kuruthola*' (tender coconut leaves) and toddy are prepared by Theeya community whereas '*Maattu*' (washed clothes) will come from Vannan *tharavad*. Vaniya have the right to hold lights ('*pidichuvaravu*') during *Kaliyattam*. A certain *tharavad* is entitled to perform *Kaliyattam*.

The *theyyam* spirits worshipped by the people are believed to be primarily dwelling in certain trees like the banyan tree, the *chembaka* tree (frangipani), the tamarind tree and the jackfruit tree. All castes and their lineages worship at their own *Theyyam* shrines. These spaces of performance have different names.<sup>82</sup> And sometimes the ritual is carried out in places especially set for *theyyam* performances, usually an agricultural field or beneath trees in which case the God has to be marked in a solemn procession and a *pathi* will be built first.<sup>83</sup> Among these *theyyam* performance spaces the *Kavu* has much more importance. *Kavu* is the primordial locale where people worship wild animals, reptiles and natural powers that were a threat to them or awed them. The Malayalam word *kavu* means sacred grove. These sacred groves are exclusively dedicated to particular deities, the majority of whom are goddesses. The authority to rule the *kavu* lay with the board of senior members of the respective communities (castes) while the overall control was held by the local king.

Let me narrate the informers' words about *kavu*. The following narrations are collected from the informal group discussions that are conducted in different *kavu* premises during the *kaliyattam* period and the main participants were the older generations. It is believed that the breath-stopping stories and experience notes on the goddesses passed across the generation made everybody in the community humble. So a person was always ready to shoulder the orders from the *kavu* being the volunteer member with the peculiar

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<sup>82</sup>*Theyyam* is performed in the *mundya*, *pathi*, *kanniraashi* of the *tharavad* (*kottil*), *idam*, *madam*, *vaathilmadam*, *kottam*, *mannam*, *palliyara*, *kottumpuram*, *kotta*, *mana*, *kalari*, *koolom*, *illam*, *madappura*, *paadi*, *podikkalam*, *mandapam*, *tharavadu sthanam*, *chaala*, *kazhakam*, *kazhakappura*, *kottil*, *eattumaadam*, *padinjatta palliyara*, etc

<sup>83</sup>These places are also called *Boomika* or *Arangu*.

identity of *chellukuri*.<sup>84</sup> The ruling system of the *kavu* consists of *samudayi* (community people), to be in touch with the community shrine, the *koottaymakkar* (selected members among the *tharavad*) who help the senior-most persons in decision-making and the *vaalyakkar* (general members of the community) who are always service-minded. Quarrels within the community or between individuals and arguments over borders and crimes like theft were examined inside the *kavu* and verdicts were passed based on the hearings. There was actually a captivating power instilled in the *kavu*, which surrounded peoples' life in pre-independence days or the days before the implementations of colonial rule. Since the *karanavar* (here the eldest person among the *tharavad* which comes under the respective *kavu*) had the backing of the belief in the goddess, he had the authority to call the accused and affected people inside the *kavu* for trials. Even the rich obeyed the commands of the *kavu* having the power of the goddess to bless and curse. The villagers sought justice before the *kavu* whenever they lost their valuables or they faced assaults or harassments. There was also an option to convey their sorrows through the *kolam* (*theyyam*) apart from communicating to the *anthithiriyar* (the person who lights the lamps of the shrine at evening) and the *velichapad* (Oracle). The God listens to all these and blesses them with solutions through his representatives, i.e. *theyyam*.

The power of '*kavu*', to withdraw people from convictions and instil moral senses and compassion within them, was commendable. The hearings and trials conducted within the premises of the *kavu* should not consider the economic or social status of the accused. They confess to the goddess, hoping for forgiveness and mercy, by placing their hand over the lit divine lamp. In a way *theyyam* was practicing a kind of psychological therapy for the society. When *theyyam* consoles his affected devotee, promising to destroy his enemy and pledging to be the medium for the sufferer in his/her 90s, it is expressing a whole new level of confidence rooted in devotion. It could unite all the villagers at the divine premise regardless of their economical differences. When the *theyyam* blesses by saying 'I will serve as power for the clothes you wear, the foot you have and the cradle in which you rest without any resolution', the common people feel relaxed and content. They say *theyyam* served as a shade and support for the villagers' life in ways far surpassing and differently from it being a mere art form.

They always cared to convey every special moment of their *tharavad* and family to the *kavu*. They offered a percentage of their first crop and surrendered their first calf to *kavu* as a regular ritual. *Kavu* as a whole and the devotions put forward by *kavu* were always the bottom line for the villagers and no other ruling centres could control their worldly and spiritual lives to this extent. When the new governing structure introduced by the British was accepted, the supreme authority held by *kavu* was tampered with.

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<sup>84</sup>*Chellukuri* literally means the obedience one learns by living in a village.

As a result, it was unable to involve itself in community issues the way it had done until then. The villagers started approaching the judicial system with their troubles. The new generation with education and scientific awareness has a different insight about the supreme power of goddess. So at this age, *kavu* cannot declare verdicts and their executions successfully. The general body of senior members has severe limitations on not only involving itself in the life of devotees but also on decisions concerning worship. According to the democratic system, the common peoples' committee has the authority to take decisions on the yearly rituals such as *kaliyattam*. The performing orders and the duration of *thottam* and *theyyam* have also been fixed according to their word. Those rituals – practiced uninterrupted during the olden ages – have been sized down or restricted for one purpose or another. Much like towards the *kavu*, people's attitude towards *theyyam* has also changed. The *theyyam*, which was once accepted and witnessed by the older generation with high reverence (tears in their eyes and folded hands) is just a charming art form for the new generation.

*Theyyam*, which was once watched with utmost devotion is now being researched and analysed to unveil the mystery it possessed. As the devotional sentiments melt down, the charm of the attire and jewellery, the beauty of the facial painting, the peculiarity of the dances and actions, the blend of music and literature, and the orchestra of supreme performance have all been studied separately. Beyond the devotional element and sovereign beauty of the ritual, these studies concern themselves with form segregated from the ritual's soul. But the researchers should also consider the innocence of those ancient minds and the life circumstances they went through, as they make the goddesses their research subjects. The *theyyam* performance, which included tribal hunting rituals as well as the worship inherent to the farming culture, could seem silly to the new generation. But *theyyam* actually reopens the life attitudes and beliefs of the older generation of which there is no trace even in the historical chapters. Time has caused changes not only in the delegates' culture but also in *theyyakkaran*. Earlier, *theyyam* was considered a ritual to be performed with a pure mind and body and with hardcore dedication but now it is only an art and the performer an artiste. The artistes also form associations and demand salary increments, seeing their performances as labour. Of course the *kavu* authorities are not happy with the change and some people find conflicts in the legacy and current trends. Those who respected the caste structure and the centuries-old rituals are also disappointed and shattered.

The *kavu* is now gradually being referred to as a temple. This tendency, which was at a slow pace ten years ago, is accelerating. *Theyyam's* strong strategy begins with the performer, calling the goddess through *thottam paattu*, then the *komaram* gets the power and performs his part and at the final stage some spiritual power is passed on to the *theyyam* and the performer concludes the act. When it comes to temples, regular offerings and tantric acts will be practiced. The God's presence attained through tantric

acts will always be there. But in *kavu*, as years pass by, the ritual will be performed only on a fixed day. We should think how much this difference would negatively affect the future of *theyyam*.

As times have changed, people have exploited *kavu* by naming newly built educational institutions and auditoriums after *kavus'* name, cut down the trees, and constructed shrines. *Kavu* which was the ruling centre of the community in the years before commemorates the past only during the festival time.

### 3.4 The present situation

It was on the day of '*Perumkalasam*' at Mannampurath *kavu* in Neeleswaram that I met a person who received the customary title '*Madiyan Chingam*' recently. In Kerala, on average 80-120 films are released per year in the Malayalam industry. The textile sector is doing crisp business as compared with previous years. The government's revenue largely comes from the sale of liquor. It is under such circumstances that a youth about 25 years of age has to take up a customary title and abandon his shirt, sandals and keep away from watching cinema and drinking liquor. He has no option but to do the ritual as he is obliged to accept the tradition. '*Madiyan chingam*' is the *koladhari* of Kshethrapalakan *theyyam*. Though both have different patterns in body movements (*aattaprakaram*), Kshethrapalakan *Theyyam* did '*mozhiyattam*' (oration) and body movements similar to that of the Vairajathan *Theyyam* and there was no '*swaroopavicharam*' (talking about *Swaroopams*) which is one of the main parts of the oration.

The Neeleswaram police station got a complaint against *Godhavarman*, a *theyyakkaran* who performed Moovalamkuzhi Chamundi *Theyyam*, which said that he had slapped another person. The police called '*Godhavarman*' to the station and when asked about the incident he said, "Sir, it was not me but the *theyyam* who slapped him. Next time when you see the *theyyam* performing you can arrest *theyyam*." In another incident, one *koladhari* kissed a foreign lady who had come to see *theyyam*. When asked about this, he smiled and said it was not him but the *theyyam* who kissed her.

An old *theyyakkaran* sitting outside a green room where others were getting ready for the performance said, "It is very difficult to understand the new generation *theyyakkaran*. They do not like to take any advice and will react very badly if we give some suggestions. So, our attitude is 'let them do whatever they like.' Most of them don't take *theyyam* seriously and even my son's performance was also not up to the mark," he added.

'*Thottampattu*', which was normally sung for about an hour, is finished nowadays in just 10 minutes and the duration of '*Purappad*' is changed according to the committee members' need. The maximum remuneration a team of about 8-12 people gets as '*kolu*' for their performance is Rs 20,000 only. *Theyyakkar* find it very difficult to get even this money as the organisers also bargain over this. At the same time, even Rs 500,000 and more are spent on various commercial musical shows. These events have to be winded up before 10 pm as there is no permission to use a PA system after this time. And these high-volume events sometimes coincide with the time of *theyyam* performance.

Some *theyyakkar* perform *theyyam* for nine days in a stretch without resting because if they take a break their rights will be taken by others. Performers will usually be busy during the season which is from the Malayalam months of Tulam to Idavam. "The older generation used to restore their health through Ayurvedic treatments. We have to take leave from work to perform a *theyyam* and therefore cannot get more leave to take rest", said one *theyyakkaran*.

"I don't get time to learn all the techniques of *theyyam* but I know its style and do it accordingly. If anything goes wrong there is the possibility that viewers may understand it but I don't think anybody will easily understand it," said a hotel management graduate, working in the same field, who continues to perform *theyyam* in order to not lose his family's rights.

*Theyyam* has a pattern of speech where we can find a combination of Thulu and Malayalam languages and it is curious to see English becoming a part of this. There was a *theyyam* who once said "I love you *Paithangale* (children)" in the Thayineri Kurinji Temple. "Sorry '*anthithiriya*'" said another one.

Most of the people I talked to don't even know the meaning of the *thottam* they sing and the detailed myth of the *theyyam* they carry out. With the exception of two performers, they consider drinking alcohol as a part of entertainment. Another performer shared his experience with me. "Today, I have to visit 5000 homes instead of 500 to get enough money to give those accompanying me so that only then they will come with me next time". *Theyyakkar* like to perform as part of processions and at places out of North Malabar as they can make more money there. Another aspect which inspires them to do so is that they can also travel and visit new places. The new generation *theyyakkar* have received institutionalised education but the number of those having higher education is quite low and sometimes they drop out of these institutions.

*Mudi* is the headgear of a *theyyam*. A *theyyam* becomes complete only after the ‘*mudivekal*’ (ritually wearing the headgear) and once it is done the *mudi* can only be taken after all the rituals are finished. *Mudivekal* (placing the *mudi*) of Muchilottu Bhagavathi *Theyyam* is usually done around 10-11am and the *mudi azhikal* (removing the *mudi*) can be done only after all other *theyyams* remove their *mudi*. But others do not finish this ritual soon as they know that they can get more money from worshippers as long as they stay in their attire. Due to this, Muchilottu Bhagavathi’s ‘*mudiazhikal*’ will even extend up to 12 pm and the *koladhari* becomes tired. Once during a Kaliyattam in Thrikarippur Muchilottu *kavu*, an areca nut was kept while tying the *mudi* of Muchilottu Bhagavathi *Theyyam*. This was done by other *theyyakkar* with the *koladhari* to cheat him and ruin his performance. An artiste cannot balance his head and concentrate on other things when something is put inside the *Mudi*. After that incident, that man retired from performing *theyyam*. Years of performance could not make him rich but led to some health issues where his disk got some complaint. Another performer committed suicide by jumping in front of a train due to some health-related problems.

The majority of *theyyakkar* are not rich compared to the people from other castes. They are also worried that their children need to take long leave from schools during the *theyyam* season and due to this they cannot excel in studies like other students. The new generation performers believe that the certificates their children can get thorough education will have greater influence in the future than ritual proficiency and therefore they want to give their children the best education and send them to professional institutions for higher education. They too have the desires of a middle class Malayali family and dream of a two-storey house and a car and also expect good treatment facilities at hospitals. But most of the performers I met were finding it difficult to make their ends meet. Though one or two persons from the community have become rich most of others are trying their best to lead a good life. Even today, there are people from upper castes who don’t drink water from a *theyyakkaran*’s house. Today, an individual have to bear the responsibility of a four-member family where once it was a group’s responsibility and without a steady income it is impossible to run a family. Today, only the performance of *theyyam* exists but the reciprocal relationships that existed among different *tharavad* and *theyyakkar* other than the ‘*kolu*’ have all vanished. *Tharavadukal* have become deserted miniature homes with a kitchen, ‘*kottil*’ and ‘*padinjatta*’ and they open only once a month. Birth or death is no more part of these homes and the community is deprived of the rice or paddy they once used to get as their rights on these occasions. Most

of the rituals associated with pregnancy have also disappeared as false belief and performers do not get paddy or clothes in return for what they do and even if they get them, they cannot fulfil their needs.

As part of the migration of Keralites to the Gulf countries from the beginning of the 1990s there was a huge flow of money from these countries to North Malabar. *Kaliyattam* and *kavu* are now becoming places for rich people to spend their money. Once performed by erecting performing spaces either around a tree or on simple floors, *theyyam* is now being taken to concrete buildings floored with tiles and slabs of marble. Trees which were once abundant in *kavu* are cut down and concrete buildings are replacing them. *Tharavadukal* have lost their cultural value as an institution providing life to a community. They are reconstructed and turned into *theyyam*-worshipping ‘temples’ (*kshethram*) where deities are installed. At the performing spaces of *kaliyattam* of the lower castes where once the Brahmins never entered, several *poojas* and rituals are carried out under their guidance. *Kavu* is transformed into temples. For example, Poomala Baghavathikaavu becomes Poomala Bagavathi Kshethram and Muchilottukavu becomes Muchilottu Bhagavathi Kshethram.

Though there are efforts to bring people from different communities together by making committees concentrated at the *kavu* of some *tharavad* and thus making *kaliyattam* a platform for a ‘consolidation of communities’, *kaliyattam* is still becoming a celebration to spend hundreds of thousands of rupees.

While the world around a *theyyakkaran* changes very fast and this change is universal and common, people in general still retain the attitude that a performer should never change. This was clearly observable during a debate – organised by the North Kerala Malaya community welfare organisation – against ‘Marketing *Theyyam* as a product’. The state secretary had presented the topic where he said that the debate was an attempt to voice concern over the present state of *theyyam* when it is lifted from its ritual origins and badly showcased in TV channels and as part of various celebrations. It was also an attempt to face the other communities that accused the *theyyam* community for making such a situation of the ritual. “Our organisation strongly opposes the unfavourable marketing of *theyyam*. We cannot do anything if other *tharavadukal* decide not to commence *kaliyattam* and therefore we should not present it as vulgar”, he said. The debate was inaugurated by the Chairman of Payyannur Municipality where the Left Democratic Front is in power. Therefore, throughout his talk there he attempted to combine leftist ideology into it. He reminded the audience about Swami Vivekanandan who called Kerala a mental asylum when untouchability and the caste-landlord system were prevalent in the state. He also broached

the fact that once people belonging to the lower castes – including *theyyam* performers – were prevented from entering temples and when today the community wants to hold on to their rituals, this fact should also be taken into consideration.

The representatives from Kerala's mainstream parties CPI(M), Congress and BJP also spoke on the topic. The CPI(M) representative reminded everyone about the history and said that *theyyam* should be taken out of the walls of temples and castes and a performer should be known as an artiste to the world. His talk mainly focused on the plights his father had to go through in life just because he belonged to a lower caste and the potential danger were such a situation to prevail in society.

The Congress representative opposed presenting *theyyam* badly. He was of the opinion that a *theyyam* is God's reincarnation and it should not be taken out of its performing space as a ritual. According to him, the art (he used that word instead of ritual) does not only belong to a performer or a particular caste as it is carried out with the blessings of the idols of the God installed in a temple. He praised *theyyam* performers as the best team of artistes, but also shared his concern that there are no studies conducted in the area of *thottam* and we are losing the art. He said it is really painful to note that nowadays *thottampattu* is compressed by performers. He also urged the artistes to take the responsibility to maintain the divinity of the art.

The BJP representative, a non-Keralite belonging to the Brahmin community, was a member of the Kundora Thantric family. His talk focused mainly on the unity of the Hindu community. He said that at present there is no unity among the Hindus which is why so many atrocities are happening against Hindu culture. He strongly opposed the High Court rule banning '*Nayattu*' (hunting) which is an integral part of Vayanattu Kulavan *theyyam*. He also said that it is the responsibility of experts on Tantrism and the Hindu believers to handle religious issues. He also added that the court and the government should not indulge in such matters and said that the believers' decision is ultimate.



After him spoke a PhD scholar on *theyyam* whose research was among the Malaya community. She praised them and their rituals but talked much less on the topic of the debate. She said, “It is the community that has the right to take decisions on what is to be done about whatever it has inherited”.

The final speaker was Tharananelloor Namboodiri who rebuked *theyyam* performers and the democratic system followed by India. He was of the opinion that *theyyam* was not an art to be known to the world and he accused the *theyyakkar* for being responsible for marketing *theyyam*. Everyone who spoke after him followed suit and held the performers responsible for turning the ritual into an art product in this consumerist society. The debate was limited to a platform where some well known people spoke their minds.

Only one speaker touched upon the difficulties faced by the community. The *theyyakkar* were expecting a chance to ask questions and when questioning time began only one speaker was left on the stage. The *theyyam* performers who were present shared their disappointment over the immediate departure of speakers after their presentation and on how the debate was hijacked. The organisation representing the *theyyakkar* was unable to address the problems and situations that compel the community to perform at various events without even taking proper care of their health. By analysing the speeches at the debate one can understand the attitude society at large has towards these performers and the contradictions they face. Without addressing the issues that lead performers to turn *theyyam* into a consumerist product, the (non) debate tried to maintain among the attendees a mindset that a *theyyakkaran* should simply remain an obedient and devoted performer who should never engage in other occupations such as that of a doctor or engineer. It also failed to reveal that other members of the same society – who are supposed to be devotees of *theyyam* – are transforming themselves into mere spectators. Moreover, it is doubtful whether the debate addressed the younger generation: those who enjoy seeing and enjoying *theyyam* just as an art form.

### **3.5 Summary of the chapter**

This chapter discussed different dimensions of *theyyam*. It was also an attempt to elaborate how from being a religious ritual, *theyyam* has been transformed, first into a ritualistic art, then to a folk traditional ritual, the performer into an artiste, and a believer into a spectator. The concluding part discusses how it became a consumer product in the society. The full impact of this chapter will only be realised once it is

read along with the next chapter which deals with the topic of how differently artistes and believers identify and internalise *theyyam*. The first section of the present chapter details how *theyyam* was transformed into an art due to the influences of state and academia and later into a product in the tourism sector. The second section is an attempt to introduce the reader to the performers and it discusses the transformation of the performers. The surroundings and structure of *kaliyattam* and *theyyam* performing spaces constitute the topic of the third session. The final and fourth sessions brings forth the present situation of performers and the places of *kaliyattam*. The changes taking place inside and outside *theyyam* itself is the main focus in this chapter.

## Chapter 4

### Tracing the present day *theyyam*: A walk through North Malabar consciousness

Just Google the word *theyyam*. You will be flooded with links to sites that speak volumes about it. *Theyyam* is something special to the natives of North Malabar. It is described sometimes as simply as an art form, at other times as a folk dance, a folk art. But *theyyam* is also considered as a folk traditional art or a traditional performing art and even as a ritual art. But whatever it is called, these sites say further that, “*theyyam* is an unavoidable part of each and every human being of north Malabar.”

Yes, *theyyam* is an unavoidable part of a North Malabari’s life. But there are considerable variations in how different generations conceive of it and this chapter deals with these differences concerning *theyyam*. I have tried to discuss in previous chapters about the common aspects of *theyyam* and the journey of *theyyam* from a folk religion to folk traditional art. Now, this chapter explores the views of the *theyyam* specialists and other participants of *theyyam*. Here comes the description of how the participants and performers try to identify, internalize and articulate the *theyyam* in two very different eras. When it was a folk religion, the participants were devotees and the performers were “enacting” or “impersonating” (as *koladhari*) the *theyyam* deities. Over time, the role of the *koladhari* changed into that of a performing artist, the devotees becoming audience or mere spectators. The data for this chapter are collected from purposeful and casual group interviews and group discussions conducted among the locals of this area. I have taken the age below 15 years as younger generation, those between 15-30 years of age as the young generation, those between 30 and 60 as middle-aged generation and old generation includes those between 60 to 80 years of age. The persons above the age of 80 are considered as the older generation for the purpose of my study. But I have been fortunate to talk and discuss with centenarians, too. The locals from the study area are divided into *theyyam* performers and *theyyam* participants. But still, they are considered as a single entity of society who participates in the *theyyam*. It is very important to realise that the give-and-take between performers and participants have influenced their views towards the concept of *theyyam*.

#### 4.1 Internalisation, identification and articulation of *theyyam* by the participants of different generations

As I have mentioned in the previous chapter: most *tharavad* have already been transformed to trusts. This section is based on the interactions with members of these trusts. I had ample opportunities to be a part of the general body when meetings were held by such trusts. Some of the group interviews with selected members of the trusts were very informative and helpful. In addition, school visits, informal interviews with students and my participation in public programmes made useful links for this data collection.

The concept of *tharavad* comes from consanguines and affines living under the same roof. The members of the *tharavad* follow the same order of inheritance (*dhayakramam*) and are closely connected with rituals. But for many reasons the members of each *tharavad* are scattered nowadays. The main aim of the *tharavad* trust is to bring the dispersed members to the gatherings of the trust.

The house units which stayed together have a prime deity and it will usually be a female goddess. There were myths about the formation of these *tharavad* and the acceptance of their prime deity. These myths and stories became a prominent reason to strengthen the bonds between the members of the house and their devotion to the prime deity. The duty-based social relationship in a village was based on the concept of houses, i.e., *tharavad*. By analyzing the *thottam* songs, we can understand the interconnected relations between the prime deity, the *tharavad* and *kavu*. Some of these myths and their descriptions should be mentioned here.

The prime deity of Kolathunadu is Thiruvarkkatt Bhagavathi, a goddess also known as Thai of Kolaswaroopam. Thai of Kolaswaroopam is represented by Madayi Kavu,<sup>85</sup> which was a prime authority and the transaction centre of Kolathunadu. According to an ancient Kolathunad proverb, the one who is behind the birth of a person is Thai – none other than Thiruvarkkat Bagavathi – and the one who should rear the new-born is the king, Kolathiri. This proverb is mentioned in the *thottam* song of Pulimaranja Thondachan Theyyam which portrays the profound relationship between the prime deity and the *tharavad* members. In the *thottam* songs, the *karanavar* of Paranthatt Chenicheri approaches Madayi Kavu for an agristic servant (*adiyala*) to work in their field. There he asks the elder person whether he can adopt a

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<sup>85</sup> A sacred grove.

female servant (*adiyathi*) to his *tharavad*. The elder person suggests that he raises this question directly with the servants of the *kavu*. At first no one was willing to follow the *karnavar* because they wouldn't like to part with their prime deity: Thiruvarkkat Bagavathi and their family. Finally, one among them, Kavile Vallikudichi, consents to go with the *karanavar*. She explains, "We are supposed to go because our mother is Thai and the one who has the right to rear us as father is the king or the representatives of the king." After reaching his *tharavad* Paranthatt Chenicheri *tharavattamma* welcomes the new servant, Kavile Vallikudichi, as a member of their *tharavad* and renames her Paranthatta Vallikkudichi. The narrative in the *thottam* song of the interactions between the servant and the *karanavar* relates how the house, the prime deity and the members of the house are deeply connected.

Another myth concerns the origin of the *theyyam* named "Pambooriyamma & her child" and is related to the Kallarakambikkanath Kaliyanthil *tharavad*. Once Pambooriyamma had gone to have a bath after her pollution days related to menarche, and she was unaware that her child also following her. Both got killed in a flood due to heavy rain. Later they were worshipped because it was found that they became gods. The renovated *tharavad* members shared their memories about the last *theyyam* celebration during this year's trust meeting. But the new generation – those under 30 years old – were unaware of the myths and rituals of *theyyam*. The generation above the age group 30 had least some knowledge but missed the essential details. During my fieldwork, I used to visit the area of *theyyam* performances and ask the roaming youths about the name of *theyyam* being performed. Rarely, they answered without consulting others. The *kunjitheyyam*<sup>86</sup> visit people's homes during the month of Chingam in the Malayalam calendar. Although the *kunji theyyam* were eliminated in the Cheruvathoor area, I chanced to be with them in Payyanur. Nowadays, only *kunji theyyam* of the Malaya community make home visits. The first day I accompanied the *kunji theyyam* was a working day. In the homes we visited, mostly women and children below the age of 3 were present although we encountered a few above 70 years of age. As and when the *theyyam* reaches a home, the most senior performer asks for permission to perform. With the permission of the family members they perform according to the song. Then the elder lady of the home prepares a solution known as *guruthi* by mixing ash with water. They bring it out holding it in one hand and a lighted wick in other. They place the wick on the south side and pour the *guruthi* around it. This ritual is called *Guruthi Ozhikkal*. The *theyyakkar* actually had to instruct the women in the 20 to 40 age bracket to do this in the correct manner. The others were not sufficiently confident to do it themselves.

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<sup>86</sup>*Theyyam* performed by children.

Besides its fundamental grounding in the *tharavad*, *theyyam* has inseparable relations with agriculture. Most of the *theyyam* deities are considered as protectors of agriculture & livestock. The *theyyam* named Kalichekon, which is performed by the Pulaya caste is an example of this category. This *theyyam* visits homes on the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the Malayalam month of Thulam and blesses the cattle in the crib. But there is a diminishing trend in the number of homes with crib and cattle. When a Pulaya person transforms to *theyyam* the onlookers' consideration should be towards *theyyam* and not on the Pulaya who performs *theyyam*. But some women of higher caste, with whom I had a discussion, are not ready to accept this. They debated the fact that the person inside the *theyyam* outfit is still Pulaya. The essence of the debate was that they were not ready to reuse the glass used by the *theyyam* to drink water. But, according to members of the older generation, the utensils touched by *theyyam* were considered in the past to be very precious. This item of belief was shared by one of the grandmothers of the area. When I asked her, "did Pulaya or *theyyam* come here yesterday?" they answered, "No, *theyyam* came".

I organized a group interview with senior citizens residing near the locality of a *kavu* during *kaliyattam*. There I got the first glimpse of the distinction of their knowledge about *theyyam* and how they conceive it. One of the men present was a 32-year old photographer. Although he was not from the *theyyam* community, he started his journey with them while he was in eighth grade. As he used to roam with *theyyam* from childhood, he is very familiar with almost all of the *kavukal* and *tharavad*. He has immense knowledge about *thottam* songs and *theyyam*, which can be considered on par with that of aged folk. So, he joined in the discussions on the same wavelength as the octogenarians. He is a living example to point out that knowledge of *theyyam* is not based on age, but on the intimacy with it.

I have collected some *theyyam* related proverbs, sayings, quotes etc. from the senior citizens of my study area. These sayings and descriptions are as follows.

- "Like Kuliyan pampers a kid"

Gulikan is a *theyyam* with bell in hand and dressed with tender leaves of coconut and a face-mask. This *theyyam* feeds a child doll made of straw and lovingly gives it an oil bath. The same pampering Gulikanthen proceeds to stab the child with his weapon as a punishment for the disobedience of the child – and laughs louder. It makes the viewer feel both fear and humour at the same time. Kuliyanan is considered a saviour and a

devastator. This quote is used to denote those who sometimes pamper their kids and sometimes punish them.

- “Like the jumping of Paniyan to burning charcoal”

Paniyan is performed as gap filler on the intervals between major *theyyams*. These gaps occur when the charcoals are burned to a heap in the *kavu*. Paniyan wears a skirt of tender leaves and a facemask. The *theyyam* of Theechaamundi performs in the burning charcoal. Then Paniyan laughs out during the performance without displaying any fear. But if someone pushes him to do the same, saying “try to jump”, he replies, “don’t be greedy to jump into the burning charcoal of others. This is easy for me”. Those who always say that they are ready to do something and then excuse themselves are described by this saying.

- “Don’t send back one who came, don’t call back one who left”

This is one of the orations of Muththappan *theyyam*. It is performed at homes without fireworks or much celebration. Muththappan is very simple in his words. Normally, *theyyams* make their oration in very ornate language. But Muththappan always uses simple words and local speech which are understandable to the layman. Muththappan says that, come to meet me by knowing the core inside and not seeing the flashy outside. This is used to distinguish between persons who are on our side and those who are against us or jealous of us.

- “Is it Kothamoori?”

Kothamoori is being performed in the *tharavad* of villages during the Malayalam month Kanni after the harvest. This is based on the belief that the Godavari Cow descended to earth from heaven with the Paniyar who are the shepherds. It is amusing when the *theyyakaran* follow and joke with the Paniyan, another *theyyam* wearing a cow mask. Grandmothers of the *tharavad* use this saying to depict stubborn kids and vigorously active cows.

- “State of *kavu* after *theyyam*”

*Theyyam* is not a one-day affair. It continues for 3 or 4 days with crowds and their joy. The silence in the *kavu* after *theyyam* produces a feeling of being lost. Family members enjoy the mirth and joy when they live with those they love and care about. But the same ones clash on property issues. This saying is used to describe such a situation or similar experiences of discord.

- “As we got the signal (*adayalam*), we had to perform”

Getting the signal to perform is very important in *theyyam* performance. It is an important ceremony of calling the *theyyakkaran* of the village to get a promise to perform *theyyam*

on a particular day. To make sure that he keeps his promise, a small amount of money is given to the *theyyakkaran* with betel leaves and coconut. This is accepted by the *theyyakkaran* who announces the date of *theyyam*. It is his responsibility to perform the *theyyam* at any cost as he accepted this money. This is often said when a person is unable to fulfil his promises. He may have to promise to do the same without thinking about woes and loss.

- “*Theeyan* grows to *theyyam*”

This is a proof of the dominance of the Theeya cast in *theyyam*. The duties of *Theeyan* (the individual who belongs to theeya caste) for *theyyam* includes collecting tender coconuts and leaves. The preparation of firewood is also their duty. They keep *theyyam* very close to heart. Stories on the resurrection of Theeyan after death as *theyyam* is very common. Theeyan participates actively in each and every step of *theyyam* from the first to the last. This saying is to denote the offering of Theeyan to *theyyam* in a fully devoted manner of body and soul.

- “*Theyyam* is with Velan”

There are different communities who are authorized to perform *theyyam*. There is an unwritten rule according to which *theyyam* can only be performed by certain castes. It is believed that the Velan cast is the first caste who had the rights of *theyyam*. And all other castes come to the field by requesting to the rulers for permission to perform. The Velan still try their best to keep the ancient style in rituals, dressings, outfits, using drums and *dholaks* (two-headed drums), etc.

- “Goddess Saraswathi is on the tongue of Malayan”

Malayans who perform *theyyam* are very blessed with their literal and musical abilities. They call the devotees near to them and praise and talk in very pleasing manner. They are masters in presenting the praises of *tharavad* and prime deities in a very beautiful, musical language.

- “Play of Malayan”

While a common saying among villagers, this is a negative one. This may be an outcome of a collective experience of the old generation from these communities. The saying denotes someone displaying exaggerated obedience without actually meaning it.

- “Like Oorpazhassi and Vettakkaramakan”

Oorpazhazzi and Vettakkaramakan are the two *theyyam* who begin, perform and end together. So it is said about inseparable friends.



- “Giving sword after climax”  
During the climax points of *theyyam* performance, the priest who is fasting (*nottirikkuka*) has to relinquish his sword, arrow, bow etc. at the correct moment. Any failure to do this is considered to be a severe offence. So, extreme care has to be given in this sequence. This is an advice to those who fail to do the right thing at the right time.
- “Started *Kaliyattam*”  
*Kaliyattam* is a joyful time with cheering crowds and the loud sounds of drums and fireworks. Similar situations may occur in the presence of someone in families. The sounds of clashes and quarrels from neighbours are described by this saying. It is also a pre-assumption that it happens upon the arrival of particular persons.
- “Performing like Veeran”  
Veeran Theyyam is considered to be a ghost of Brahmin. This personage appears by wearing an umbrella and *poonool* (holy thread). Then the priest tries to tie it down and the Veeran runs around. This is used to make fun of persons who make much noise and fury without reason.
- “Like reciting *thottam*”  
*Thottam* are tender *theyyam*, performed by circling slowly three times around the *kavu* with *Komaram*. This is called “*chuzhalal*” and it takes a long time to complete. It is used as an irritating comment towards anyone who walks very slowly and lags behind. Normally they say, “why do you *chuzhalal* like a *thottam*, speed up!”
- “Vannan who lost God”  
The outfits of *theyyam* of Vannan are very colourful and beautiful. But some performers cannot shine even with attractive costumes. This saying is used about the *theyyakkaran* who is unable to perform with a vibe in the climax. This is also used about someone who looks tired on stage, lacking stamina.
- “Possessed by *theyyam*” (or possessed by Kooliyan)  
Even calm and cool persons become rude and active on impersonating the *theyyam*. They run around with protruded eyes and pointed fingers. Villagers who are very familiar to these transitions use this saying about persons who get excited without reason.
- “Taking care of *thottam*”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup>*Thottampattu* or *thottam* songs are the anecdotes of the deity which are recited in the form of a song with the accompaniment of *chenda*. In Malayalam, *thottam* literally means feeling, creation etc. These songs can be considered as hymns with different outfits and accessories; they wake up the goddess and conjure up the spirit in performers’ bodies. *Thottam* can at the same time be the performer too. Before the actual performance of the

*Thottam* are tender *theyyam*. When they finish their performance, they are carried back stage without touching the ground. Referring to this practice, the proverb denotes someone who is glorified above others.

- “Are you staying for *thottam*?”

Staying for *thottam* is an unavoidable part of *theyyam* orders. *Thottam* of *theyyam* which is to be performed on next morning, have to recite the *thottam* by standing in front of the *kavu*. When a person starts to mention some troubling issues on happy occasions, they get scolded by using this quote.

- “Even if you hide behind trees, you will be caught by the arrow”

After the different movements (*attaprakaram*), *theyyam* places a mark (with turmeric paste) on the forehead of the devotees who reciprocate by giving money as offerings (*dakshina*). But some clever people stay behind so as to avoid giving it. Once the *theyyam* found out a hiding devotee he would say, “I will find you, if you try to hide away, as if it is from Rama’s arrow”. So, it is used as a joke on others who try to hide out.

- “He started his fasting”

*Anthithiriyar* (*notiirippukaran*, one who is on fasting) is the prime priest in the ceremony of *theyyam* in the *kavu*. He gets immersed wholly in this and forgets everything else. Similarly, this saying describes the person who is singularly involved with one aim and works with dedication. *Notiirikkuka* means to fast with all its cleanness and belief.

- “Arrival of *theyyam*”

To watch the arrival of *theyyam* in its colorful costumes with *thirumudi* (holy headgear) is to behold something which is extremely beautiful. It is used to describe the arrival of a well-dressed lady.

- “It is better to cut *thampuran*’s palm tree than mine”

*Theyyakkaran* has lived under the control of *thampuran* (the ruler) and they were called *kudikidappukaran*. But, due to some resentment, the *thampuran* came with a woodcutter to cut the palm of a *kudikidappukaran*. As he has no right to speak up against the *thampuran*, he expressed his anger in an indirect way by saying, “It is better to cut the palm on *thampuran*’s property than that on my property.” There is a hint in this Malayalam usage atinsulting the *thampuran*’s father.

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*theyyam* with accessories and clothes on, the performer appears in front of the shrine and sings. This is called the *thottam* of the respective *theyyam*. To reach the final *theyyam* form he has to undergo this procedure.

- You can leave as you got your remuneration (*kolu*)  
*Kolu* is the term for the remuneration given to the *theyyakkaran*. As they get this money, they normally depart for their own home. This saying is used towards the workers by their employer (*karyasthan*), for simply hanging around after finishing a job.

I used these quotes as a litmus paper that dips into the awareness of new generation both younger and young to see how deeply the *theyyam* exist in their day to day life. I have enquired among members of the new generation, whether these quotes are familiar to them. As per my evaluation these are not in use by them. Most of them had not even heard these sayings.

When I was in the company of children, one child told me that he lost his ‘*navarathri vrutham*’ (this is a nine-day fast (meat abstinence) observed during the month of October for the Hindu goddesses Shakti which is observed all over India) because he had eaten chicken by mistake. He also said that, “I will be protected by *theyyam* even if not by gods”. Everyone agreed to it by laughing. If we analyze his words, we can find a clue to what separates the *theyyam* from god. It also exemplifies how these two concepts differ.

Let us look into an experience shared by an informant, who had gone to a village to act in a drama. As he reached there in the morning, he had enough free time till the drama to be staged at night. So he visited a *kavu* where *theyyam* was being performed. Very few people were present there at that time. There was a scene which made him interested to watch. A *theyyam* was sitting on a stool and someone was talking to him. While overhearing this conversation, he came to understand that the *koladhari* was actually a construction worker and their subject of discussion concerned the completion of the work that they had undertaken. This becomes a reason for that informant to rethink the status of the *theyyam*: that it became a profession.

During the 1980s and ‘90s the Communist party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)) and Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishath (KSSP), an atheist organization discouraged their members and supporters from performing or sponsoring *theyyam*. Thus, the participation of the new generation declined. Almost all OBCs &

SC castes are followers of the Communist party and the party was not much supportive for conducting *theyyam* in *kavu&tharavad*. But later the party changed their stand towards *theyyam* and it now has a more positive attitude to it. This policy change in the CPI(M), the dominant political party in the Kannur and Kasaragod districts, has played a significant role in enhancing the level of interest in *theyyam*.

Another informant divided 60 years of Kerala recent history into three 20-year periods and gave the following explanation. The period of the first 20 years is notable for the decision on land reformation. The partition of the *tharavad* then reached its peak stage. Furthermore, the seized land was distributed to the poor people. The next 20 years were marked by the economic boom in the Arabian Gulf. Malayali began to migrate for work in foreign countries. This created a sudden cash flow to Kerala and created new money-centres. The last 20 years are distinguished as the era of globalization. At the same time Kerala became the first state in India governed by a communist party. According to the informant, all these changes made their own impact on *theyyam*. At that time, usual topics of school essay-writing competitions were “The global village” or “The world under one umbrella” or something similar. I went to school at the end of the 1990s and as a student in that period participated in these topics. The *tharavad* started to separate during the 1990s and were later renovated to family temples. Almost all the *tharavad* which are now known as family temples were renovated between 1990 - 2015. After renovation, the installation of new idols and other karmas has been done by Brahmin priests, whereas originally the senior *karanavar* of that *tharavad* installed them. For example, *theyyam* came with Viruthi, a Dalit lady, who installed it. And no Brahmins were involved in the ritual functions. But when it was renovated, Brahmins from local temples were present and they did all the karmic rituals. The Brahmins also inaugurated a new custom of *Ganapathihomam* (a ritual commencement). Nowadays there are many attempts at converting *theyyam* deities into Hindu gods and the *theyyakkavu* into temples. These are intentional efforts at glossing Hinduism over *theyyam* and they contribute to the decreasing trend in the involvement of followers of other religions.<sup>88</sup> In past, *theyyam* always welcomed everyone without distinguishing caste or creed. In this connection it is very important to note the presence of Mappila *theyyam* such as Kalanthan Mukri & Ummachi *theyyam*. *Theyyam* addressed Muslim society by calling out “oh... my city of Madayi...” (“*ente madayi nagarame...*”) *Theyyam* was never an alien subject to the Muslim society of North Malabar. But now the presence of Muslims is very rare in *theyyam* performing spaces.

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<sup>88</sup> This view is shared by Raghavan Payyanad (2001:12). The native religion of North Kerala is slowly undergoing the process of cultural osmosis with the impact of Hinduism as an organised religion. As a result, *theyyam* may assimilate into Hinduism or *theyyam* may take a new shape which is admissible to Hinduism also.

The caste system is returning to Kerala with all its powers but in a different form. The number of members of the upper castes who are against caste-based reservation is increasing at an alarming rate. It is worth noting that the *theyyam* in a way reconstructs the caste system during the commencement of the *kalyattam* while at the same time heavily criticizing it during the performance. For example, Pottan *theyyam* is connected to a Pulayan who talks to Sankaracharyar, a Nambuthiri monk. Devotees who fail to understand the *theyyam* sayings and the background to them consider Pottan *theyyam* as just a continuation of old customs. If the devotee is from an upper caste they consider themselves to occupy a higher position from which they can instruct those of lower castes to do *theyyam* and to give wages. These rights of *theyyam* are divided based on the *tharavad* and these *tharavad* themselves represent various castes in society and divide labour on a caste basis. Although the caste-based jobs are not the same now as they were in the past, *theyyam* performers still do their duties based on their caste. In other words, the caste culture in Kerala has become increasingly intensified.<sup>89</sup>

A North Malabar devotee used to offer a prayer to *theyyam*, their prime deity, at each and every moment of life, especially on waking up in the morning and before going to sleep at night. This has now changed. They go to pray in *theyyakkavu* on *theyyam*-performing days, they light a Kerala traditional bronze oil lamp once in a month, or pray to *theyyam* in critical situations. So, preserving *theyyam* with all its ancestral properties becomes a duty of the *theyyam* performer. Now *theyyam* continues as a curiosity of people who come from other parts to watch it. But for them it is just another art form, not a belief. According to Dinesan Vadakkiniyil (2009), there is a recent revival of this art form as it has been introduced in many universities in departments such as “Folklore studies”. Now there is increased acceptance of this dance form as people want to identify themselves as artists. Certain multinational companies have even started to sponsor *theyyam* as a traditional form of art.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Lukose (2005); Sivanandan (1979); Kodoth (2008); Deshpande(2000).

<sup>90</sup> Vadakkiniyil 2009: 23-24.

#### 4.2 Articulation, internalization and identification of *theyyam* by the *theyyakkar* in different generations

Now let us consider how a young boy of a *theyyam* performing family who faced very depressing incidents articulates *theyyam* in his views and life. His father was a drunkard and severely down with illness. He got help from local people to get his life back. His cousin, who used to do *theyyam*, committed suicide as he was unable to perform *theyyam* because of bone issues. Facing such negative situations that boy is very much worried about money. Although he dreams of getting a job after his studies, he is unable to attend the classes regularly during *theyyam* time. As his father stopped performing *theyyam* himself, the boy has to continue the same as per the custom. Appreciation of his performances inspires him and he takes this as a way to make money. Others value the performance style rather than the completion of the rituals. They pay more attention to appearances.

According to my *theyyakkar* informants, the income from *theyyam* is minimal and they keep part time jobs to support their family.<sup>91</sup> *Kaliyattam* is a result of unending and tiresome work and the collective efforts of so many *theyyam* performers. The long working hours without proper food or sleep causes serious health problems, say the new young *theyyakkar*. They consume alcohol to overcome the strain which leads to addiction. But they never get a suitable remuneration from the organizers. They should be satisfied with the offerings given by the devotees. A performer cannot take off his “*mudi*” to take rest till the performance has run its full course. If the audience dislikes it or some error occurs, the performer’s livelihood is threatened. Besides, performers are sometimes cheated by friends or colleagues. Let me describe the experience of a performer who was ready to retire and for his final performance he selected Muchilot Bhagavathi. His performance was very famous even in faraway places. But he was unable to perform at his best in this very last performance. Someone played a trick on him and placed an areca nut under the “*mudi*” he wore. So, it became almost impossible to balance the *mudi* and perform in an energetic manner. As per rule of *theyyam* performers cannot take their *mudi* off in while a performance is unfolding. To do so is considered a bad omen and marks the performer as corrupted. So, he finished his performance well in advance and left the scene, humiliated, without accepting offerings.

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<sup>91</sup> A detailed study was conducted by Jacob John (2015) on *theyyakkar* by the title Socio-Economic and health problems of theyyam dancers belonging to scheduled castes of kerala

Another performer was in real anger towards the new generation. Young performers are not familiar with thottampattu and are unable to recite them by heart. They copy the songs, two or three days before the performance. But various styles of singing cannot be learnt properly in such a short period. More than that, the emotional content can be expressed only if the performers know the meaning of what they sing. These songs are a mixture of scripts in Malayalam, Thulu and Sanskrit. Today's children do not even have enough knowledge in Malayalam. So, they cannot understand the colloquial usages in these songs if they try to learn them quickly. We can analyze this as a consequence of the current style of schooling. The present educational system was adopted to produce a working class for colonial governance. Although more than one language is being taught in schools, pupils are not even well versed in their mother tongue. There are so many living examples of the same.

The young generation gives another version of the same situation. The *thottampattu* or rituals of *theyyam* do not serve anything in today's society. Members of other castes are not aware of the *thottam* in its full sense like before. So, nobody in the *theyyam* community is able to correct or question the flaws. They are only interested in the performance of *theyyakkaran*. How "beautifully" and "energetically" the performer dances, is what is appreciated. Nowadays organizers are reluctant to give the agreed remuneration after a performance. They bargain to reduce the amount. But at the same time, they are ready to spend hundreds of thousandson bringing cine-stars to conduct stage-shows and music programs. Sometimes the organizers even change the *theyyam* schedule for the program of cine-stars. The *theyyakkaran* are very angry and irritated in this. They are compelled to continue the performance to protect their belief. To the new generation it is a matter of preserving their rights. So, it is natural that they try to make as much money as they can.

The *theyyakkaran* are much bothered about the remuneration and recognition (*kolu*) they need. In the past, *theyyam* was an integral part of each village. So *theyyam* was the responsibility of the village as a whole and not of the *theyyakkaran* alone. The village "laymen" helped the *theyyakkaran* whenever they were in poor situations. Each *tharavad* used to give a share to the *theyyakkaran*. But the disintegration of the *tharavad* was a major blow to *theyyam*. As the joint families split up into nuclear families the *theyyam* lost its importance. Consequently, the *theyyakkaran* were compelled to find other ways to make ends meet. What they received from the devotees after performances were small amounts of offerings and remunerations.

Importantly, there was a custom in the past of remunerating the castes that provide services to the *tharavad* on a monthly basis. To provide these services was their right.<sup>92</sup> The disintegration of the *tharavad* became a reason to end the occupations designed to various castes; i.e., the *kulathozhil*. Conversely, as performers got the chance to do other jobs, the *tharavad* also began to disintegrate.

Every *theyyam* has its own gestures and postures. For example, holding the *paricha* (shield) and sword by Vairajathan Theyyam is very special. The holding and use of this *paricha* is not like a normal person would do the same. The aesthetic impact of the actions that are performed cannot be expressed in words. I got three chances to watch this particular *theyyam* – the Vairajathan – during the period of research. But, only one *theyyakkaran* held the *paricha* in the right way and performed as it is demanded. While enquiring about the situation, I came to know that the *theyyakkaran* came to that place to replace his deceased uncle who had held the right to perform as it was his right, in the name of his *tharavad*. The performer came from a distant place and he was unfamiliar with Vairajathan Theyyam. He came for the performance from a place where this *theyyam* is not being performed.

The same issue was mentioned by another *theyyakkaran*. Members who had left the *tharavad* came back to regain their *theyyam* rights. But, as they were not familiar with the customs and rituals, they dropped the rights and left again. On some occasions, however, they were compelled to accept the rights anyway.

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<sup>92</sup> See Miller (1954: 413) for a discussion of rights. The right (duty) of a particular family to perform services is called *desam avakasam* – the right in the village. *Avakasam* carries the meaning of ‘right’ or ‘privilege’ rather than obligation.



#### 4.3 Examining how the disintegration of *tharavad* reflects on society and in turn on the ritual performance

The Joint Family Abolition Act came into existence by the end of 1976 and it is undoubtedly the chief reason for the disintegration of the *tharavad*. At one stroke, almost all of the *tharavad* became exhausted because of the issues on land partitions. There used to be strong bonds between the *tharavad* members based on love and concern. These bonds of trust dissolved when the property was divided and what replaced them was greed for property. The *tharavad* with huge properties fared the worst. People were quick to break the bonds to get the property. As a result there were clashes, court cases and even cases of murder. Due to this clash for property, a woman got killed in Thazhekkattu Mana. The formation of Thekke Periyatt *Tharavad* was a result of an attempted murder. A woman of Periyatt *Tharavad* also faced a murder attempt. She eloped from her *tharavad* to save her life. But, while leaving the *tharavad*, she lit a wick from “*kottilakam*” and took it with her. This caused the formation of Thekke Periyatt *Tharavad*. But, by the end of 2015, this became just a small structure with a *Kottilakam*, kitchen and corridor. Still they light the lamp once in a month and consider it as a space for *kaliyattam*. Members of this *tharavad* created their own nuclear families after getting their share of property from the *tharavad*. During the last *kaliyattam* conducted after reinstallation, it is unbelievable that the family members couldn't identify each other.

*Tharavad* are such rare places where in the past three or four generations lived together. Grandparents used to tell stories of *theyyams* to the younger generations. The devotion to *theyyam* was transmitted from one generation to the next. This knowledge which they used to gain from childhood strengthened their bonding with *theyyam*. But the disintegration of joint families effected a breakup of this chain of transmission. A geographical spot and its myths are collective knowledge of that location and it was preserved by *tharavad*. But, by the disintegration of *tharavad* and the formation of nuclear families, each family became a small cocoon. And they lost the chances to know about *theyyam* as they had been able to in the past. These changes also made an impact on agriculture. While dividing property, some will get five cents of paddy field (some 200 square metres) as their share, which is suitable for constructing a house. And in most cases, this building will occupy the whole five cents. At most, there will be five members in that household.

In previous chapters I have outlined how the British colonial era legal system turned the *karanavan* into the custodian and guardian of properties owned by *tharavad*. He had the rights also to make transactions of the property. 200 years of British rule reversed everything that existed. We can see many examples of this in the books published locally praising patriarchy over matriarchy. Some of them say the *tharavad* are the right of followers of matriarchy and the *karanavan* are dictators. The Legal Registration Act and all other legal formalities connected to it also portraits the *karanavan* as a dictator. But what is not noticed by anyone is how this power and authority came into the hands of the *karanavan* in the first place. When the effects of colonial era legislation kicked in, the life of *tharavad* became pathetic and their members were unable to live in peace. Changes in the system of law provided the *karanavan* with the chances to rule their *tharavad*. This in turn triggered the protest of future generations against their *karanavan*. This also accelerated the disintegration of the joint family system. The *karanavan* started to route his earnings from the *tharavad* to his own nuclear family, unbeknownst to members of the extended family. This became possible only after the Land Registration Act. The corruption occurring in the transaction of family properties and the revenue generated from it also help explain the disintegration of *tharavad*. When the joint families started to dissolve, many of the connected customs and agricultural practices also began to disappear. Many of the rituals which were once enacted in my study area were no longer practiced. Two of them are *Kothamooriyattam* by the Malaya community and *Keleeyathram* (*keleeyathram*) by the Yogi community. Folk songs which people used to sing during harvest have suffered the same fate. These songs are also known as *Vadakkan Paattukal* (Northern ballads) or *Payyannur Pattu*. In the past, they were carried forward from generation to generation. Senior citizens of families sing these songs in a particular rhythm and members of the young generation learn it by hearing.

To a common person from Malabar who belongs to the Hindu religion, the prime deity in his *tharavad* does not play any role in his daily life. He interacts with the Hindu Gods like MahaVishnu, Siva, Lakshmi, Saraswathi and others which are portrayed on the walls of his house. He goes to pray in the local temples. The *tharavad*, where the prime deities are situated, has become a place to light an oil lamp on *Sankrama* days in Malayalam Months. This is done by someone who resides near the *tharavad*. The younger generation also lost the opportunity to hear the stories of the prime deities and to study the *thottam pattu*. The *theyyam* became the dance of Gods that will occur on very few occasions during a year. So, children are not very familiar with the concept of “prime deity”. They come to know about this only after growing up.

The cases are different among the low castes of society, i.e., Pulayar, Kopalar, Mavilar etc., who lead a communal life. They belong to the Scheduled caste or Scheduled Tribe categories. They occupy the low stratum of the caste system or are considered out-castes. Still they are much sidelined in society and others of higher castes show discrimination towards them. As they are living in the local communities even after the scenarios changed so fundamentally, *theyyams* by them are performed in the proper ways. They still continue to carry out the rituals without fail. Even the children and young adults are well aware of their prime deities and beliefs. These youngsters are ready and capable to narrate about their *theyyam*. Even though their narrations miss some minute details, they reach nearly the same level as those of their elder relatives.

#### **4.4 Summary of the chapter**

In this chapter, I have sought to detail how the participants and performers try to identify, internalize and articulate the *theyyam*. This chapter deals with this topic under three subsections. The first section explains how the participants conceive *theyyam* and it is followed by the views of participants in the second section. There has been a massive change in peoples' articulation, internalization and identification of *theyyam*. For the younger generations *theyyam* is an art form. The knowledge of the *theyyam* literature (the *thottam*) is dwindling among the new generation. There is a change in the direction of interest towards *theyyam* and its related perceptions, as the generation passes. When members of the older generations talk about *theyyam*, for instance people aged about 80 years, they are full of reverence and nostalgia. Whereas the youngsters, for instance, people around 5-25 years of age, see *theyyam* as a form of art. At the same time the youngsters participate in the *theyyam* rituals as part of their lineage or because members of their family compel them to do so. Both old and young are involved in the *theyyam* but they give very different explanations for its various aspects. Each generation has something in common in their explanation of *theyyam*. For instance, when the youngsters see and explain *theyyam* as an art form the young generation says it as a folk traditional art. For the great grandparents, however, *theyyam* is their god.

The collective knowledge of *theyyam* existed in the form of stories and songs from generation to generation. But these collective knowledges were shattered after the disintegration of *tharavad*. This makes the basis of the discussion in section 4.3. The *thottam*, the folk songs and the stories and myths were highly valuable and played an important role in making the *theyyam* a crucial part of Malabar life and building the *aparan* ('the other self') for everyone.

Nowadays the new generations watch *theyyam* keenly even though they have missed the stories behind it. They don't understand '*thottampattu*' in its complete sense either. Most of the myths have been eradicated from the consciousness of the new generation. Nowadays, anyone interested has to approach a scholar, speak to performers of *theyyam* or read books on *theyyam* in order to know more about *theyyam* practices. The corridors of valuable and precious information became closed when the *tharavad* disintegrated.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion and Summery

I am part of a recently partitioned *tharavad*. As I grew up, I observed my grandmother, who was a farmer, heading the *tharavad* and organizing rituals related to the *tharavad*. Brought up in an inescapable environment of a joint family and the everyday engagements with *theyyam*, my grandmother became a person who was rich with experience and knowledge related to *theyyam*. Besides this, her companions were also a reservoir of myths, ballads and other traditional *theyyam*lore. Their everyday lives were closely embedded in *theyyam*. Since I stayed with my grandmother during childhood, I developed a passion towards *theyyam*. Due to marriage and the resultant move to a nuclear family, my mother has almost forgotten the ritualistic aspects and myths about *theyyam*. Hence my own daughter may not be benefitting from the knowledge transmissions traditionally passed on from grandparents to grandchildren. In a way this can be generalized to practically all the households in the areas of my study in North Malabar who used to carry out the rituals of *theyyam*.

When I was planning to carry out a study of *theyyam* the first thing that came to my mind is that the knowledge transmitted through the female descent line is worth studying. While reviewing the literature related to the study I came to understand that most scholars have associated the *tharavad* with the matrilineal joint family. But when I started fieldwork I found that the *tharavad* is common to the people of North Malabar irrespective of the law of inheritance. Then I faced a dilemma: how could I conceptualize and operationalize *tharavad* solely as matrilineal joint families or being based on a single law of inheritance and succession? At this juncture, I gained inspiration from Olaf Smedal's work on accounts of the fundamental principles of the social organization of the Ngadha in eastern Indonesia and I borrow the Lévi-Straussian concept of house-based societies, which gives me a direction to the study.<sup>93</sup> I

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<sup>93</sup> Lévi-Strauss explains that the House is a corporate body ("moral person") holding an estate made up of both material and immaterial goods. As a "moral person", it is an alternate metaphor replacing "blood" in defining the social identity of the group. As a symbol of the group, the House persists over generations and links the group to its sacred origins. The House persists over time by transmitting its titles through conditional kinship principles: "patrilineal descent and matrilineal descent, filiation and residence, hypergamy and hypogamy, close marriage and distant marriage, heredity and election: all these notions which usually allow anthropologists to distinguish the various known types of society, are united in the house, as if, in the last analysis the spirit (in the eighteenth-century

draw on this concept in order to emphasise the *tharavad* and its essential feature of constituting a joint family. From my fieldwork, what I understood was that villages in North Malabar are comprised of *tharavad* as the basic unit and it fits well with the concept of house-based societies.

Another influential work which provided much guidance was the work on the political economic aspects of *theyyam* by Rajesh Komath, a research scholar cum *theyyam* performer. His work traces the transformation of *theyyam* and my field reflections on the transformation on *theyyam* can be supported by his work.

In this study, I have attempted to explore the connection between the disintegration of the *tharavad* and the transformation of *theyyam*. There are a number of factors that contributed to the transformation of *theyyam* which are not under the purview of this study. But the changes that occurred in the transmission of knowledge – as a result of the disintegration of the *tharavad* – facilitated and acted as the basis of the transformation of *theyyam*. The *tharavad* has “always” played a central role in the transmission of knowledge related to *theyyam*.

Local vernaculars and geographical peculiarities have probably been the main obstacles to any thorough documentation of the kinship patterns of North Malabar. There is a lamentable dearth of literature on North Malabari . Malabarians themselves have made valuable attempts to document and explain its features. With very few exceptions, this work has not caught the attention of academics. Whenever the matriarchal, joint family system and rituals of Malabar are discussed, Southern Malabar including Kozhikode is highlighted compared to Northern Malabar with its “deviations”. It was the kingdom of Zamorin (Southern Malabar) that got the limelight more than the Kolathunad(Northern Malabar) in academic discussions on kinship.

After a detailed introduction to the thesis in the first chapter, the second chapter explores the less known aspects of the relationship between the *tharavad* and the two modes of descent and inheritance, in contrast

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sense) of this institution expressed an effort to transcend, in all spheres of collective life, theoretically incompatible principles.” (Lévi-Strauss 1982: 184)

to previous literature which simply posits the *tharavad* as a matrilineal joint family. The three basic pillars of North Malabar society were the caste system, the joint family system and village life. Each house-based unit formed a joint family. Caste was an important element in forming a village during pre-independence days. Caste membership determined the services that a person had to provide in the village. Each village had at least one *tharavad* to provide the services that a particular caste could offer. The reciprocity between different *tharavad* made the village self-sufficient. In North Malabar the *tharavad* is a house and joint family which belongs to both *makkathayees* (those who reckon descent patrilineally) and *marumakkathayees* (those who reckon descent matrilineally). Neither the individual nor the mode of inheritance or kinship had ultimate importance; instead the *tharavad* – as a house in Lévi-Strauss’s sense – was the fundamental social unit and it was the *tharavad*’s affairs and their associated practices which shaped the identity of the individual in society. Both in the *makkathayam* and *marumakkathayam* systems the oldest male is addressed by the society as *karanavan* and women among *marumakkathayees* enjoyed more freedom and equality compared to the women in *makkathayam*. With life-long rights in the *tharavad*, women enjoyed a sense of independence and self-worth in *marumakkathayam*; marriage for them did not mean dependence on the husband. *Marumakkathayam* was prevalent among a number of castes, tribes and groups belonging to different religions. However, neither mode of inheritance had a uniform pattern. There were numerous variations in practicing both *marumakkathayam* and *makkathayam* among different castes, mainly in terms of residence patterns, role arrangements and rituals related to marriage, birth and death, etc.

There was no single reason or cause that led up to the disintegration. The disintegration of the *tharavad* and the changing family structures and practices in Kerala is analysed in Section 2.3. Section 4 discusses the contemporary phase of the house-*tharavad* and family. It was under British rule that the terms *tharavad* and *karanavar* became associated with the matrilineal joint family in the official court records, hence over time the association was strengthened. Modernised education and exposure to western ideas and values, along with the concept of privately owned land – made possible by the land registration act implemented by the British rulers – and the emergence of an alternate concept of family in the modern sense of the term began to gain ground. In the span of the first two decades after independence from colonial rule the transition to a nuclear male-headed family became complete.<sup>94</sup> According to the legal system, matriliney ended completely and officially on 1<sup>st</sup> December 1976 by the establishment of the Kerala Joint Hindu Family System (Abolition) Act.

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<sup>94</sup> Praveena Kodoth(2002) discusses the dominant persuasion of families today, particularly in terms of their role in regulating access to material and social resources is patrifocal, (one that gives precedence to men over women).

The third chapter discussed different dimensions of *theyyam*. It was also an attempt to elaborate how from being a folk religion, *theyyam* has been transformed, first into a ritualistic art, then to a folk traditional ritual, the performer into an artiste, and the believer into a spectator. The concluding part discusses how the ritual became a consumer product in the society. The full impact of this chapter will only be realised once it is read along with the next chapter, which deals with the topic of how an artiste and a believer identify and internalise *theyyam*. The first section of chapter 3 details how *theyyam* was transformed into an art due to the influences of the state and academia and later into a product in the tourism sector. The second section is an attempt to introduce the reader to the performers and it discusses the transformation of the performers. The surroundings and structure of *kaliyattam* and *theyyam* performing spaces constitute the topic of the third section. The final and fourth sections bring forth the present situation of performers and the places of *kaliyattam*. The changes taking place inside and outside *theyyam* itself is the main focus of this chapter.

Chapter 4 is an attempt to understand the changes in the articulation, identification and internalization of *theyyam* by different generations of *theyyam* performers and participants. Along with the encroachment of Brahminised Hindu religion and a lack of knowledge about that which made *theyyam* a folk religion, the new generation conceives *theyyam* more as a form of folk art. The ways of knowing *theyyam* are different now. The context of traditional knowledge acquisition and knowledge transmission is changed in North Malabar. There are changes in the transmission of *theyyam*-related knowledge mainly due to the disintegration of the *tharavad*. The *thottam* and the folk ballads, proverbs and myths which constituted the *theyyam*-related collective knowledge played a crucial role in making the *theyyam* a constitutive part of Malabar life and constituting ‘the other’ for everyone.<sup>95</sup> The process of knowledge transmission can be more fruitfully understood if we envisage the traditional knowledge and skills transmitted through *tharavad* where a minimum of two or more generations dwelled together.

My thesis overall suggests that the encompassing and dominant element in North Malabar personal identity is the *tharavad*, and that the *tharavad* is the locus of *theyyam* roles (and other prerogatives). The major way that the *tharavads* can celebrate and express their religious faith or convictions is through the *theyyam* — the *theyyam* being not a cultural spectacle (performance) but religious worship. *Theyyam* is fundamentally a product of collective life and the *theyyam* knowledge will be used by, and kept moving

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<sup>95</sup> I have discussed in the previous chapter how *theyyam* was considered as ‘the other’ self of a devotee.



through, networks of kinship and the *tharavad*. The collective *theyyam* knowledge has been in existence for many centuries in the form of stories and songs, maintained through a joint family *tharavad* and passed on from generation to generation. But all the collective knowledge which existed in that system was shattered after the disintegration of the *tharavad*. The reservoir of the collective knowledge related to *theyyam* now resides with the great grand parents whose prominence – along with their goddesses – are fading from the nuclear family oriented North Malabari's day to day life.

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