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## The Legends of Resistance: Kuttichathan Theyyam

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### ABSTRACT

The paper aims to explore how Kuttichathan Theyyam, performed in Kalakatt Illam of Kannur district, Kerala, resonates a tale of resistance and struggle against caste oppression through his myths and mannerism. The paper tries to focus on the question of how the tales and performance of Kuttichathan theyyam is a direct attack and resistance against the orthodoxy and hence attempt to critique how the legends and myths of Kuttichathan Theyyam have undergone noticeable cultural appropriation in the due course of time, which brings it into the sphere of myth-making and cultural fabrication that follows. This goes in parallel with Roland Barthes's idea of myth in the discourses regarding religion and cultural appropriation and hegemonic dominance in the manipulation of the myth of god and propitiation by the upper caste. These also come up with John Fiske's idea of resistance, subalternity and caste issues in the myth of Kuttichathan theyyam. The paper also tries to show the hegemonic control imposed on cultural art forms like Theyyam which outrightly threatens the power structure.

**Keywords:** Theyyam, myth construction, cultural manipulation, resistance, subverting power structure.

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*"Performances mark identities, bend time, reshape and adorn the body, and tell stories."*

-Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies an Introduction*

The human incarnation of God, Theyyam, is the ritualistic art form of North Malabar, where legends are truly brought to life. Theyyam is mainly performed and worshipped in Kannur and Kasaragod district in the months from November to June, during which God come in search of his devotees. The heroes and heroines who was transformed into the status of God,

dance and perform in the limelight with music, fire and *Thottam paatu*. For people who only experienced God looking out of the four walls of the temple (*Sreekovil*), it is a mesmerizing scene to witness God breaking the boundaries of a temple and performing in the land of the mortals, with a feeling of being one among them. An amalgamation of myth, heroism and worship, no other art form in the history of North Malabar holds the cultural significance as high as that of Theyyam.

Kuttichathan is one of the most powerful, most abled God of magic. The origin and myth of Kuttichathan Theyyam is rooted in the Kalakatt Illam of Kannur district. He is one among those five *Manthramoorithikal*, who does wonders with their magical powers, and is so wild and vivid in his mannerisms. Like Kuttichathan theyyam, most of the Theyyam were once heroes and heroine who had to sacrificed their life for losing the battle, fighting for justice of the lower caste, for claiming right for

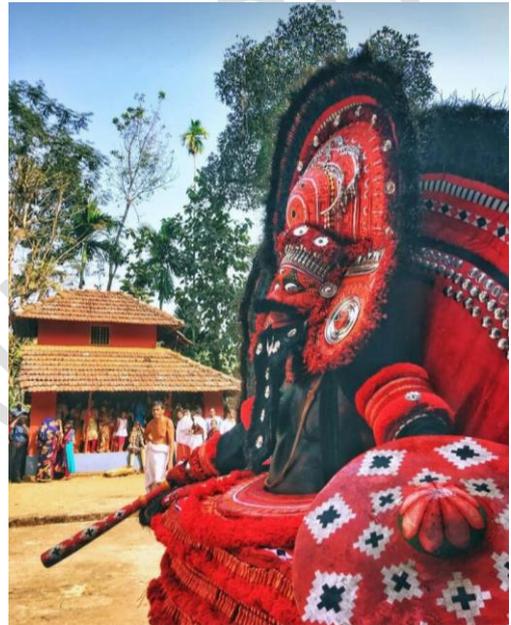


Figure 1. Kuttichathan Theyyam

education, or who were the victims of the exploitation of the ruling class. These great valiant men take rebirth as God, and as a living cult with several thousand-year-old traditions, rituals and customs, it embraces almost all the castes and classes of the Hindu religion in this region. The success of theyyam performance is by breaking all the boundaries and stereotypes of caste and religion.

This aspect of inclusivity and the legends of resistance that Theyyam forms beholds makes it subject to tremendous appropriations. The ideological appropriation happens in the Theyyam cult in the way the myth of Theyyam are being manipulated. The story behind the Kuttichathan Theyyam is the tale of resistance, caste struggle, oppression and injustice, being

the out-casted section of the society. Hence those heroes like Kuttichathan are later being appeased through worshipping, to avoid the mass destruction they would cause to the section of the society. The collective guilt consciousness of the society is a major factor responsible for elevating the status of the victim. Hence when it comes to the popular legends and performance of Kuttichathan and all the similar Theyyam forms, appropriations according to the privileged section of the society, where these God incarnates are being labelled to be from a higher class origin, or their whole tale of resistance is being redefined, which becomes the major research problem.

Cultural studies provide a larger framework to analyse the discourse of Kuttichathan Theyyam. Where Culture studies has spoken against oppression, and the way lower class try to resist and evade the dominant ideology, the myth of Kuttichathan becomes relevant. Since Kuttichathan's myth shows the possibility of him being a child from the lower class, his actions could easily be related to John Fiske and James Scott's idea of resistance and how is it being side-lined by the dominant ideology and Roland Barthe's idea of mythologies provides the understanding of how the hegemony have worked in manipulating the myths of resistance of Kuttichathan theyyam.

Performance of art, rituals, or ordinary life are restored behaviours, and twice-behaved behaviours as Richard Schechner said (65). When viewed as a ritual that is performed to release the friction that is built into the inequality and contradictions of a caste-ridden society, it tries to create the ambience of a carnival enabling the release of the repressed collective social tension. Every bit of the performance and mannerism of



*Figure 2 . Kuttichathan Theyyam performance*

Kuttichathan theyyam pays testimony to the fact that like other major theyyam forms of North Malabar, he is not so serene and pleasant, but very vibrant, order less and his expressions are filled with anger and resistance, the root of which should be traced back to the legends and myth of Kuttichathan.

The major facts that draws attention, when one looks into the Myth and the performance of Kuttichathan Theyyam is the actuality behind the popular discourses regarding Kuttichathan, before he was disguised as a God. Kuttichathan's life story, the myths related to his origin, his actions of resistance and evasion, Theyyam's acts of protests to upkeep the rights of the lower caste peasants against the Brahminical superiorities in which Kuttichathan himself is said to belong to and above all, his actions and the rebellious nature during the Theyyam performance are all leading towards a hint which voices about an underlying disparity in the caste identity of the Theyyam itself, which but have been highly kept unnoticed by the dominant ideology.

Multiple myths are ascribed to the origin of Kuttichathan which adds to its complexity. When one of the myths describes Kuttichathan as the divine child of Parvathy and

Parameshwaran, another myth explains him as born for a lower class servant Cherumi. It is also believed that he was born from the sacred fire. These different myths problematize his lineage, linking him with a high class superior god or else with a lower class servant. The multiple myths regarding his origin is a matter to be studied because often this multiplicity is derived from an initial unity that is shattered. A person who is always in flux do not have a permanent identity. Myths acquires its distinctive shape from the cultural environment in which they grow, which in the general sense is universal, which are social constructions prone to appropriation. The notion of multiple origin is a prime means of social differentiation, thus flexibility in the concept of origin itself deconstructs the clear cut boundary or compartmentalisation based on class and caste boundaries and the notion that a God is always a high class figure.

The child bor for the lower class parents seems to exhibit the traits of that community, which is marginalized as subaltern. Though Kuttichathan was brought up in a Brahmin family still he showed traits which were unacceptable to Brahmin orthodoxies. Here caste structure is broken with his hybrid culture. His life story describes that he could never cope with the mannerism of Brahmin tradition and his actions never confirmed to the orthodoxies of Brahmin community. Kuttichathan's actions speaks about how resistive and vibrant was he throughout his life time. Irrespective of being brought up in an orthodox Brahminical family, he used to go out for grazing, killed bull and drank its blood to curb his thirst, and his anger is unimaginable and disastrous. This trait can be correlated to his love for the deprived, his resistance and anti-establishment nature. Kuttichathan is a god who broke all the caste boundaries and spread justice across the land. He raised his voice for the lower class peasants. This God did the wonder of planting the seedlings across the vast acres of the field in Chandravayal within a night. Kuttichathan was the God who took birth to punish injustice, to spread justice across the world and for the anti-establishment of the stereotypes. Hence in every

legend related to Kuttichathan, there is a voice of resistance and rebellion, and a continuous effort to break the dominant beliefs and norms.

Hence Kuttichathan's life entailed an everyday resistance, which was also an act of subversion. Everyday resistance is not easily recognized like public and collective resistance – such as rebellions or demonstrations – but it is typically hidden or disguised, individual and not politically articulated (Vinthagen 2). As James Scott introduced this concept in 1985, Scott showed how certain common behaviour of subaltern groups is not always what it seems to be, but instead resistance. Scott argues these activities are tactics that exploited people use in order to both survive and undermine repressive domination; especially in contexts when rebellion is too risky and are the ordinary means of class struggle (4). Though Kuttichathan showed everyday resistance, his acts were not hidden, but highly evident to those against whom it was intended. His act of resistance became manifest in different developmental stages of his life, that the orthodoxies found it so offensive. Being the 'divine child' Kuttichathan's evasive and resistive acts didn't make him fear the authority, but whenever they questioned his mannerism, he grew up to be more and more rebellious.

As John Fiske said, culture is a constant site of struggle between those with and those without power. One can look on the process of making popular culture, therefore, as the opposition that develops between the class in power and the working class people. Hence a true culture always is a site of conflict and resistance, involving the struggle to make social meanings that are in the interests of the subordinate (i.e., those without power). Resistance to dominant culture takes various forms that differ in their social visibility, in their social positioning, and in their activity (2). Pleasures are found, for example, in the carnival aspects wherein, all of these texts allow for a kind of exaggerated, liberating fun that turns social norms around and momentarily disrupts their power. Hence in the Myth of Kuttichathan theyyam, all the actions of Kuttichathan including punishing the Gold smith who is not loyal to his master,

killing and drinking the blood of the red horned bull, offending his mother, burning down the *Illam*, and also fighting for the rights of the working class people are all a symbol of his resistance which is aimed at the dominant norms. This rebellious, resistive nature of Kuttichathan was bring about a change the dominant norms, and also as Fiske said, Kuttichathan could find pleasure and meaning through his actions.

But this rebellious “superhuman”, in the end of his life story was being killed by his father. Myth says that Kuttichathan killed and drank the blood of the red horned bull. Next day Kuttichathan boldly confessed that he killed the bull to quench his thirst. Out of rage father took bamboo stick and started beating him. Angry and annoyed by this action of his father, Kuttichathan cursed that every beat he got will be counted and its consequences will be heard in seventeen countries and transformed the beating he got in his right chest in to sacred thread (worn by Brahmins). He understood that mother complained about him to father in the extreme anger of which, he took a big stone and threw to mother's chest. Unable to bear his deeds, father tied him and took him to *Kanjira puzha* and chopped his head. And that same night he took his divine form and made himself present in the *Illam*. Later, out of anger he left the whole place on fire and started moving around causing more destruction. Finally, Chala Perumalayan appeased him and started worshipping him. Till then Kuttichathan is being worshipped everywhere around North Malabar.

This details from the myth of Kuttichathan is relevant because his anger and rebellious nature and spontaneous response has caused threat to the concerned people. The question that instead of all his wild nature how he became to be devoted as a powerful deity is very well answered by the myth itself. His actions and nature was uncontrollable that is why they had to kill him. The way he responded to his mother’s blaming, the way he cursed for scolding him and the way he took his revenge by burning the Kalakatt Illam into ashes, is the fear that he evoked inside the concerned people. The form of resistance and rebelliousness exhibited by

Kuttichathan posed a declared threat to power holders. This fear of the dominant class is what led to propitiation and hence appeasing and worshipping Kuttichathan as a God.

Relating this Myth, the essential facets of resistance and evasion to the Theyyam performance of Kuttichathan, one can easily relate to the mannerism of Kuttichathan. As Richard Schechner said in his *Performance Studies*, a performance entails a kind of being, doing, and showing. As he describes, “Being is existence itself, doing is the activity of all that exists, from quarks to sentient beings to super galactic strings, showing doing is performing: pointing to, under-lining, and displaying doing” (28). These aspects are what makes a performance reflect the underlying acts of resistance in the Theyyam.

Kuttichathan’s appearance itself is not an elitist type. He doesn’t have that fair plump body of an elite or noble class. As described in the *Thottam*, he was born with a dark body with white spots. He has flowers in his forehead and he is an incarnation of lord Shiva. Lord Shiva itself is different from rest of gods, in his lifestyle which is deprived of any grandeurs, and his association with ordinary, normal class people. Hence the rituals that are performed during Kuttichathan



Figure 3. Kuttichathan Theyyam appearance

Theyyam is very specific and unique. The nature and movement of this Theyyam is very different and specific. The reason behind Kuttichathan having a dark beard and moustache, a

false eye and the sacred thread is being interpreted in the myth. He had a fire pack in his hand which he throws in the course of the performance. Unlike other Theyyam, Kuttichathan never keeps his head straight. He always holds his head tilted to one side. His movements are very wild and diverse. Compared with other structured theyyam forms, Kuttichathan theyyam won't stand at a place. He always moves from one place to other, frightening and threatening everyone around him. All this is related to the order less and anti-establishment nature of his life. The random, restless movement of Kuttichathan, his head tilted to one side and he scaring and frightening all the people around him pays testimony to the fact that, Kuttichathan always carry that rage in him; that anger against injustice and the discrimination that happens in the society.

Richard Schechner described Rituals as “collective memories encoded into actions. Rituals also help people deal with difficult transitions, ambivalent relationships, hierarchies, and desires that trouble, exceed, or violate the norms of daily life (52). Hence the subaltern classes used theyyam as a strategic aesthetics and spiritual act, and articulation against caste oppressed and barbaric violence unleashed by the caste lords and feudal patriarchy. Theyyam of Kuttichathan is performed by artists from *Malayan* community, who are placed in the lower strata of caste hierarchy. Hence the ambiguity is in the multiple myths regarding his birth, his actual caste, him being brought up in an orthodox Brahmin family, but at the same time, Kuttichathan fighting for the justice of the lower caste people. This definitely leads into the cultural identity of the Theyyam.

To understand the appropriations that happened in Kuttichathan theyyam, and its cultural relevance in caste oppression and resistance, the text should be read along with the larger discourse. Roland Barthe's idea of Myth should be considered in the discourses regarding religion and creation of God and propitiation by the upper caste, which can be connected to the idea of Subalternity and caste issues in the myth of Kuttichathan theyyam. As

Roland Barthes said in his *Mythologies*, Myth hides nothing and flaunts nothing, it distorts; myth is neither a lie nor a confession, it is an inflexion (128). For this interpellant speech is at the same time a frozen speech: at the moment of reaching us, it suspends itself, turns away and assumes the look of a generality: it stiffens, it makes itself look neutral and innocent. The appropriation of the concept is suddenly driven away once more by the literalness of the meaning (124). This appropriation of the concept itself is what projects towards the ambiguity regarding the multiplicity of the myths of origin and the issue of the caste identity of Kuttichathan.

The fact that Kuttichathan is also said to be born as the child of a lower caste servant is always denied in the popularisation of his myth. And has always been oppressed the traits of a lower caste child and him favouring the lower caste community. When Kuttichathan went out of the control of the higher orthodoxy, and started causing destruction due to the injustice that they did to him, they started appeasing and worshipping him as a God, hence never problematizing his subaltern characters. His identity is being highly manipulated and appropriated using myth fabricated by the upper caste. Hence myth becomes a tool to hide the subalternity and caste conflict of the Theyyam form; a kind of appropriation that happens with respect of socio, cultural and political interest. The legends of resistance and evasion is always side-lined in the myth and Kuttichathan is propitiated as the 'God of magical powers', by the higher caste, hence ignoring his high associations with the lower caste. Mythological figures are considered as personified abstractions, divinized heroes or decayed gods. Religious myths function to explain political, economic, social and cosmological aspects of the world for a given people. This is accomplished through a myth's structure rather than its particular detail. Myths then reveal how a group think about and structure their world.

Kuttichathan Theyyam speaks more than what it intends, through the myths, actions, expressions and his mannerism; the legends of resistance and martyrdom. The relevance of

Kuttichathan Theyyam in Cultural studies is due to the fact that, Theyyam is the voice of a community, which were made voiceless at a point of time, and are still being highly conditioned in the upper class norm, and these myths are made to look so 'natural' for the prevalence of that culture. Kuttichathan Theyyam is not an isolated case but he represents all other Theyyam forms who holds the legends of resistance and who have been fought, suppressed and whose myths have duly been appropriated.

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