



## MYTH AS A SYMBOLIC NARRATIVE: A STUDY OF THE SELECTED MYTHS OF MALABAR THEYYAM CULT

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### ABSTRACT

Symbolism refers to the use of symbols to suggest concepts and possibilities by attributing to them symbolic connotations that are dissimilar from their literal meanings. Symbolism takes diverse forms. Symbolism supplements double levels of implications to a work: a literal one that is irrefutable and the symbolic one whose meaning is far more intense than the literal one. Symbolism makes the plot, characters and the motifs of literature universal. The paper is an attempt to analyse the myths underlying Theyyam as symbols of the travails of the lower caste people. Theyyam is a pattern of hero worship performed in the Kolathunadu region of the North Malabar area of Kerala, India, as a living culture with several thousand years of tradition, rituals and customs. The art is performed by the people of the lower class community. Theyyam rituals mostly take place either within the precincts of a small shrine which is usually called Kavu or in the courtyard of an ancestral house, or in a wide space with a temporary shrine called pathi. There are various myths underlying each Theyyam performance. These myths tell us the story of a lower class man/woman who was subjected to the cruelties of the upper caste society and its after effects and how these men/women are deified. Therefore these myths are stories justifying the deification of the downtrodden people which is an uncommon occurrence. At the same time, they act as symbols representing the sufferings of these people and how they function as resistance narratives. These myths can also be read as weaved stories that can act as a shield to protect the oppressed community from the tortures of the aristocratic groups.

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Symbolism refers to the use of symbols to suggest concepts and possibilities by attributing to them symbolic references that are far removed from their literal meanings. Symbolism takes diverse forms. Symbolism supplements double levels of implications to a work: a literal one that is irrefutable and the symbolic one whose meaning is far more intense than the literal one. Symbolism makes the plot, characters and the motifs of

literature universal. Though the symbol has its origin in the world of fairy tales and myths and it permeates the literature of the ancient and the medieval ages, the conscious use of symbolism in literature began with the symbolist movement that took place in France in the second half of the nineteenth century. Though they were initially the part of a literary group called Parnassians who were as materialistic as the naturalists and concentrated

on the phenomena of the external world, later the symbolists parted with them and proclaimed aims and intensions different from those of romantics, naturalists and Parnassians.

The symbolists believe that symbolism is a means of presenting the unseen reality as comprehended by the consciousness. The symbol communicates the reality without reproducing it. The goal of symbolism as Frederick R. Karl and Marvin Magalaner maintain, 'was to give recognizable external images a spiritual or symbolic value'. Almost all the modern writers like T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, W. B. Yeats and many others made use of symbolism in their works to convey many ideas. Seasons, Colours, and many other objects are used as symbols to represent the common realities of life. E.g. T. S. Eliot uses wheel as a symbol in his play *Murder in the Cathedral* to represent the passage of time.

Myth can be defined as a traditional story, usually concerning some hero or event, which have or have not a base of a true fact or an explanation, especially the stories that concern with deities and that which explain some ritual practice or phenomenon of nature. Myths also contribute to and express the systems of thought and values of a culture. It can also be regarded as a product of man's imagination and emotion acted upon by his surroundings.

Encyclopedia Britannica defines myth as a symbolic narrative, usually of unknown origin and at least partly conventional, that apparently relates actual events and that is particularly associated with religious belief. It is contrasted from symbolic traditions (cult, ritual) and symbolic areas or representations (temples, icons). Myths are specific accounts of divine or superhuman beings involved in extraordinary occasions or circumstances in a time that is unspecified yet which is comprehended as existing apart from normal human experience.

Robert A. Segal in his book *Myth: A Very Short Introduction* defines myth as a story about something significant. Rudolf Bultmann defines myth as a primitive explanation of the world, something that is unacceptable to the moderns. Bultmann reads myth symbolically. Through his excruciatingly confusing phrase, he demythologises

myth, where he preserves mythology by extricating its true, symbolic meaning. Demythologised, myth ceases to be about the world and turns out to be about the human experience of the world. Myth becomes universal and credible to the moderns once it is analysed symbolically. Myths are understood to perform multi-faceted functions at the same time. By function, we tend to question why and how myths persists. It generally addresses some needs to be fulfilled by the story.

The paper is an attempt to analyse the myths underlying Theyyam as symbols of the travails of the lower caste people. They can also be read as weaved stories that can act as a shield to protect the oppressed community from the tortures of the aristocratic groups.

Theyyam is a pattern of hero worship performed in the Kolathunadu region of the North Malabar area of Kerala, India, as a living cult with several thousand-year-old traditions, rituals and customs. The art is performed by the people of the lower class community. Theyyam is a ritualistic form of worshipping gods, goddesses, legendary heroes etc. Compared to the upper class customs and rituals, this is a very simple concept that the god or goddess belonging to a temple becomes temporally manifest in the body of an empowered man (the performer), thereby elevating him to a divine status. Theyyam ceremonies usually take place either within the precincts of a small shrine – usually called Kavu or in the yard of an ancestral house, or in an open space with a temporary shrine called pathi. It is a ritual and a folk-dance form supported by a vast literature of folk songs. Theyyam is a synonym for Deyvam 'God' among the low caste people. 'Aattam' means dance. Thus 'Theyyaattam' means the God's Dance.

Theyyam has a continuous cultural legacy of more than two thousand years in the Kolathunadu and Thulunadu regions of Malabar. It represented the culture of the lower class people especially their struggles and resistance against the upper class. The working class people ensured their participation in this ritual. The performers of Theyyam belong to Mannan, Velan and Malayan communities. They never had the opportunity to read the Hindu epics or Puranas. The characters were usually heroes who

lived among them or animals, trees or nature itself which had a supernatural colour in their oral traditional stories. These performances worshipped motherhood in forms of Raktheswari, Chamundi etc. Though it was performed by the tribal people, there was a divinity attributed to this performance. The transfer of the Kolam, the performer of Theyyam, to the status of a deity attributes divinity to the performance. Invoking god or goddess in his body, he dances through the compound of the sacred space where deities are worshipped. This dance is not to please the Gods but it is considered as the dance by the Gods or goddesses. These gods are worshipped mainly for good marriage, for better results in agriculture, for fertility, for protection and security from famines, epidemics etc. There are powerful deities who have the power to ward off smallpox and other contagious diseases. In the pre-colonial period, Theyyam performances used to provide judicial services also. Some of the major disputes and caste conflicts were often settled by a specific representative of a particular deity during the Theyyam performance. The devotees present their personal problems and troubles to the deities and the deities give them counsel and blessings.

There are about 456 theyyakolams in Malabar out of which 112 are important. All these Theyyams have a different story as its origin. The myths underlying Theyyam forms a vast collection of distinct stories. This paper analyses only the myths behind three different Theyyams and how they serves as symbols for the present generation who are ignorant of the life in Malabar in the early periods. The myths under study are that of Pottan Theyyam, Manakkott Amma, Vishnumurthi Theyyam and Puthiyothi Theyyam.

The myth underlying Pottan Theyyam is related to Sree Sankaracharya. Sankaracharya was all prepared to ascend the highest award of excellence 'Sarwanjha Peedam'. On his way, he saw a Pulayapottan, Pulachamundi and Pulamaruthan (refers to people from lower communities). As untouchability was deep rooted during that time, Sankaracharya asked them to move away from the path and not to make him polluted by their presence. Then Pottan starts arguing with him asking about the differences between them. He

says, "If there is a cut on the body, the blood will come out and the blood of mine and yours will have the same color. So, what is the difference between us?" Sankaracharya then realizes that it is Lord Shiva who is examining his knowledge and kindness towards the humanity. "It is blood that flows through our veins and we all are human beings; as we have to live in unity." He makes Sankaracharya understand the irrelevance of the caste system and the unnecessary divisions prevalent among the human beings.

The next myth under consideration is related to Manakott Amma. Manakott was a Nair household near Neeleswaram, Kasargod. Manakott Amma refers to a lady from that family who received good education and was against untouchability and caste system. She was pregnant and once when she was travelling she drank water from the pot of an outcast which was against the caste rules of the period. It was an insult for the elders in the family and they killed her. This resulted in a series of unhappy occurrences in the household and it ceased to exist. Later it was concluded that the murder of Manakott Amma is the reason for those problems and made her a goddess.

The myth of Vishnumurthi Theyyam is related to Palanthai Kannan who was a dependant of Kuruvat Nair. He belonged to a lower caste and earned his living by herding the cattles of Nair. One day he became very hungry and plucked some mangoes from the trees owned by Nair. Nair got angry and ordered his men to kill Kannan. But before they could get him, he fled to Manglore and took shelter in a Vishnu temple there. He returned to his home town six years later thinking that Nair would have forgotten the incident. But as soon as Kannan reached Neeleswaram, Nair came to know about his arrival and ordered his men to kill Kannan then itself. Kannan was taking bath in a pond and Nair and his men killed him there itself. The pond reddened with his blood and his urumi (a weapon used in Malabar) started dancing on the water. It killed Nair and his men and destroyed the Kuruvat tharavad. Understanding the danger, the survivors from the family built a kavu for him and created the Vishnumurthi Theyyam, which became a popular Theyyam in Malabar.

Puthiyothi Theyyam is also a local girl elevated to the status of a deity. She was a girl from a low caste family and the local ruler got attracted to her. He tried to molest her and when she refused asked his attendants to kill her. They killed the innocent girl and it was the beginning of all miseries in the family of the ruler and the province itself. At last the ruler was advised to make the girl a deity and perform a Theyyam every year in her memory as a penance of killing her. The ruler did the same and was saved from damnation.

In its literal sense all the myths described above are stories justifying the formation of deities among lower class people which was considered as an unnatural happening. The myths try to convey that the people from the subaltern sects suffered a lot of injustice and due to the power of truth, they became deities. We have many more such myths regarding Theyyams like Kadathanad Makkam, Kathivanoor Veeran and many others who suffered injustice from the people who were supposed to protect them. A detailed study of these myths proves that they operate mainly at two levels – as a social narrative and as a symbolic narrative. Theyyam serves as a social narrative as it records how there existed a mechanism to classify people as higher and lower classes at the same time controlling the lower class people not being agitated in the sufferings they had.

Apart from its traditional and social functions, Theyyam myths also functions as symbols for the present generation. Mere than being a story, it acts as a symbol representing the sufferings of the downtrodden. Bultmann's concept of demythologising myth analyses a myth not to be about the world but to be about the human experience of the world. Myth becomes universal and credible to the moderns once it is analysed symbolically. Similarly the Theyyam myths speaks about a life unknown to the modern people. These myths or its performances are not merely recreating the past situation, but connotes that situation through these stories of the common men who were made deities because of their suffering. They tell us the story of a lower class man/woman who was subjected to the cruelties of the upper caste society and it's after effects and how these men/women are

deified. In short they suggest/remind through these deities what they suffered under the unjust hands of power.

Most of the Theyyam myths are evidences to the social system that existed in the past. Pottan Theyyam refers to the untouchability experienced by the lower caste people and how they were to move away from the path of the higher caste people. There were stipulated measures regarding the yards to be kept by each lower caste from the local ways used by the upper class people. They were supposed to follow this and any violations were met with brutal punishments. When Sankaracharya was on his way to ascend the *Sarvajnapetham*, the PulayaPottan stands in his way. Sankaracharya asked him to move away and not to impurify him by his nearness. This shows how even the learned men followed the principles of untouchability and believed them to be true. In the case of Vishnumurthi Theyyam, it reveals how the Kuruvat Nair gets angry with Kannan for plucking mangoes from his orchard. He drove Kannan away and he keeps the hatred for years. When Kannan returns after six years, Kuruvat Nair still gets angry and kills him. Ultimately the murder happens because a boy from a lower caste ate a mango from the orchard of an upper caste when he got hungry. Again it is evidence on the sufferings of the lower caste people and the valueless existence of their lives. Puthiyothi and Manakott amma symbolises how women were insecure during that period and how they were punished for insignificant reasons.

An alternate reading of these myths shows how they acted as a shield for the protection of the downtrodden people. The popularity of these stories and the wide performance of its Theyyam forms made the people believe that unjust actions to any man or woman will invite troubles and end only in the damnation of that person and his family. This has helped, to a great extend to preserve the honour of the women of the period and assured justice to all people. Thus these myths act as symbols representing the sufferings of the common people and how they function as resistance narratives.

Theyyam performances don't have a strong root in any of the Hindu epics. It tells the story of the

common men and women who were made deities. The myths more or less served as justifications for this glorification of ordinary human beings. They were regarded as mere stories to perform a particular function. But Bultmann's concept of demythologising myth changes this aspect of the myths. It helps to read them as symbols suggesting the early life in Malabar and the probability of a narrative being woven to save the downtrodden people.

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