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Lessons of Sustainability

The Folk Reading of a Ritualistic Landscape

ABSTRACT: This paper entails an investigation of the reciprocal relationship between the agrarian landscape and the cultic practice of *teyyam* prevailing in the cultural region of Kolattunāṭu. Focusing on the agrarian history, production pattern and the resultant social formations, it attempts an analytical reading of the socio-historical realities of *teyyam* in Kolattunāṭu. The characteristic features of *teyyam* performance and its consistent co-existence with the associated landscape have resulted in distinctive cultural and social formations in the region. The current research argues on the interdependencies of *teyyam* and its agrarian landscape and analyzes the multitude of ways in which liturgies of *teyyam* communicate exemplars of ecological and social sustainability. The aspects of sustainability intrinsic to the folk ritual are explored through three facets discussed in the paper. At the onset, the role of *teyyam* in shaping its sacred realm thereby simultaneously getting shaped by the singularities of geography is discussed. Second is an inquiry into the temporal and spatial dimensions of *teyyam* performance to establish the reciprocal relationship between *teyyam* and its ritualistic landscape. The third facet of the inquiry analyses the case of a

folk performance through the spatial lens to decipher the layers of interdependencies within its sacred realm.

KEYWORDS: *teyyam*, Kolattunāṭu, sustainability, ritual, landscape

Introduction

Teyyam is a cultic practice prevalent in Kolattunāṭu—a culturally defined territory in the northern part of the Indian state of Kerala. Kolattunāṭu sprawls between the productive belts of the Perumba river in the north and Vaḷapaṭṭaṇam river in the south and is tucked between the forested hills of the Western Ghats in the east and the Arabian Sea in the west (Rajesh 2011, Ganesh 2009a: 9). It roughly coincides with the present-day administrative districts of Kannur and Kasaragod. The ritualistic performance of *teyyam* is closely associated with the tribal culture and preserves within it a multitude of indigenous knowledge systems. Several strands of tribal worship like fertility cults, hunter cults, serpent cults, animal worship, and mother goddess worship can be seen in *teyyam* to be inextricably linked with the agricultural practices and ecological worldview of the tribes. They strongly signal the social and environmental awareness sustained for generations and expressed through *teyyam* liturgies. The right to perform *teyyam* is vested with the indigenous communities of Vaṇṇan, Malayan, Vēlan, Pulayan, Māvilan, Nalkadāya, Munnūttan, Kaḷanādi, Cinkatān, etc. Performed at sacred groves, ancestral shrines, and front yards of domestic houses, *teyyam* portrays a skillful combination of art, music, dance, spirituality, and celebration of agrarian culture in a single canvas. Several aspects of this ritualistic performance like the performance space, music, instruments, intricacies of face painting, attire, accessories, materials, and properties can be found intricately intertwined with the eco-centric worldview of the tribes and its resultant social structure. The research entails an analysis of *teyyam* liturgies and the multitude of ways in which they communicate exemplars of ecolog-

ical and social sustainability. The inquiry was limited to the agrarian history of Kolattunāṭu and the resultant social formations which shaped the ritualistic landscape of the region. Overlapping layers of history, culture and mythology made it difficult to place *teyyam* within a historic timeline. The analysis made in this research is based on the previous historical studies conducted on this region which attempted to decipher the chronological stages of its evolution,¹ and the hints available from *teyyam* songs and mythological narratives (Rajesh 2011, Suresh Kumar 2008, Varma 2012). The inquiry was also delimited to the ritualistic performance of *teyyam* in its primary context and did not cover the stage performances or presentations outside the ritual realm. The geographical scope of the inquiry was delimited to the erstwhile Kolattunāṭu region between Perumba and Vaḷapaṭṭaṇam rivers bounded by the Western Ghats in the east and the Arabian Sea in the west.

Materials and methods of research

The research is an attempt to understand the practice of *teyyam* in its contemporary space and is backed by historical studies, ethnographic surveys, and spatial documentation. Supported by the outcomes of participant observations, and unstructured interviews with participants and stakeholders, it focused on the ritualistic landscape generated by the cultic practice of *teyyam*. The initial exploratory research substantially benefited from the published materials on the collection of folk ballads and oral traditions (Ilayavoor 2012, Balakrishnan 2005, Namboothiri 2016). Live recordings and content analysis of folk ballads, oral narratives, and conversations with older inhabitants, veteran *teyyam* performers, and traditional officials of *teyyam*

¹ The study by K. P. Rajesh (2011) deciphers three layers of chronological evolution in the region of Kolattunāṭu. They are the agropastoral early chiefdom of Nannan, the settled agricultural society under the Mūṣaka genealogy, and the consolidated agrarian society under *kōlasvarūpam*.

from the field also contributed towards the gathering of data.² Spatial mapping and documentation techniques were undertaken to reveal the association of the agricultural landscape with the ritualistic landscape. Being an inhabitant of the region helped the author to participate in a wide range of *teyyam* performances and acquire a deep understanding of the landscape, ritualistic practices, and local beliefs. The study followed an emic approach in which the social group involved in the research was studied and observed from within.

The agrarian and ritualistic landscape of Kolattunāṭu

Based on the scholarly comprehension of *nāṭu* as a conglomeration of multi-crop agrarian units bound by abstract geographical barriers (Ganesh 2017, Ganesh 2009a: 19–20, Gundert 1872: 539), the erstwhile territory of Kolattunāṭu can be delineated between the productive banks of Perumba river in the north and Vaḷapaṭṭaṇam river in the south. The geographical character of this narrow strip of land located towards the northern tip of Kerala is highly undulating, from the ascending hills and slopes of the Western Ghats in the east to the long coastal stretch in the west. Lying sandwiched between the high forested mountains and the low-lying coastal belt of the Arabian Sea, the morphological peculiarities of this land have contributed significantly to its settlement pattern, architecture, and social formations. The uneven topography triggered the spread of production agglomerations dispersed in the forested hills, hillock slopes, river valleys and coastal plains which in turn resulted in an isolated, non-uniform pattern of settlement formation (Rajesh 2011: 3–5). Even though later political developments imply further addition of

² Interviews conducted with *teyyam* performers Sri Narayanan Peruvaṇṇan, Sri Biju Panikkar, and Mr. Rajan, caretaker of the *teyyam* shrine of Kativanūr Vīran at Ameri, and several informative conversations with researchers such as Dr. Raghavan Payyanad, Dr. Dinesan Vadakkiniyil and Mr. V. K. Anilkumar significantly contributed to the analysis and inferences mentioned in this paper.

northern and north-eastern territories to it and expanding the political boundaries to include Allaṭamnāṭu³ as well (Freeman 1991: 488), core area of the region developed around the rich in resources catchment areas of Perumba, Kūpam and Vaḷapaṭṭaṇam rivers (Rajesh 2011: 14, Ganesh 2009a: 9).

The forested hillocks and slopes supported large-scale swidden cultivation known as *punam-kṛṣi* in the local tongue and buoyed the ancient practices of hunting and gathering among the indigenous groups. Swidden cultivation involved slashing the forest cover and burning the dried slash before the onset of monsoon to raise mixed crops of millets, pulses and vegetables on the nutrient-enriched soil fertilized by the burned slash. After cultivation, the plot was left fallow for a shifting agriculture cycle, which might span around fifteen to twenty years, with cultivators eventually returning to the same plot for the subsequent cropping phase. Hunting was often an inevitable part of swidden cultivation to keep the crops safe from wild animals (Freeman 1999: 268–269, Ramakrishnan and Patnaik 1992). References from ancient Tamil Sangam literature and other sources indicate that Ēḷimala, the erstwhile capital of Kolattunāṭu, was a forested mountain in the undulated landscape under the sway of tribal chiefdom.⁴ Along with swidden cultivation and hunting practices, a gradual spread of paddy-cultivated wetlands occurred around the fertile belts of the Perumba, Kūpam and Vaḷapaṭṭaṇam rivers. The water courses emptying themselves into the Arabian Sea during monsoons deposited fertile alluvial soil on riverbanks making

³ Allaṭamnāṭu is said to stretch between the Cittāri river in the north and the Oḷavara river in the south. The contiguous territories of the Kumbala and Allaṭam regions were also subordinate to the rulers of Kolattunāṭu except during the short periods of their intermittent independence.

⁴ The tribal chief Nannan of Ēḷimala is referred to in the Tamil poems like *Akananuru*, *Purananuru*, *Patittupāṭu*, *Kuruntokai* and *Pattupāṭu* (as the predatory chief of the Ēḷiilkunram) as cited in Rajesh 2011: 100. Rajan Gurukkal and Raghava Varier refer to the region of Ēḷimala as being under the sway of a tribal chief (Gurukkal and Varier 1999: 172–173). M.G.S. Narayanan also proposes a link between the Nannan of Tamil anthologies and the Nannan who appears in the dynastic chronicle of *Mūṣikavaṃśakāvya* (Narayanan 1994).

the narrow strips of wetlands between the hills suitable for paddy cultivation. The fertile river valleys yielded a variety of crops like *kanni*, *makaram*, and *kumbham*⁵ named after their months of harvest which eventually resulted in the proliferation of wetland paddy cultivation along the river valleys and facilitated the formation of new settlements (Ganesh 2017, Gurukkal 1989). Kaṇṇapuram village, located at the confluence of the Valapattanam and Kūpam rivers right where they empty into the Arabian Sea, has one of the most fertile *kaippādu*⁶ cultivated tracts in the region even today. The garden lands in this region had soil mixed with laterite, suitable for the cultivation of food crops and commercial crops like coconut, areca nut, pepper, and cardamom. The evolution of a society in the backdrop of its multi-crop agrarian system which supported swidden agriculture, wetland paddy, and garden variety crops was strongly structured by their beliefs and worship patterns. *Teyyam* evolved and prevailed as a popular ritualistic performance along the fertile belts of the production agglomerations of Kolattunāṭu. Older inhabitants of the region still recall memories of their agrarian culture depended on wetland paddy cultivation, swidden and hunting practices.⁷ The

⁵ *Kanni*, *makaram*, and *kumbham* are lunar months in the Malayalam calendar and they roughly correspond to the months of September–October, January–February, and February–March respectively. In the agricultural parlance, they refer to the paddy crops harvested during these months.

⁶ *Kaippādu* method of cultivation was largely practised on the low-lying lands near the coastal zone subjected to flood from backwaters. The marshy lands of the Kaṇṇapuram belt have one of the most widely cultivated *kaippādu* agricultural tracts of the region.

⁷ Several details of *teyyam* veneration in connection with swidden agrarian practices were gathered from a series of informal conversations with Smt. (late) Cheriyanamma—an older inhabitant of the region and an active participant in swidden cultivation. Cheriyanamma hailed from Kunnattūrpāṭi and later shifted with her husband, Mr. Kunjambu, to a neighbouring village called Mundanoor. Kunjambu was the chief steward of the feudal landlords known as Karakkāṭṭidam Nayanārs who owned the swidden cultivated hills of Kunnattūrpāṭi. Though in her nineties, she recalled with clarity the activities involved in swidden cultivation, the harvest rituals, and *teyyam* deities venerated in the sacred groves during a post-harvest ritual. The author also had an opportunity to participate in one such ritual with her. A

initiation rituals and harvest festivals were often combined with *teyyam* worship where fertility cults and forest spirits were appeased in the cultivated land. *Teyyam* deities worshipped by the agrarian community mirrored the reminiscence of hunting-gathering practices, swidden cultivation, wetland agriculture and pastoral traditions in the region. As recorded by scholars, the ethno-musical tradition of tribal societies was closely related to their fertility worship and post-harvest rituals set within the agricultural landscape (Rajagopalan 2013: 253–255, Chandran 2006). A comparative reading of the agricultural calendar and *teyyam* festivities attest that the occasions of *teyyam* performance coincided with the agricultural cycle in the Kolattunāṭu region. The seasonal performances of *teyyam* corresponded to the onset of agricultural activity and harvest periods of both swidden and wetland agriculture in the region. *Teyyam* performances in north Kerala are organized between the tenth day of the month of *tulām* (*tulāpattu*) and the middle of *iṭavam* (*iṭavapāti*) which is the period between the completion of a year's harvest and the beginning of the next agricultural season. *Teyyam* performances marked the celebration of harvest and preparation for the next seeding season accompanied by agricultural and pastoral motifs.

post-harvest celebration known as *puttarikalaśam* called for a reunion of all family members at the ancestral house. A sumptuous meal, with food items cooked from the recent harvested products, was served. An oracle from the *teyyam* performing community of the Karimbālar tribe (who were also the agricultural labourers of swidden cultivation earlier), offered rites at the sacred grove amidst the forest and blessed patrons of the land. Another instance of such conversations was with Smt. Kamalakshi Amma who owned and cultivated paddy in the *kaippādu* lands along the marshy belt of Ceṟukunnu. As a long-time practitioner of *kaippādu* paddy cultivation in the coastal water marshes of Ceṟukunnu, she reminisced on instances of Kurati *teyyam*—a fertility cult visiting houses post-harvest, and several *teyyam* performances conducted during harvest seasons.

***Kāvu*: The sacred abode of divine beings**

Teyyam performances are often centred around a sacred geographical setting called *kāvu* (sacred grove).⁸ Several scholarly studies had attempted to define the concept of *kāvu* and to scrutinize its structure. It was interpreted as a patch of agricultural land, reminiscent of a swidden cultivated forest (Freeman 1999: 261–266), a tribal worship centre (Unnikrishnan 1995), a community facility (Payyanad 2013), an abode of folk gods (Namboothiri 1990), etc. Some recent perspectives visualize *kāvu* as a seamless territory consciously lacking any physical representation of God (be it as natural phenomena or man-made material tokens) and an ecological symbol of tribal worship (Anilkumar 2021). *Kāvu* is also defined as the totality of rites generating new meanings in a ritualistic space (Vadakkiniyil 2014: 77–96). Environmental studies focusing on the cultural contours of subsistence modes of this region signify its association with sacred groves.⁹ They define sacred groves as pieces of forest preserved in their virgin state, undisturbed amidst vegetation transformed by human agricultural activity and resource gathering (Gadgil 2018).

The origins of sacred groves date back to the shifting cultivator and hunter-gatherer societies which attributed sacredness to patches of forest within the territories of resource gathering. Distinct from pastoralism and settled agriculture, swidden cultivation involved the transformation of natural forests into bounded units of land. Since swidden cultivation involved large-scale burning of dried slash and disturbing the organic setting, leaving a piece of the land untouched in its virgin state, and dedicating it to the protective deities of the land might have evolved as a devotional practice to please the folk

⁸ It is to be noted that there are other folk forms of worship and rituals conducted in sacred groves other than *teyyam*. Some of them include serpent worship, the powder art form called *kalameluttu pātu*, etc.

⁹ For more readings on this, refer to Gadgil and Vartak 1976, Gadgil and Malhotra 1983, Ramakrishnan and Patnaik 1992, Gadgil and Chandran 1992, Gadgil, Chandran and Hughes 1998.

gods. The spread of swidden cultivation in the forested hills and slopes reinforced the custom of assigning divinity to the land which ultimately resulted in the evolution of sacred groves (Gadgil, Chandran and Hughes 1998). Protective deities which safeguarded the agricultural land and protected the cattle were worshipped in these sacred patches of sacred forests. The performance ritual of *teyyam* gradually evolved and developed around this mode of worship. On a closer observation of the setting, sacred groves can be seen located either within what once was a patch of forest where swidden cultivation was prominent, a fallow agricultural wetland for paddy cultivation, or a garden plot where areca palms, coconut, pepper, and plantains were grown in plenty.

The concept of *kāvu* integrates a complex ecosystem including human beings, flora, fauna, and other living micro- and macro- entities within it. Unlike the isolated territory of a temple with discrete solid boundary walls around it,¹⁰ sacred grove of *teyyam* performance is a sanctified open space and an ecosystem in itself. It revolves around the generous worldview which defines an ecosystem wherein “the prey and predator coexist in harmony”.¹¹ It is structurally and operationally distinct from the Brahmanical temples where liturgies are centred on a permanently installed idol. *Teyyam* deities being non-tenacious beings have the potency to transmigrate territories, to appear and reappear in various settings as and when desired. At specific occasions of *teyyam* festivals, they are invoked in the sacred performance space. Any habitual landscape like a forest,

¹⁰ According to *Tantrasamuccaya*—a canonical treaty on temple construction—a *mahākṣētram* should be constructed with *pañcaprakāras* or five enclosures (*akatte balivattam*, *chuttambalam*, *vilakkumādam*, *puratte balivattam* and *maryāda*) around the installed deity in the *sanctum sanctorum*. For more details refer to *Tantrasamuccayam*, Kanipayyur Damodaran Nambootiripad 2017: 59.

¹¹ *Paśuvum puliyum onayirikkuna idam* is a popular saying about the sacred groves of *teyyam* performance. The phrase also appears in the mythological narrative of Nēliyar Bhagavati propitiated at Nēliyar Kōttam—a sacred grove at Mangāttuparamba. It signifies the character of a sacred grove of *teyyam* performance as a place where “a cow and tiger live in peace”—a favourable ecosystem in which the prey and the predator live in harmony.

wetland or garden plot transforms itself into a sacred grove when the deities are invoked and performed in it, along with the associated rites and rituals. Thus, in northern Kerala, the concept of *kāvu* as a performance space for *teyyam* connotes multiple meanings. The essence of agrarian culture, social cohesion, and ecological cognizance rooted in indigenous worldview can be seen mirrored in the conscious organization of spaces within a *kāvu* and how it embraces the performance space of *teyyam* (Anilkumar 2021). It remains a seamless zone of greenery wherein every micro aspect is preserved and protected by unwritten laws of ecological consciousness.¹² Apart from mirroring the ecological conscience of a community, *kāvu* forms a colossal canvas against which the mythical fables of *teyyam* are narrated and performed. The sacred space in a *kāvu* is delineated by the physical context of performance together with the spiritual experience generated by the invocation and deification of *teyyam* deities. Thus, *kāvu* can be understood as a transient sacred setting that can be continuously created and recreated by *teyyam* performance.

The cultural landscape of Kolattunāṭu and its ritualistic connotations

Teyyam deities can be seen closely associated with the physiographic singularities of the land. The extensive body of scholarly works on the social formations of early South India portrays Kolattunāṭu as a cultural landscape which evolved in the backdrop of multi-crop agrarian systems, feudal hierarchical structure, and ritualistic order (Gurukkal 2010, Ganesh 2017, Rajesh 2011). Since the administrative territory of Kerala and the cultural realm of Kolattunāṭu was a

¹² The environmental consciousness of indigenous communities formed a legal manifesto for the protection of sacred groves in the region. They restrained themselves from entering the sacred precincts of a *kāvu* and gathering resources from it. The sacred groves like Kuruvakāvu, Āyilyārkaṭu and Idayilekattukāvu are some of the examples. The self-righteousness of the community helped in the protection of biodiversity from any kind of undesirable human intervention.

part of the larger region known as Tamiḷakam¹³, various historical sources of early Tamiḷakam can be integrated into the socio-historic enquiries on Kerala as well (Maloney 1976, Gurukkal 1989: 159–160). A widely discussed literary source of information regarding the history of Tamiḷakam is the Sangam literature¹⁴ which provides a mine of information on the social and political formations of the region (Ganesh 2009b: 151–195). There were long-existent allusions to the Sangam origin of *teyyam* based on theories which linked it to hero worship of the tribes. These propositions indicated an uninterrupted historical continuity of *teyyam* since the period of Sangam literature (Kurup 1973). But later scholars refuted these arguments and associated the origin of *teyyam* worship with the mother goddess and fertility cult traditions of primaeval society (Chandran 2006: 19–25). Mother goddesses like Mucciloṭṭupōti, Kurati, Putiya Bhagavati, Kundora Cāmuṇḍī, and Pañcuruḷi appear in the *teyyam* pantheon as protective mothers, valiant warriors, and fierce goddesses at the same time. However, the *teyyam* songs of all these deities confirm their close association with the agricultural practices of the land. Thus, the theory which propounds mother goddess and fertility worship as a precedent of *teyyam* worship reinforces its tribal agrarian ties and the ecocentric worldview while acknowledging the Tulu influences of *teyyam* and its relationship to the worship of *bhūtakola* cults of Tulunāṭu.¹⁵ It can be observed that the *teyyam*

¹³ Tamiḷakam can be roughly translated as the region inhabited by Tamil-speaking people. Sangam texts hint that the parts of present-day Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra, and Lakshadweep belonged to this cultural region.

¹⁴ The earliest known literature of South India, the Sangam, is considered to have been written between 300 BCE and 300 CE. The collection of Sangam literature includes two major groups of texts: *Eṭṭuttokai* (The Eight Anthologies) and *Pattuppāṭṭu* (The Ten Idylls). Some scholars include in the Sangam corpus also the following: the twin epics of *Cilappatikāram* and *Maṇimēkalai*; the eighteen didactical texts of *Paṭiṇenkiḷkanakku* and the Tamil grammatical treatise of *Tolkāppiyam*. Refer to Rajan Gurukkal 2010 for more details.

¹⁵ Tulunāṭu can be understood as the region of the Tulu-speaking community in coastal Karnataka. Contiguous with the territory of Kolattunāṭu, it shares several political, cultural, and social traits. The spirit-worshipping tradition of

forms worshipped in Kolattunāṭu retain strong ties with Tulunāṭu in terms of their mythological narrative, routes of transmigration, and association with the agrarian culture (Freeman 2006). The *bhūta* forms like Pañcuruḷi Cāmuṇḍī, Guḷikan etc. can be seen associated with the *teyyam* forms of Kolattunāṭu with the same names (Karippathu 2012: 138–141). Kundora Cāmuṇḍī who hailed from Tulunāṭu, Mañjunāthan *teyyam* believed to have travelled from Kalyanapura to Kolattunāṭu, and Pālantāyi Kaṇṇan who took his route to Mangalapura from Kolattunāṭu are examples of deities strongly associated with the Tulu traditions.

A significant interpretation of the poetic landscape of Sangam anthologies is the physiographic divisions of the region known as *tiṇais*. Sangam poetics describe five distinct categories of Tamil landscape in which the mood of love poems and heroic verses were set. These include: *kuṟiñci* which constituted the swidden cultivated hilly forests, *pālai* or the parched zone formed due to seasonal changes, *mullai* comprising pastoral hills and slopes, *marutam* or the paddy-cultivated wetlands and *neital*, the coastal zone (Gurukkal 1989: 164). The poetic landscape divisions are identified with real, naturally occurring geographical regions of Tamiḷakam by later scholars. They are understood as an interspersed, overlapping continuum in the environment which neither had any sequential order in chronology nor a definite beginning or end (Gurukkal 1989: 164, Ganesh 2009b: 153). The undulating terrain of the Kolattunāṭu region identifies itself with the physiographic zones of *tiṇais* in Sangam anthologies. The presence of a long coastline, vast lateritic belts, thick forested hills, slopes, and valleys, all closely interspersed, make for easy identification with the Sangam landscape. Just like the topographic features, the *teyyam* deities of Kolattunāṭu as well can be precisely linked to the physiographic zones and their associated subsistence modes as mentioned in the Sangam anthologies. Folk spirits related to swidden cultivation and hunting were

bhūtakola or *bhūtaradhane* prevailing in Tulunāṭu maintains a close connection with the *teyyam* practice of its contiguous region—Kolattunāṭu.

propitiated in the forested hillocks and slopes of *kuṛiñci tiṇai*. Deities like Kuratti, Kotuvālan, Kankālan, Thorakkāratti, Nellukuttipōti, and Kāpālattipōti are believed to be the saviors of the swidden cultivated hills. The mythological narrative of these *teyyam* deities gives detailed descriptions of swidden cultivation and hunting in the forested hills and slopes of *kuṛiñci*. Hunting tradition, independently and as a part of swidden cultivation, subsequently led to the development of hunter cult practices in the *teyyam* ritual. Ritual hunts or mock hunts known as *paḷḷiveṭṭa* conducted as a part of *teyyam* performances of hunter cult practices like Muttapaṇ and Vayanāṭṭu kulavan strike a chord with hunting traditions conducted as a part of swidden cultivation (Rahman 2019: 38–54). Even today there are annual ritual hunts organized as a part of the *teyyam* festivals. The ritual known as *bappital*¹⁶ conducted in connection with the performance of Vayanāṭṭu kulavan involves large-scale hunting, poaching and animal sacrifice. The constant presence of dogs in the liturgies of Muttapaṇ and the role of dogs as close companions of human beings in hunter-gatherer societies imply the association of this cult practice with hunting traditions. *Ayan tōttam* also known as *ayan manda* is a piece of folk ballad recited at the beginning of the *teyyam* performance of Muttapaṇ. It presents a comprehensive narration of the hunting practices, preparatory procedures, suitable time, place and conditions for hunting, the significance of dogs in hunting and also mentions the names of 18 prevailing hunting traditions of the time (Balakrishnan 2005: 128–137, Kannan 2007: 121–126). The presence of administrative institutions like *urpaḷli*, with delineated hunting territories under them and sacred hunting sanctu-

¹⁶ *Bappital* is an integral part of the propitiation of Vayanāṭṭukulavan *teyyam* which involves the poaching of wild animals to propitiate the deity. Though such mock hunts are conducted as mere symbolic rituals for most *teyyam* forms today, the ritual hunts organized as a part of Vayanāṭṭukulavan *teyyam* performance involves all the ritualistic formalities conducted to its fullest extent without any legal sanctions. This includes large-scale poaching of wild animals like barking deer, squirrels, and wild boars. Detailed documentation of this ritual was captured by M. A. Rahman in his documentary film *Gotrasmiti* directed by M. A. Rahman. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6M_9nLpcgBQ.

aries called *mundya*, hints at the significance of hunting tradition as a part of swidden cultivation in the past (Namboothiri 1990: 116–122). Similarly, the cult of *puliteyyams* (tiger cults) is said to have evolved around the duels between hunter and the prey wherein both were later venerated as *teyyam* deities¹⁷ (Freeman 1999: 277, Namboothiri 1990: 131).

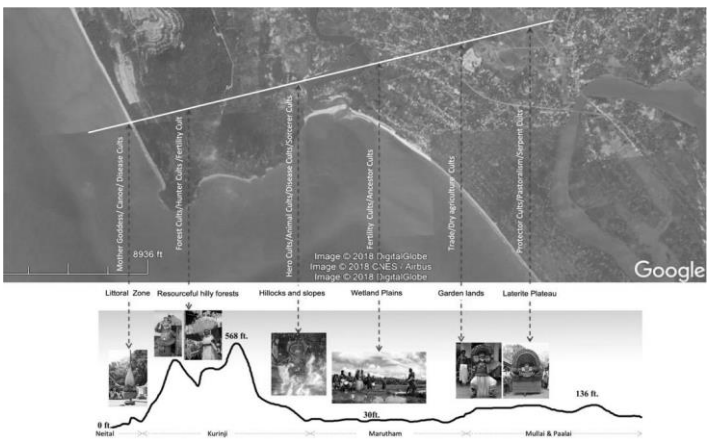


Fig. 1. Diagram interpreting the association of *teyyam* cults to the subsistence zones. Source: Author

There are several *teyyam* deities that are traditionally appeased in association with the cultivation of wetland paddy in *marutam tīṇai*. Valiyavaḷappil Cāmuṇḍī, by sowing the first seeds in the paddy wetlands of Ceṟuvattūr in the month of *tulām*, initiates both the

¹⁷ The prominent group of deities worshipped under the category of *puliteyyams* are the Aivarpuliteyyams—the five tiger gods which include Kālapuli, Mārapuli, Kaṇḍapuli, Pulimārutan and Puliūr Kaṇṇan. Another female *teyyam* deity called Puliūr Kali is also associated with this group. The ballads of these deities elaborate the duels between a brave warrior Karinthiri Nair and Pulikandan (believed to be the animal manifestation of lord Śiva) wherein both were later deified as *teyyam* deities. Refer to Namboothiri 1990: 59–83 for more details on this.

agricultural process and the *teyyam* performance for the season. Kāliceḥon and Kārtika Cāmuṇḍī are considered to be the protector deities of cattle and agricultural fields in the pastoral plains and slopes of *mullai tiṇai*. The well-developed network of overseas trade and exchange in this region facilitated the development of *teyyam* cults in the *neital tiṇai* along the coastal belt. It is a well-recorded fact that the abundant supply of spices and natural resources from the hinterlands of Kolattunāṭu attracted traders and travelers to this territory since 300 BCE (Varkey 2006: 117–138). The favourable geography offered by the western coast made it possible for the merchant guilds to integrate local exchange networks of Kolattunāṭu with the global market. Port towns developed along the littoral tracts, facilitated by the favourable coastal morphology and easy access to hinterlands provided by the network of riverine and land routes.¹⁸ ‘Canoe cults’ refer to veneration of a group of deities that evolved around the network of overseas trade and exchanges along the coastal belt of Kolattunāṭu. Pūmāla Bhagavati, Āyiti Bhagavati, Uchūlikatavattu Bhagavati, Āryapūṅkanni, Chuḷali Bhagavati, etc. are some of the deities that belong to this group, which voyaged from Āryanāṭu in a canoe and crossing the seas reached Malanāṭu.¹⁹

¹⁸ The favourable conditions offered by the morphology of the west coast including the availability of natural harbours, and the hydrographical significance of sea contours which contributed to the establishment of ports along the coastal belt. The shallow floor of the Arabian Sea along the Kerala coast facilitated safe anchorage points, devoid of any violent wave thrust, for the incoming vessels. The well-connected network of land and riverine routes linked these ports to the resources rich eastern hinterlands of the region. For more readings refer to Mailaparambil 2011 and Malekandathil 2002.

¹⁹ Āryanāṭu, also mentioned as Āryakettu or Āryakkara in the *teyyam* texts, signifies the land of Indo-Aryan migration around the northern Gangetic plains. It can also be seen referring to the middle east Asian region from where there was a significant inflow of population to the western coast of India. The term Malanāṭu can be seen used in various texts (*Marakkalapāṭu* of Pūmāla Bhagavati, *Ballads* of Katiyanūr Vīran *teyyam*, etc.) to signify the region of Kerala which was famous for its eastern hills with their abundant supply of pepper and several other spices. According to Boverianda and Nanjamma 2014, folksongs of Kodagu mention Kerala as *Mānikya Malanāṭu* which translates as ‘the precious land of the hills’. This re-

The folk ballads focused on such deities, also known as Marak-kalapāṭṭu, describe in detail their sea voyages. For instance, the songs of Pūmāla Bhagavati vividly portray the old shipbuilding techniques, sea voyages, and the names of several ports she traversed to reach Edathūr and settle down at Rāmavilyam shrine near Trikkaripūr.²⁰

Viswakarma determines an auspicious time to build the vessel,
There puts the stump of a sandal wood tree,
measures a length of forty *kol*-s,
measures a distance of twenty *kol*-s.
On an auspicious day and auspicious time, did the logs of upper
and lower parts of the vessel got fixed.

(Translation after Balakrishnan 2005: 477)

According to the ballad, Āyiti Bhagavati and her companions are said to have anchored at Edathūr estuary and accompanied Nellikka *thīyyan* (a person belonging to the caste of toddy tappers) towards the north to reach Nellikka Akathūṭṭu, and further travelled and settled at Oriyarakāvu and Kulangāṭṭu hill near Ceṟuvattūr. The littoral landscape of the region, the sea and the symbols associated with marine subsistence turn out to be an incessant presence in the songs and liturgies of canoe deities. The chronicles of canoe cults are not just myths of divinities who crossed the ocean to reach this land. It encompasses the history of port towns, details of maritime

gion is also referred to as Malabar by the travelers. Etymologically *mala* is a Dravidian term which refers to mountains and the term *bar* refers to land in Arabic and to coast in Persian. In a broader sense Malanāṭu in this report connotes the geographical region of Kerala which includes the undulating terrain of coastal belts, plains, and forested hills rich in spices.

²⁰ The folk songs of Pūmāla Bhagavati mention the names of estuaries at Aryakkara, Gangakkara, Arabikkara, Ananthakkara, Gokarnnakkara Ananthaasi, Jagavalli, Kanyapuram, Vadaveeswaram, Shayyapuram, Asthinapuram, Thoranamugham, Vellimankallu, Anantheswaram, Kunthapuram, Mangalapuram, Ullapuram, Kumbalakkara, Kanhirangode, Pandyan kallu, Cheekkaikadavu, etc. They reveal significant historical data on the ports and settlements of maritime trade, waterways, and inland networks which connected the ports and the hinterlands.

trade, goods traded and the traditional knowledge of shipbuilding in Kerala (Namboothiri 1990: 107–109). It is interesting to note that most of the deities in the canoe cults are female. There are, though, certain male deities, like Villāpuratt Asurālan, Villāpuratt Vatakkān koṭivīran, Bappiriyan and Pūmārutan, among them as well. But the male divinities associated with this cult belong to the Muslim community and play the role of companions of the goddesses who escorted and guided them to cross the rough sea during their voyages. In *teyyam* performances, they often appear as oracles or humorous characters known as *porāttu*. The Muslim characters in the *teyyam* pantheon are addressed as Mātāyi nagaram. Mātāyi was an ancient port along the western coast; it finds its mention in many significant travelers' records. Explorers like Ibn Battuta, Marco Polo, and Duarte Barbosa describe Mātāyi as a prosperous port town with burgeoning trade and commercial activities, inhabited by Moors and Jews (Barbosa 1967, Barbosa 2011: 149, McCrindle 1885). The travelers' records and orature of *teyyam* taken together hint at a strong presence of Muslim community in the maritime sphere and the long-lasting commercial ties they had in the region since time immemorial. Several archaeological and architectural edifices in the present-day Mātāyi prove these associations further.²¹ An attempt to spatially map the sacred shrines of the canoe cults revealed their spread along the long coastal belt of Kolattunāṭu (Fig. 2). The people who worshipped these deities were the community of traditional fishermen (Mukkuva and Mokayar community) and toddy tappers (Tīyya community) of the region. The spatial dispersal of shrines revealed a close association of these deities with the social groups who depended on the sea for their livelihood.

²¹ The sherds of turquoise glazed ware excavated from Mātāyi creek (assumed to belong to the 7th–9th century CE) hinted at the trade relationship with the West Asian world (Rajesh 2011). The presence of Jewish Pond (Jūtākulam), Mātāyi Mosque (Mātāyipalli), etc. substantiates the presence of diverse communities in this region.



Fig. 2. Spatial mapping of the shrines venerated by the fishermen community of Kolattunātu. Source: Author.

The analysis filtered from the above discussions reveals that each terrain is associated with a group of *teyyam* deities. The *teyyam* of the coastal zone is different from that of the forested hills, mountains, slopes, and wetlands. Even though all these deities carry certain common characteristics and can be associated with a particular physiographic region, notable is their geographical spread throughout the landscape. This occurrence can be well explained by citing examples of recurrent patterns of human movements across the landscape, within and between various geographical realms as a result of military expeditions, warfare, seasonal jobs, and refugee movements (Freeman 1999: 285–287). There are *teyyam* songs which elaborately narrate the movement of deities across the landscape, to and from the forested hills, midland plains, and lowlands. Transmigration is a significant theme in the folk ballads of *teyyam* forms like Kativanūr Vīran, Vayanāṭṭu Kulavan, Perumbuḷayaccan, Putiya Bhagavati and Kūumba Bhagavati.²² Worth mentioning is the interesting case of a *teyyam* oracle²³ belonging to the community of fishermen narrating his experience of travelling to the eastern hills of Kodagu (Coorg) as a helper for pepper cultivation and road construction works during the time of famine in the coastal region (Anilkumar 2020). There existed a strong network of exchange in the region wherein the diverse agricultural and craft products from various eco-zones were bartered. The exchange of domestic prod-

²² Ballads of Kativanūr Vīran *teyyam* narrate details of the deities' travel from the coastal town of Kolattunāṭu to the Kodagu (Coorg) hills in the east. Vayanāṭṭukulavan is a deity who traversed the Wayanad hills to reach the region of Kolattunāṭu. The myth of Perumbuḷayaccan *teyyam* narrates the journey of a trader from the region of Andhra Pradesh to Kolattunāṭu. Putiya Bhagavati and Kurumba Bhagavati are deities who voyaged along the highlands and the littoral belt of Kolattunāṭu respectively as mentioned in the mythology.

²³ Ambadi Moyon popularly known as Asrālan Thambachi among the *teyyam* devotees belongs to the Mokayar community of the Kasaragod region. He is the oracle of Villāpuratt Asuralan *teyyam* who accompanied Āyiti Bhagavati to Malanāṭu, voyaging in a canoe. (Oracles are representatives of the full manifestation of *teyyam* deities. They are believed to be mediums through which God will speak to the devotees. They make prophetic predictions and orature on the behalf of the deities.) Asuralan *teyyam* is deified at Kuruvapaḷḷiyara near Trikaripūr coast.

ucts between the *tiṇais* and overseas trade relations are narrated in *teyyam* ballads.²⁴ Narrow passes in the mountain slopes (*curam*) have been active linkages for the reciprocal relationship between the *tiṇais*. *Turai*—an open space of interface between land and water bodies developed as centres of surplus exchange and coastal transactions (Ganesh 2009b: 172). *Teyyam* festivals also provided a platform for the exchange of seasonal agricultural and craft products obtained through harvest. Garden crops like areca nut, betel leaves, jackfruit, coconut, and other domestic crafts products were widely exchanged in the festival markets. These products from the agrarian landscape of Kolattunāṭu also appear as offerings for the *teyyam* deities propitiated in the sacred groves, temples, and households.

Social structure and settlements: Societal reflections in *teyyam* liturgies

This section will discuss the consistent co-existence of *teyyam* with the natural landscape and its idiosyncrasies which resulted in distinctive cultural and social formations of the region. Around the later phase of the 6th century CE, a steady growth of agrarian settlements in the backdrop of multi-crop production zones resulted in the configuration of several occupational groups in the region namely the agricultural production forces, crafts groups and merchant communities, ritual functionaries, intermediaries, and service groups

²⁴ Ballads of *teyyam* forms like Kativanūr Vīran, Perumbuḷayaccan, Mut-tapan, etc. provide significant hints of such exchanges. For example, in the ballad of Kativanūr Vīran there are instances of the hero exchanging agricultural products with the people at check post:

Thenga kodutt chunkikalōdu ariyum vāṅgi
Chunkikalōdu vekkum pātram vāṅgi kondu
Annavide vere vechundokka sugham kalinju.

(Namboothiri 1997: 81–82)

Transl.: He bartered rice for coconut from the tax collectors at the border. Also borrowed from them the necessary vessels to cook, had the food there and comfortably stationed at the check-post that night.

(Rajesh 2011: 53). The hierarchical social structure was spatially manifested in the temple-centred *grāmams* as depicted in the diagram (Fig. 3). Temples became the nucleus of settlements around which the ritual functionaries, service class, and occupational crafts groups placed themselves in corresponding layers.²⁵ Agricultural production forces were the marginalized group in the social system and occupied the outermost layer of the hierarchical spatial order. It can be observed that they were dispersed proximal to the production units at the fringes of the settlement.

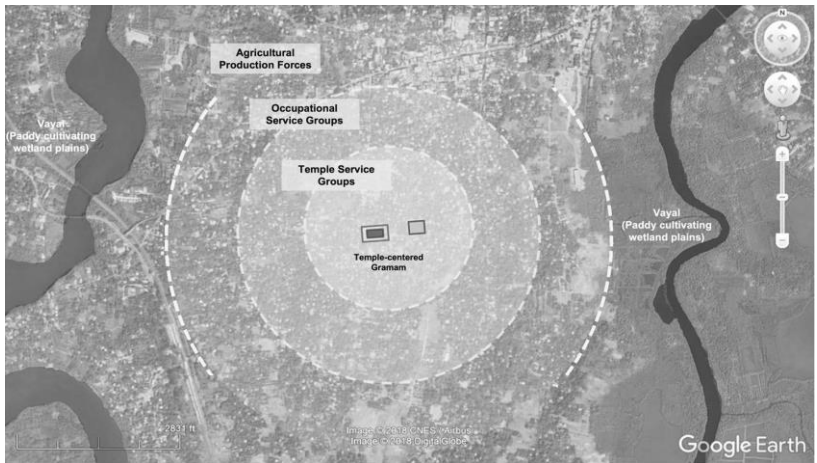


Fig. 3. An interpretative diagram of the social structure manifested in the hierarchical spatial organization of settlements. Source: Author

Sanketams of the Brahmins and *svarūpams*²⁶ of the royalty were two powerful socio-religious institutions which evolved in the

²⁵ A close observation of the existing spatial morphology of the Brahmanical settlements in the region like Peruñcellūr Grāmam (present-day Taliparamba), Payyanur Grāmam, etc. reveals the evidence of such hierarchical layers.

²⁶ *Sanketams* were powerful, autonomous institutions of the Brahmins and were formed in this region during the early medieval period (7th–8th century CE). *Svarūpam* refers to the political units which included the matrilineal joint families

social realm of medieval Kerala (Ganesh 2017). The Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva deities worshipped in Brahminic temples were constituted under the *sanketams* whereas the tutelar deities from the *teyyam* pantheon were believed to be protecting the political units of *svarūpam*. The tutelar goddess of the Kola *svarūpam* was Mātāyikāvilacci (Nair 2000) and that of the Allāṭam *svarūpam* was Kṣētrapālan—both being *teyyam* deities.²⁷ Below these equally powerful religious institutions were the temples of non-Brahminic higher castes and the socio-religious community centres of the occupational groups constituted therein. Known under various names like Kaḷakam of the Tīyya community, Kaṇṇangāṭṭu of Maṇiyaṇi community, Mucciloṭṭu of Vāṇiya community, etc., the chief god/goddess of these community centres was a *teyyam* deity, also considered to be the clan deity of the respective community. The community centres were constituted under the authority of the land-holding class but had their traditional priests and officials drawn exclusively from the community (Karippathu 2012: 184–198). Other communities offered services to these sacred centres through their traditional occupation during the occasion of a *teyyam* performance. For instance, the carpenter did the maintenance work of *teyyam* shrines, blacksmiths were responsible for polishing and sharpening the weapons, members of the Tīyya community prepared toddy offerings, oil mongers held rights to carry the sacred torch

of the region. The influence of Brahminic rituals was evident in the functioning of a *svarūpam*. The coronation ceremony and the related rituals of entitlement in which the ruler was elevated to Kshatriya status were conducted by the Peruñcellūr Brahmins which indicates a clear ritual dominance of Peruñcellūr *sanketam* over the *svarūpam*.

²⁷ Kṣētrapālan is worshiped as the ‘lord of the land’ and the guardian deity of temples in Kerala. The origin of the cult of Kṣētrapālan in *teyyam* worship is associated with the formation of Allāṭam *svarūpam* as an extension of the erstwhile Kola *svarūpam* between 14th and 15th centuries. As the mythology narrates, Kṣētrapālan sets out from Neṭiyirup *svarūpam* along with his companions to conquer the territory of Allāṭam. The political history of this region reveals a military expedition and consequent migration under the joint leadership of Kṣētrapālan and his warrior allies who later were propitiated as the guardian deities of Allāṭam *svarūpam*. For more details refer to Freeman 1991.

during the performance, and weavers provided threads for decorations. It was under these socio-religious community spaces that the other minor *teyyam* performing centres of the region were constituted.²⁸

Teyyam performance and its associated liturgies also played a significant role in the formation of *nāṭus* and the hierarchical dispersal of social groups within it. *Nāṭus* can be understood as the structural amalgamation of multi-crop agricultural landholdings based on the production and distribution processes and the resultant power relations (Ganesh 2017, Ganesh 2009a). K. K. N. Kurup's study elaborates that the upper seals in the *teyyam* ritual are the result of a strategic reconciliation between the ruling class who had an upper hand in the production process and the outcastes who were the actual tillers of the land. As a result of this, the *teyyam* deities became subservient to temple deities, the upper caste supremacy in the production and distribution process continued, and the economic interests of the ruling class were perpetuated thereby eliminating any possible conflicts (Kurup 1973). While examining this social context, the sacred spaces of the *teyyam* performance turn out to be a microcosm of the indigenous settlement itself with different communities and occupational groups settling at specifically allocated spaces within it. Every occupational group contributing to the *teyyam* festival can be seen spatially dispersed within the sacred realm such that the existing social order is re-interpreted with respect to the feudal agricultural hierarchies. It proposes a parallel universe to

²⁸ For instance, the ritualistic landscape of the Tīyya community in north Kerala can be seen as organized under the four socio-religious institutions known as *kaḷakams*. They are Kuruvanthatta *kaḷakam* and Rāmavilyam *kaḷakam* located in the present-day Kannur district, and Nilamangalam *kaḷakam* and Pālakkunnu *kaḷakam* situated in Kasaragod district. Pūmāla Bhagavati is the chief deity venerated at these *kaḷakam* centres. Constituted under each *kaḷakam* are a few sacred centres popularly known under the names *stānam*, *mundya* or *ara* where folk gods and goddesses are worshipped as presiding deities of the Tīyya community. Under Rāmavilyam there are five *mundyas*; Olavara *mundya*, Kūleri *mundya*, Kuruvapaḷḷi *ara*, and Tatiyan Kovil *mundya* where Viṣṇumūrti *teyyam* is propitiated as the chief deity along with other folk gods.

the existing hierarchies which were based on the feudal agricultural system.²⁹ The periphery of the sacred performance space would be often occupied by the local markets wherein products from different ecozones are exchanged. Marginalized groups in the existing social order (tillers) come to the central focus of the territory since they are also the *teyyam* performers. Ritual functionaries and temple service groups are replaced by the priests and officials from the *teyyam* worshipping communities. The positioning of other occupational groups like oil mongers, washermen, toddy tappers, etc. respective to their services can be seen dispersed around the sacred space of *teyyam* performance. Thus, the microcosm of the settlement created during a *teyyam* performance also reflects a collective social resistance which in turn was the result of existing feudal agricultural hierarchies (Fig. 4).

²⁹ The inferences mentioned here are derived from field studies and observations conducted at the *teyyam* shrine Chirakutti Putiya *kāvu* also known as Vayalile Kottam near Keecheri in Kannur district during the *teyyam* festival of January 2022.

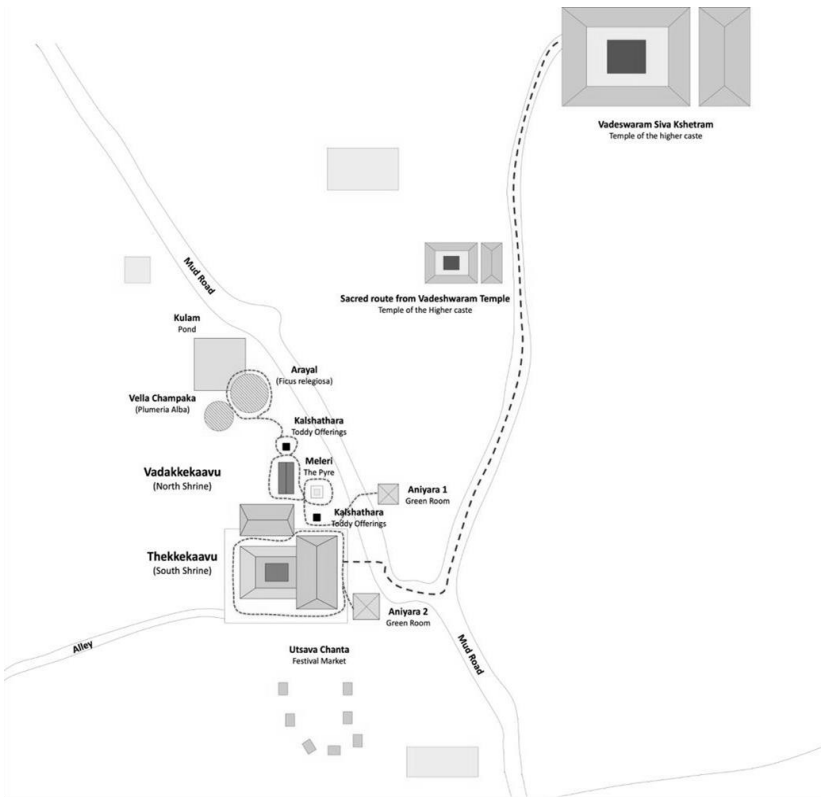


Fig. 4. Interpretative diagram representing the spatial dispersal of social groups within a sacred realm. Based on the field study and observation at Chirakutti Putiya *kāvu*, Keecheri. Source: Author

Cerujanmam* land rights: The emergence of patronage in *teyyam

The evolution of land as a transactional entity in the social sphere of Kolattunāṭu and the introduction of land grants in the region had a significant impact on its spiritual realm. Even though the idea of individual land ownership was absent, land transactions remained

complicated during the period of early social formations in Kolatunāṭu (Gurukkal 2010). A shift from the collective holding of land to its attainment of transaction value played a significant role in the evolution of various land rights in the region³⁰ (Rajesh 2011). The formation of different land ownership types established strong feudal politics in the region wherein the status of land holding defined the hierarchy of a social group in the existing feudal system (Ganesh 1999). This hierarchical configuration was extended to the religious realm wherein it gradually established strong control over the system of worship. *Cerujanmam* entails the customary land rights granted to the service class defining their territory of service distribution and the extent of land from which they were supposed to receive any resources in return. In *teyyam* parlance, the *cerujanmam* land rights can be interpreted as a sacred geography assigned to each performer and his lineage in a *svarūpam* for the performance of the *teyyam* ritual (Komath 2013: 9–10). It included the rights to the share of produce from the delineated land assigned to the performer to render their service. These delineations necessitated the performer to be aware of all the events and particulars of his village and kept him rooted in his homeland. Violation of rights led to severe punishments by the authority.³¹

The practice of venerating *teyyam* cults within their production units was prominent among the agrarian communities which worked in the lands owned by higher castes. In a feudal agricultural system,

³⁰ The *brahmasvom* land grants of Brahmins and *devasvom* lands of the temples evolved in the region. *Cherikkal* lands were the crown land held by the ruling aristocracy. The title holders of royalty and temple service groups received *viruti* lands as a reward for their service. *Janmam* was the hereditary proprietorship over the land granted to occupational groups who serviced the royal households and the village. *Kāṇam* was the mortgage tenure and involved obtaining lands on lease for a stipulated period after paying a certain amount of money as security. For more details refer to Gurukkal 2010.

³¹ Conversations with *teyyam* performer Sri Biju Panikkar from Kalliasseri revealed several such instances where severe punishments including expulsion from the community or barring from the ritual were imposed on *teyyam* performers for violating land rights and performing outside their stipulated territory.

they had to seek the permission of the landlords for conducting *teyyam* performances in sacred groves which were part of the cultivated land itself. Thus, the dominance enjoyed by the land-holding communities over the production lands was extended to the religious realm through the process of establishing authority over the indigenous worship system which eventually resulted in patronizing these deities through the grant of land rights. Even today *teyyam* performances are organized under the patronage of the land-holding class or their representatives known as *koyma*.³² Before the commencement of a *teyyam* festival, the organizers and performers approach *koyma* seeking permission for the same. Often the sacred fire for lighting the lamps at a *teyyam* performance space will be brought from temples belonging to the *koyma*. A ritual procession from the *teyyam* shrine which carries prestaton to the Brahminic deity in the temple is also common. All these hint at an evident manifestation of the feudal hierarchical power structure in the religious realm of Kollattunāṭu. The system of land grants which defined the occupational territory of each social group demonstrated a curated model which followed the sustainable pattern of ‘using in proportion to generations.’ They did strike a refined balance between the needs and usage patterns of an indigenous tribal community. It also mirrored the traditional land use system in which land was a shared entity collectively held by the community (Gadgil and Malhotra 1983). Each privilege holder with an equal division of labour and land operated within their specific territory without infringing into other's area.

³² *Cerujanmam* rights are granted by the ruling power, through title holders or chieftains of the *svarūpam* called *koyma*. *Koyma* in a *teyyam* shrine will be the heirs of the landholding class who donated their land or made necessary arrangements for the *teyyam* performance to happen in their landed estates for the first time. For more details on this refer to Karippathu 2012.

Kunnattūrpāṭi: An ephemeral landscape of Muttapaṇ

This section attempts to demonstrate the strong ecological perspective interwoven into every aspect of *teyyam* worship through the case example of the *teyyam* festival held at Kunnattūrpāṭi—the sacred hill associated with the deity of Muttapaṇ.³³ Muttapaṇ is one of the most popular, celebrated, and ubiquitous deities in the *teyyam* pantheon. Muttapaṇ as a *teyyam* deity was venerated in the eastern hilly regions of Kolattunāṭu in association with the annual harvest of swidden cultivation and hunting practices (Kannan 2007: 89). Veneration of Muttapaṇ *teyyam* does not demand a permanent, built shrine or any specific ritual service. The temporal and spatial dimensions of the Muttapaṇ cult are observed to be simple and adaptable to a range of spaces. Though the spirit of Muttapaṇ can be invoked to any space and the *teyyam* can be performed at any time, two specific sacred contexts are prescribed for the deification of Muttapaṇ *teyyam*; the *matapūra* and the *potikkaḷam*. The character of these spaces differs from the sacred sanctuaries of any other *teyyam* deity. A *potikkaḷam* constitutes the space arranged under a sacred tree with a lighted lamp on a raised platform. Any space can be transformed into a sacred *potikkaḷam* with a bare minimum of spatial and ritual engagements. *Matapūra* comes from the term *mata* which refers to a cave or den in the forest inhabited by wild animals. In the ritualistic context, it is a relatively physical and spatial setting wherein temporary shelters are built, and daily rituals and ritualistic maintenance are ensured.

Kunnattūrpāṭi was the first abode of Muttapaṇ (Kannan 2007: 38). The landscape of Kunnattūrpāṭi sprawls over the highest peak in the forested hills of Udumbumala near Payyavūr in Kannur district. It covers an area of around 250 acres and is patronized by the family of chieftains of Cuḷali *svarūpam* called Karakkāṭṭidam Nayanār. The priests, oracles, and officials of Muttapaṇ at Kunnattūrpāṭi belong to

³³ The inferences mentioned here are based on the observations from a field study conducted at the sacred shrine of Kunnattūrpāṭi, Payyavoor, during the *teyyam* festival of December 2022.

the community of indigenous tribes of the forest. The five variants of Muttapaṇ *teyyam* performed at Kunnattūrpaṭi are Purankāla Muttapaṇ, Putiya Muttapaṇ, Nāṭuvāli Muttapaṇ, Puraḷimala Muttapaṇ and Nambala Muttapaṇ. Along with these deities, a female goddess called Mūlampetta Bhagavati also makes a brief appearance during the *teyyam* festival at Pāṭi³⁴ (Kannan 2007: 30). *Teyyam* festivities happen every year in the hilly forests of Kunnattūrpaṭi whereas monthly rites, ritual offerings, and performances for Muttapaṇ happen at the sanctum situated downhill.



Fig. 5. Satellite imagery showing the location of Kunnattūr Pāṭi hill. Source: Google Earth.

The sacred centre of Kunnattūr where the *teyyam* performance happens is a virgin forest hill which can only be climbed on foot. Entry to this place is strictly restricted to devotees and visitors except during the yearly *teyyam* festival. From the entranceway down the road, stone-paved steps lead up half the way after which there is a steep climb uphill through the rugged forest path marked by huge

³⁴ Mūlampetta Bhagavati, though widely known and written as an incarnation of Muttapaṇ's Brahmin mother Pāṭikutti Antarjanam; interestingly, many devotees at the festival identified her as the divine personification of forest goddess worshipped by the tribes of Kunnattūrpaṭi.

tree roots, potholes, and stones. There is no sacred shrine or any permanently built elements dedicated to the deity here. A gallery space suitable for the spectators to watch the *teyyam* performance has been created by conveniently clearing and shaping the existing slope of the hillside. The bottom edge of this gallery defines a mud-swabbed courtyard space which faces the sacred sanctum called *matapūra*. The *matapūra* here is a narrow cave partially covered by a thatch at its entrance which can only be accessed with great difficulty due to its low height. The entry to this sacred cave is restricted to the tribal priest and his female counterpart alone.³⁵ It is in the central court that the *teyyam* performance and all associated rituals are conducted. At the centre of the court stands a mud pedestal symbolizing the divine altar called *pētakallu*. On either side of the court are thatched huts built for the officials and patrons of the sacred centre. Towards the north of this sacred setting is a natural spring protected by a temporary stone hedge built around it.

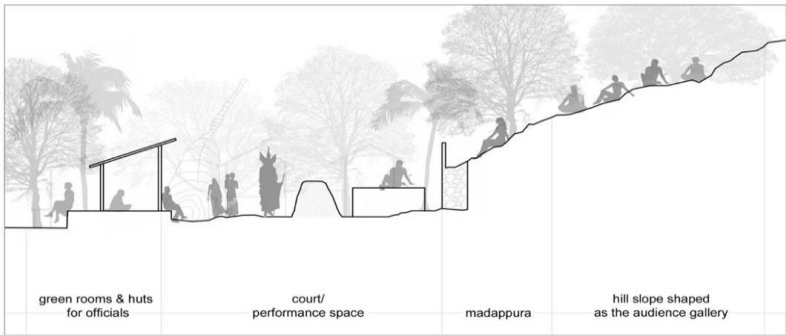


Fig. 6. Performance configuration at Kunnattūrpāṭi—the sacred abode of Muttapaṇ. Source: Author.

³⁵ The right to perform observances at Kunnattūrpāṭi is vested with the ritual servant called Chanthan belonging to the *Mōttōrān* lineage of Kunnattūr region. Apart from Chanthan, another person who has the right to enter the sacred cave is his wife known under the customary title Kallayikodi Adiyātti.

Teyyam performance at Pāṭi happens on the coldest winter nights of the months *dhanu* and *makaram*. Spectators, including women and children, wait patiently for the *teyyam* performance to begin by watching the artists preparing for the ritual and the performer painting his face and putting on the costumes in the central court. The spirit of the deity is invoked to this sacred central court where all rites and rituals related to the performance are conducted. The ritual of *malakēkal* in all the sacred shrines of Muttapaṇ elsewhere involves the invocation of the spirit to the performance space from the hills of Kunnattūrpāṭi whereas, in Pāṭi, Muttapaṇ is believed to descend from the sacred hills of Puraḷimala (another sacred shrine of Muttapaṇ). The central courtyard here simultaneously acts as the main venue of the *teyyam* performance, a backstage, and a green room. The impressive view of the *teyyam* performance in the backdrop of the dark woods and silence of the forest, from the elevated level of the audience gallery shaped out of the hill in the warm light of fire torches, creates a transcendental experience in its totality. Every year before the beginning of the festive season a ceremony called *pāṭiyil paṇi* is held in which the officials and heirs of the place climb uphill to clear the forest and prepare the space for the *teyyam* festival. They also gather bamboo and reeds from the forest to light the fire torches during the performance. During the festive months the landscape of Pāṭi is filled with the hustle and bustle of this rural festival. Right from the entrance down the road, all along the rugged terrain towards the sacred sanctum uphill, there will be food stalls and temporary sheds set up for festival markets. At the performance space atop the hill, all facilities including the offering counters, offices and outposts will be built as temporary thatched shelters, intervening in the organic setting of the forest in the least possible way.



Fig. 7. The ritualistic landscape of Kunnattūrpāṭi during the *teyyam* performance. Source: Author.



Fig. 8. The regenerated landscape of Kunnattūrpāṭi after the festival. Source: Photograph by Mr. V. K. Anilkumar.

After the one-month-long festival, the region is once again left untouched, devoid of any human intervention for the rest of the year. The dense forest which became the vibrant, sacred seat of Muttapaṇ during the festivities goes back to its tranquil lethargy for the rest of the season. During this dormant phase, the landscape regenerates itself through the flora and fauna getting back to its indigenous abode. Devoid of any outside commotion, in the peace of solitary woods and backdrop of its low chanting hymns, the indigenous species, together with the tribal god, regain their territory. During the occasion of the festival and *teyyam* performance, the sacred setting shaped out of the natural landscape ascribes a transient meaning to every natural and built element in it. The central court, thatched sheds assigned to the officials, mud altar and the audience gallery etched on a hill slope; everything together crafts the physical and spiritual setting for the *teyyam* festival. Post the festivities, the landscape detached from its sacred meanings merges back with nature after the withdrawal of human interventions. In the background of the spatial behaviour of Muttapaṇ as discussed in the previous section and examination of the organic performance of this *teyyam* deity in its naturally curated setting, Kunnattūrpāṭi can be interpreted as an ephemeral landscape which generates and regenerates sacred meanings. It precisely demonstrates the optimal interface between humans and nature in which the resources are ideally mobilized with mutual respect and reverence in the backdrop of a folk liturgy.

Observations and conclusions

The study contributed to the understanding of the cultic practice of *teyyam* and presented nuanced observations on its association with the natural landscape. The theory of the origin of *teyyam* worship from the agrarian practices of Kolattunāṭu can be validated through the details of its performance and rituals. The spatial and temporal dimensions of *teyyam* were observed to be closely associated with

the agricultural practices of Kolattunāṭu. *Teyyam* had a definite role to play in the evolution of the production landscape and social formations of the region. The folk ballads of *teyyam* deities discussed in the study are rich in their narration of the modes of production, forces of production, production process and agricultural activities, hunting, maritime and hinterland trade, products and goods of exchange, the system of taxation, trade routes, etc. The songs of fertility deities like Kurati narrate in detail the process of paddy cultivation, the types and variety of seeds used in cultivation and various modes of production. *Teyyam* deities like Valiyavaḷappil Cāmuṇḍī, Nellukutipōti and Thorakkāratti enact agricultural activities during the performance. Hunter cults like Muttapaṇ, Ayappaṇ, and Malappilavaṇ paint an illustrative image of traditional hunting practices in association with swidden cultivation and its ritualistic connotations. The songs of canoe cults are rich in details of sea voyages and the process of trade and overseas exchanges. *Teyyam* songs of Kativanūr Vīraṇ and Perumbuḷayaccaṇ give comprehensive narrations of inland trade, trade routes and details of transboundary landscapes which they transmigrate.

The heavily undulated terrain of the region which corresponded to the ecozones known as *tiṇais* called for the evolution of *teyyam* cults specific to varying topographies. The association of *teyyam* cults with *tiṇais* of Sangam anthologies is a significant spatial construct established in the landscape of Kolattunāṭu. Throughout the evolution of the ritualistic landscape of Kolattunāṭu, it can be noticed that the liturgies of *teyyam* were moulded by the environmental, social, and political transformations in the region and in many instances, *teyyam* too had an equally significant role in shaping the landscape. Moreover, several instances of *teyyam* worship provided valuable information helpful in deciphering the historical and geographical layers of a place. The *teyyam* chronicles, songs, myths and orature embraced a rich mine of environmental and historical knowledge which is meticulously intertwined with the individualities of the landscape. The rigid structure of socio-religious community centres like *kaḷakams* simultaneously represented a harmonious

social system within which *teyyam* operated and provided a common ground for the communities to unite and interact during the performance. The contemporary political relevance of *teyyam* is that it simultaneously represented a caste-centric, feudal system and provided a sturdy platform for the strong opposition towards casteism within its constrained boundaries. The multitude of ways in which various social groups evolved and organized their ritual order within the landscape was highly influenced by the land and land relations which existed then. *Cerujanmam* land rights in *teyyam* endowed each *teyyam* performer and his lineage with a sacred territory and cemented his associations with it. *Cerujanmam* as a spatial phenomenon established the role of land as a significant entity shaping the ritual realm of Kolattunāṭu. Furthermore, the analysis of Mut-tapaṇ *teyyam* performed at Kunnattūrpāṭi establish the case of a temporary spatial construction within the sacred realm of *teyyam*. It describes the creation, destruction and regeneration of an ephemeral landscape which assigns temporary sacred meanings to the spatial components of a performance space.

Throughout history, there have been several attempts to revive *teyyam* ritualistically and artistically by disconnecting it from the primary context and modifying it to suit the changing times. The resurgent initiatives of the powerful upper caste group which gained popularity in Kerala around the latter half of the 14th century can be read alongside the popular myth of Maṇakkātan Gurukkal.³⁶ The

³⁶ The myth of Maṇakkātan Gurukkal is popular among the *teyyam* performers and devotees of Kolattunāṭu. In one of the conversations with the *teyyam* performer Sri Biju Panikkar, stating this myth, he asserted that Maṇakkātan Gurukkal is the forefather of all *teyyam* performers and the earliest forms of *teyyam* were designed by him. This myth was mentioned multiple times during the conversations with performers, officials, and devotees. Maṇakkātan Gurukkal was a great scholar and tantric who hailed from the Karivellūr region. Kolatiri, the ruler of Kolattunāṭu, envied his reputation and invited him to the palace. The ruler and his cohorts were said to have put him to severe tests along the way, but Gurukkal managed to cross all hurdles and reached the palace. He also performed 39 *teyyam* forms in a night's time as demanded by Kolatiri. All the *teyyam* forms performed

story of Maṇakkātan Gurukkal can only be a covert strategy of the upper caste system to revive the Dravidian worship system of *teyyam* as an elite art in its appearance and content. But the most dangerous endeavours which called into question the very existence of *teyyam* were attempts to uproot the ritual art of *teyyam* from its ecological and social roots and place it within a religion-centric, upper-class Hindu system. The folk gods and goddesses who guarded agricultural lands and hunting traditions of the tribes gradually transformed themselves into Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava cults.³⁷ The free spirit of indigenous deities believed to be transmigrating natural abodes, trees, hills, and mountain passes were constricted and bound within the precincts of a ‘temple’. The sacred groves that guarded the biodiversity and ecosystem of the Western Ghats within the blanket of their green cover are now sandwiched between cement floors and aluminium roofs, devoid of sunlight and rain. The ritualistic practice of *teyyam* today calls for a collective effort to impede the imposed shift from an eco-centric system to a religion-centric one.

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today are said to be the derivatives of the initial 39 *teyyams* designed and performed by Maṇakkātan Gurukkal.

³⁷ For more details on this refer to M. N. Srinivas 1952 and the ‘Palace Paradigm’ as proposed by Jawaharlal Handoo, IGNOU Study Material for Post Graduate Diploma in Folklore and Cultural Studies (<http://ignou.ac.in/userfiles/Project%20Manual%20PGDFCS-converted.pdf>); and the examples of Bhairavan and Kuṭṭicatān discussed in Freeman 2006, and Parpola 2012.

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