Introduction
Part I

Theoretical and Methodological Premises

This dissertation examines the political economy of the Theyyam, a cult confined to the region of Northern Kerala¹, dedicated to multiple gods, and a performative ritual by hereditary specialist performers assuming imagined shapes of the god and becoming transformed and communicating directly with devotees, resolving their problems. The cult has undergone a shift of thrust from devotion to performing art, from worship to an object of aesthetics and gratification, hence a commodity over a period of time. In the process of these transformation, the social context and meaning of the Theyyam itself has altered in communion with changing nature of time and space dynamics. Hence, Theyyam is not exactly defined as a cult, a ritual, festival, a dance, a performance, an art form. It gain its definitions and perceptions according to the social space where it is being danced. The determining factors are not only at the domain of economic processes and change, but corresponding social processes also attribute to these. It is not that time moves across a given space, but the space and time constitute each other enabling us to speak of time--space. The space here is understood as a social construct with the 'social' itself is spatially molded. Its

¹ It spread between Vadakara in the south to Kannur and Kasaragod district in Northern Kerala. But in Theyyam parlance, the geography of this cult spreads between two rivers, Korappuzha in the south to a little beyond the Chandragiri in the north, and between Arabian Sea on the west to the hills of Coorg in the east.
nature are determined by the time in context. These observations places Theyyam in a broader theoretical background of political economy and the cultural dynamics thereof. It takes ethnographic and autoethnographic narrative of dancers and ritual specialists, a kind of life-writing approach to locate the changing socio-economic process associated with the Theyyam.

As the Theyyam—a worship, ritual and rite, performance and cultural product—it attracted social scientist's attention as an object of their study. This explains why social scientists from diverse range of disciplines have found it a favourite terrain of study. This study takes a view through the lived experiences of the dancers of Theyyam, combining the autoethnographic narrative of the researcher as he is an active performer of Theyyam from his early childhood. It brings into focus personal narratives, biography, local history and family history, to explain the political economic and anthropological context of the Theyyam. Drawing insights from both the ethnographic and autoethnographic traditions of writing culture, with the insights from historical timelines, it has tried to explain Theyyam's relationship with the culture and economy in relation to its space and the shifts therein through the 20th century.

In order to understand a cult tradition like this, the usual disciplinary perspective is inadequate. It has to be looked at in a way very different from that of conventional discipline-based studies enabling only a pin-hole visibility. What is undertaken is an interdisciplinary study by which I do not mean attempting to surround the object of study with multiple disciplines. Instead I mean to extricate the object of study to an open field of investigation that belongs to none of the established disciplines. It is a trans-disciplinary exercise. The heuristic justification for it is that the object of study does not belong to any of the disciplines and none of them exhausts the study of any of its aspects in isolation. Therefore, it is an attempt to study all aspects of Theyyam not as independent
facets but as parts of the whole, with a view to achieving what may be called the total visibility. Here, Theyyam approached as a trans-disciplinary object of analysis, will be looked at from multiple angles transcending the simplistic uni-dimensional level of a ritual or cult or performance. We seek to escape even the inadvertent privileging of any one part/aspect of it, but start with a proposition that it has multiple visibilities in terms of its ontology, spatiality, caste/class structures, caste and community relations, institutionalization, patronage and diversified contexts. Such an effort to focus on the multi-dimensional settings of the Theyyam in time and space is hoped to be facilitating a hitherto better understanding of it in its entirety.

People participate in this kaavu² shrine-centred festival as a sign of their role in the divinity of the Theyyam/deity. It is conducted using local resources with local patronage, either of the people centered committees or of the family centric body. Veneration of this kind is seen and valued as a ritual rather than an entertainment. This context is predominantly devotional. Therefore, its ideology is ritually embedded. Though this form is being transformed its costumes, rhythms and oral texts are getting standardized, it becomes very difficult to differentiate its art elements from its ritual context in the process of change. Viewed against the above it becomes apparent that it is to be treated as a performing art. Situated in the unevenness of the social structure, this is also a caste-based occupation. One caste or family did not own it; rather it was owned by the locality. But, caste-based social structure was the base on which it is being ritualized.

² kaavus featured as a traditional unit of sacred space for enacting many and different forms of Theyyams/deities, and for the enactment of associated rituals. Kaavu originates from the practice of worshiping trees and other natural objects. The place full of trees are considered to be the centre of worship of mother goddess. To get an understanding of the groves and nature of Kerala, see J.R.Freeman, “Gods, Groves, and the Culture of Nature in Kerala,” Modern Asian Studies 33, no.2, (1999): 257-302; and for sacred forests see, E.Unnikrishnan, Uthara Keralathile Visudhavanagal, (Kannur: Samkriti Publications,1995).
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 tensions. As a dramatized performance of ritually intensified social remorse, in effect, it functions as a ‘Catharsis’ too. The myths and narrative lore-texts (Thottampattukal) such as Kadavangottu Makkam and Pottam Theyyam manifest in their forms a deep sorrow that the society is unable to bear. Wrath of the deity or its fear works in the collective consciousness of the rural folks. The Pottam Theyyam, for example, reveals how the ritualisation of protest against caste inequities in the social hierarchy, had served as a safety valve, a strategy of containment. The Theyyam by providing temporary freedom, or a strategy of occasional inclusion, to the oppressed sections at the cult-site to openly protest through the performer’s scathing criticisms, against the atrocities of the caste system. There is one view that it is caste protest carried forward through the language of the ritual. The performance releases the pent-up tension natural to the contradictory social system. When it is viewed in the background of political economic changes especially in 1930’s, its meanings and definitions have altered. New forms of social order reconstruct this tradition and the economy of the Theyyam festival is nowhere tapped from the agrarian rental surplus of the dominant tharavadus3. Though the context of Theyyam has undergone changes, there were no significant changes taking place in terms of its patronage at the local level. There are new forms of local committees come forward to conduct the festival in case of the inability of the tharavada to finance the rituals.

3 The term has been variously defined as clan, joint family, ritually significant house and a land unit or a joint family with a community of property. See P. Balakrishna Menon, Matriliny and Domestic Morphology: A study of the Nair Tarawads of Malabar, Unpublished Dissertation of Master of Architecture (Montreal: School of Architecture, McGill University, 1998). Generally it works as a residence complex and a centre of worship for forefathers and groves. The dominant landed janmi tharavada were also acted as an authority of the locality and thus as rulers of the region.
With the coming of the colonial power to the sub-continent, the rituals and customs of the people come into direct conflict with the values imposed by the colonial administration. This is further accentuated by the proselytizing zeal of the Christian Missionaries who had contempt for such 'pagan' practices⁴. The changes in the Theyyam emerge from the shifting political ideologies, the commodification of culture and the government's policy towards preserving of the symbols of Indian tradition. The setting up of Academies, Councils, Universities and International Cultural Exchange Programs, set in motion a kind of National and International context, which endows the ritual with an academic halo and creates the need for nurturing it as a cultural product, indigenous to India.

Theyyam has thus transformed into an ethnic community ritual from its original function as a participatory ritual of a locality. Agencies have become patrons and it has becomes an object of 'alien culture'. It has gradually started integrating with the market economy. Transcending the boundaries of a village-community, the Theyyam assumes a new space in the context of a Nation, and in a market-driven globalised environment. These larger processes has been put in place the lives of the dancing members, life-writing of the researcher himself, and ethnographically observed the event of festivals both in its traditional premises--kaavu--and new spaces of its veneration as a cultural commodity in grand festivals under the patronage of the state and other modern agencies.

Objectives

- To study the political economy of Theyyam in general in its entirety using interdisciplinary conceptual tools,
- To examine in particular the changing position of the Theyyam, the pattern and composition of patronage and emerging redefinitions in time and space,
- To understand the incompatibilities, conflicts, negotiations and assertions of identity of the cult and its community centering personal life history and narratives, lived experiences of the Theyyam dancing of the researcher, as a method of writing and research on the changing vicissitudes of the Theyyam in the contemporary.

Methodological Concerns

As regards techniques of data collection and processing I seek to follow the usual field work supplemented by participant observation. Covert and overt forms of participation has made according to the context that enabled to observe the phenomenon as it is. The main primary sources of the study are the texts and oral literature of the cult and the ethnographic narratives of castes already available in manuals and colonial documents. There is a good body of secondary literature on the cult, mostly of descriptive type on its history and anthropology. The approach of study is theoretical and hence explanatory. Therefore, theoretical analysis is the most vital component of the methodology. As regards the theoretical framework of analysis, we seek to follow critical social theory in general and its specific insights into processes of cultural appropriation in societies of asymmetrical relations. We seek to draw insights from both sociological and
anthropological theories. The political economy of Theyyam being the central thrust, the analysis has to inevitably come to terms with time as well as space dimensions of the changing nature of the cult. This necessitates recourse to the concept of time – space homology as developed in the context of studying spatial and social changes in the contemporary society.

Space in its very nature is temporal and time spatial. The concept of time-space homology borrowed from physics, has implicitly served as a point of departure for the recent development of social scientific research in social institutions, relations, groups, structures and processes with one eye upon their temporality and the other on their spatiality. The concept of time-space homology is rooted in the rising social theory of space. It can illuminate the extent to which time and space may be considered homologous at the macro level. Furthermore, the inter-relationships of these basic elements with human life and social structure may be better understood if the specific dual concept of time and space is carefully applied to the social level. David Harvey’s human geographical perspective technically known as the concept of socio-spatial praxis highlighting the interconnection of society, economy, polity and culture with space was the first intelligible articulation of the homology. Gregory emphasising the simultaneity of the social and spatial processes conceptualised spatiality as the practice of sociality. He maintained that the practising of social relations and structures makes spatial relations and structures inevitable for them. Castell says that in social perspective there is no space but only a historically contingent space-time, a space constructed, worked and practised by temporally specific social relations. Edward Soja remarks that just as history is inseparable from geography, time is inseparable from space.5

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A detailed appraisal of the historically and culturally contingent sacred space, the current performance spaces, the socio-cultural map of patronage in the past, the nature and scope of the current patronage of the Theyyam with the help of life stories of dancers and members of the Theyyam performing communities has been unearthed ethnographically. Likewise, the analysis of current patterns of attitudes of the dancers as well as peoples across cultures is another task employed here.

Analysis of societal time-space homology is of crucial importance for the study of the political economy of a traditional cult that is in the process of adaptation under the pressure of social changes and market expansion. There has been a perceptible change in the space of the Theyyam cult. Under the influence of modernity the cult status of Theyyam has been slowly becoming secondary to its new status as a performing art. Accordingly, there has been a corresponding change in the nature, structure and composition of its patrons. The _kaavu_ and _Cherujenmam_, the two historically contingent spaces of the cult and castes respectively, which

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6 _Cherujenmam_ is a sacred map of the region mostly divided on the marks such as river sides or hills or paddy fields in a locality. This is a sacred map or region where all service castes has specific duty or obligations to perform. One should not cross the region's map and to do their services in other areas, which are assigned to other families and castes in those locality. Performing Theyyam and allied rituals to a region has been given to specific Theyyam dancing family as a right by the then existed dominant _tharavadus_ of the locality. Each castes has to perform their caste occupation in this region. Violation of these practices were subjected to severe punishment by the _tharavadu_ authority. On special occasions, dominant _tharavadus_ provide gifts as agricultural resources to these castes who do their birth right jobs to the villagers. Though these practices of doing one's service to specified region is on the wane or completely unknown to natives, the Theyyam festival and its ritual practices are still strictly followed by considering the old division of region or locality assigned to specific caste and family. The contestation and conflicts over who hold the right to do rituals in specific _kaavus_ is also a normal view in the spaces of Theyyam worship in north Malabar.
jointly constitute what is called the sacred geography of Theyyam, but contestation and conflicts in this localised space is being surrounded by art space, sometimes a globalised space. The process has been involving incompatibilities, conflicts and negotiations between these micro and macro geographies of the cult and art on the one side and anticipating contestations and assertions of stakes and identity on the other. A study of this scenario of multiple encounters is not a task amenable to tools of any single discipline. It calls for administration of concepts and findings from disciplines such as social history, geography and anthropology besides insights of political economy, not as a multi-disciplinary strategy but as an interdisciplinary endeavour\(^7\) to understand the ongoing dialectics between society and economy on the one hand and time and space on the other.

The study at the outset involves analysis of the societal time and space of the Theyyam as a cult to be followed by analysis of the economic time and space of it as an art and commodity. This is a task to be carried out through comparisons of Theyyam in societal time and space using the theoretical insights of the homology between the two. Actually it will be comparisons along two timelines from colonial and postcolonial and facts have been drawn from colonial ethnographies and sources and later through personal narratives, memories, and through creating autoethnographic text. The study intend to give thrust to the postcolonial aspects of social processes associated with the ritual. The central background of analysis is the socio-spatial dialectics of Theyyam as a cult versus art in the capitalist system, which has been in progress for

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the past few decades. The analysis of these social and economic aspects of the period, then turns to the community of Theyyam performers and their patrons in time and space shifting from the local to the supra-local, national and international with changed meanings and aims. This is again unearthed through the life sketches of the dancers who had experiences of taking or moving the cult away from their traditional roots.

Capitalism is not just an economic phenomenon in time, but political, social and cultural processes in space too. It is economic processes spatialising at the global scale. Thus, it is constituted spatially and temporally\(^8\). This making a atrocious process of homogenization of cultures that goes to cast a blanket of uniformity over the world and stifling the rich panoply of numerous cultures the world over. So one of the most frequently raised charges against globalization, is the waning of national frontiers and the rise of homogenising universal markets obliterating regional cultures, traditions, customs, religious beliefs and other traits of cultural identity. There is no tradition that has remained unchanged over time. All traditions, particularly the living ones, have evolved into a barely recognizable image of what they were only two or three generations back. This is precisely the case of the Theyyam dances as well, the changes of which in the last four or five decades have been substantial. It has been a process of appropriation often named as nationalisation and internationalisation involving redefinition of the cult as an art and folk theatre.

The history the Theyyam cult and the question of how it is being transformed under market driven capitalism has to be comprehensively explored. Tracing the tentative origins of the cult as far

back as the sources including ethnography permit, the study has focused on its social history. Until recent times, the term Theyyam was restricted to the context of a cult and to refer to a folk tradition. Even when redefined as an art and a part of theatre, it was associated with low culture, and not as belonging to the fine arts of aristocracy, notwithstanding the pre-conceived cultural differentiation between the primitive and civilised or between backwardness and progress. Now many hesitate to see it a primitive cult but an art of classical standardisation in facial painting, body drawing, crown designing and costume fabrication. Anthropologists no longer talk about folk culture and high culture today but about consumer culture, popular culture and cyber culture. These changing value judgments, tastes and attitudes I owe to the cultural processes under capitalism. It is a fact that cultural globalisation does not lead to the dissolution of all cultures into a single global culture, for cultures and traditions are too diverse and complex to allow homogenisation to destroy them. Not only that, the preservation of cultural diversity is increasingly becoming feasible today, thanks to the demand for variety in the capitalist market. Many age old rituals, cults and arts survive not only due to their uniqueness, but also due to their capacity to respond creatively to the challenges and be a part of the process of continuity and change. Theyyam is one such cultural genre, the vicissitudes of which in time and space.

Anthropologists have followed ethnographic approaches to this object of study in the perspectives of ritual anthropology, while historians have made historical approaches in the perspectives of cult history. The output of the former gives a comprehensive account of what it is in terms of the cult and performance. The output of the latter gives details about the socio-cultural history of the cult and the pattern of its evolution. Folklorists have studied it giving descriptive accounts about the performative aspects. However, very rarely have these studies analyzed the text and context of
the cult, taking the past of the communities, their institutions, overarching social structure, relations, processes, and patronage through the lens of life narrative of the dancers and its families into consideration. Moreover, the experience of the castes and individuals who dance these forms in varied kaavus and their autobiographical and family narratives have never been a source and theme in the studies on the Theyyam. Finer details of the Theyyam as a ritual event may portray a meaningful descriptions on the society and culture of the north Malabar. The changing society and space also makes an alteration in the subjectivities of the dancer and sociality of the Theyyam.

There has been no attempt at doing an interdisciplinary study of Theyyam. The discipline based studies have more or less exhausted their tools and measures of understanding the ritual. It has been gravely felt that there are many gaps in them. What we have today is the descriptive account of synchronic perspective recounting current practices as well as the historical sketch of the cult. What we miss is how it worked over the years and what are its micro and macro spatial effects. We do not know much about what have been the changes in the structure of performance as well as in the nature of patronage. On top of all we have little systematized knowledge about the current situation of Theyyam, which is a synergy. The present study hopes to make a humble contribution to the gray area.

**Ethnography and Autoethnography**

Ethnography is a method widely applied in Anthropological studies. This is a method of getting closely with the groups intent to study and to understand their social settings to get a deep feel of the field. This is of writing on half of the objects of study considered as ‘others’. It tries to make a
thick description about other's stories in communion with their social life, which emerged in order to
give a voice to the people, or groups without history supposedly isolated from external world and
from one another. Thus, mostly ethnographies, in its beginnings, started focusing on other cultures
and on people distant from literate social worlds\(^9\). Ethnographies of one's own society, or
individuals should also be legitimized in the growth of qualitative studies in a broader
interdisciplinary sense. Over the past decades, there has been an impressive growth of research
that variously termed as auto-ethnography, auto-biographical ethnography or sociology, personal
or self narrative writings, which has commonly referred to as autoethnography. This has its
specificity that it has linked to various 'turns' in social sciences and humanities. It draws insights
from symbolic interactionist tradition of sociology and subsequently, autoethnography has recently
become a popular form of method in qualitative studies\(^10\).

Drawing distance from conventional realistic ethnographic style of writing and documenting lives,
autoethnography has indulged with cultural relative sensibilities. It argue a theoretical position that
the self of the individual would also form an account of experience, which could be taken as a social
account for theoretical propositions and as a method in itself\(^11\). It become a text that lay out a case


for self-observation in ethnography\textsuperscript{12}. Analytic autoethnography suggests following conditions to do an exercise in these genre of method as essential elements a) full membership in the research group or setting, b) to be visible as such a member in the ethnographic text, c) analytic reflexivity, d) able to dialogue with informants beyond self e) committed to develop a broader theoretical understanding of social phenomenon.

It cautions about the process of self-reflection that constitute the practice of writing with a theoretical understanding about grounds and contexts of the field, which in a way tries to locate the social, cultural, material and historical constraints and possibilities. Thus, it combines texts produced ethnographically through wide range of literatures on Theyyam in communion with the autoethnography of researcher’s experience as a Theyyam dancer. That is looking at experience analytically. Hence, the study combines political economy that meets with anthropology, a methodological position of writing ethnographies within a political economy framework or ethnographic approach to political economic problems\textsuperscript{13}.

The study is organized into five chapters with different parts following the scheme of the themes discussed in each one, including this introductory part. The second part of this chapter critically

\textsuperscript{13} See J. Nash, \textit{We Eat the Mines and the Mines Eat Us} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979). It is an example of one of the most compressive ethnography written in this framework. For a detailed review on the studies of anthropological political economy, see W. Roseberry, "Political Economy," \textit{Annual Review of Anthropology} 17, (1988): 161-185. In order to have sense of the debate on the misconceptions on doing social science research dividing discipline lines, See Bina Agarwal, "Economics and Other Social Sciences: An Inevitable Divide?", \textit{Contributions to Indian Sociology} 35, no.3 (2001): 389-399; and to have a discussion on why ethnographic work is important to cross check the interpretations of what people say or how they understand themselves and others, see J. Harris, "The Case of Cross-disciplinary Approaches in Development Research," paper presented at the \textit{Global Development Network Workshop} (Washington, 2001). Many heterodox economists have also drawn from other disciplines especially anthropology, which open up new areas of thinking, for instance see S. Lundberg and R. A. Pollak, "Separate Spheres, Bargaining and the Marriage Market," \textit{Journal of Political Economy} 101, no.6 (1993): 988-1010.
review the studies on Theyyam that begin from Logan's Malabar, to the most recent one of Gabriel's -'Playing God: Belief and Ritual in the Muttappan Cult of North Malabar'. It unravels both historical and contemporary dynamics of the ritual and various social discourses that define and redefine the meanings and social context of the Theyyam. How these various views and perspectives on the Theyyam kept altering, in colonial and post-colonial time is revealed through the detailed discussion of available literature. Theyyam was able to recreate itself homogenising with the concerned social contexts according to the changing dimension of time and space.

Second chapter constitute a narrative of a Theyyam dancing family, a personal narratives of each members of the family, that portray a picture of what was the nature of their ritual activities that they had served for the villages and tharavadus as their hereditary occupation. This narrates the social background of a Theyyam family in which they serve the villages in the prescribed sacred geography of cheru janmam. The voices of each members describe a kind of patron client relation embedded in the sacred spaces and the shifts thereof.

Third chapter is an autoethnographic narrative of the researcher himself which analysis the spatial changes that has taken place in a kaavu, that his family had hereditary right over dancing and conducting rituals. It is in a way a case study of a Theyyam kaavu and a life narrative itself. This is titled as Double Lives as it delineate the ritual processes and forms of various Theyyam venerate in the kaavu and specifically a processes of possession that transforms human to godly. It is a thick description of the lived experiences of the Theyyam dancing on the one hand and a case of changing social spaces of a kaavu in the contemporary society on the other.
Chapter four is divided into three independent parts that complement each other. Broadly, it discusses the social processes of Theyyam that enters the market. First part is about the transformation of ritual to the domain of theatre. How the subjectivity of the performer and the audience changes in this processes has been discussed in the background of an entertainment model. Second part is about the Theyyam in cultural transactions and how it works within the structures of new patronages by the state and the market. The processes of commoditisation of ritual is a point highlighted here. Third part of the chapter is an ethnography of a Theyyam festival conducted as part of Grand Kerala Shopping Festival in the city of Thiruvananthapuram. While doing ethnography and writing on these sorts of events, the question of subjectivity and objectivity and the interactions between the self and others, a unique mental dimension of writing those aspects has also discussed. The central discussions on the subject and relevant themes in the study have been pooled together in the last chapter.
Part II

STUDIES ON THEYYAM
A Critical Review

Beginning with Logan’s ‘Malabar’ (1887) the varied dimensions of the Theyyam has been discussed extensively, that unravels a tradition and its consequent adaptations and reformulations according to the changing nature and social context of the form. Theyyam has been represented in many ways, as folk genre, art, festival, ritual, performance and dance. While historical, anthropological and sociological works are mainly written in English as part of academic pursuits, folklorists had mainly documented oral literature and practices in Malayalam with a substantial content of descriptive notes.¹

The specificity of the Theyyam as an object of study invokes special attention in the sense that the phenomenon itself encompasses themes and processes that is interdisciplinary in nature. No such water tight compartmentalization of work could be sensibly done on a theme around Theyyam as it contain multiple aspects and visibilities. This is primarily due to two facts: one is

¹ C.M.S Chendera, Kaliyattam (Kottayam: National Book Stall,1978); Theyyathinte Adiroopam (Kottayam: DC Books, 2004); Athyuthara Keralaithinte Anjatha Charithram, (Kunnur:9,1974); Vanidas Elayavoor, Vatakkan Ithihamala (Kottayam: Current Books, 2006); Y.V.Kannan, Muthappan Puravritham (Kottayam: Current Books, 2007); M.V Vishnu Nambuthiri, Thottampaikkal Oru Patanam, (Kottayam: National Books Stall,1990); Raghavan Payyanad, Folklorinu Oru Padanapadhati (Trichur: Kerala Sahithya Academy, 2004); M.R Raghava Varier, Keralaolpati Granthavari: The Kolattunad Traditions (Calicut:University of Calicut,1984); M.R Raghava Varier and Rajan Gurukkal, Kerala Charithram (Sukapuram: Vallathol Vidhyapeedam,1992); P.T Ravindran, Devakooth (Kunnur: Likhitham Books, 2006). The literature on Theyyam is vast. I list out only limited Malayalam sources here.
that it could not be strictly define as a cult, dance, ritual, art, festival and a social drama. It encompasses aspects of all these. Secondly, it not only touches upon the specific life domain of the specific castes and communities who worship these forms as rituals. It is also a part of the belief, social memory, worship, occupation, and generally more on locality and its people.

The phenomenon of Theyyam could be situated and read in relation to the concept--communitas in Turner's view as the veneration of it in sacred spaces generalise a social bond and social ties that are organised in terms of caste, status and hierarchies at various tiers. Rather, it is "a matter of giving recognition to an essential and generic human bond". The concept of liminality could also be related to the transcendental state of the human to godly as it implies that "the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what is like to be low". These aspects of experiencing low and high both in liminal spaces and in real life of the dancers on the one hand and the experiences of purity and impurity on the other, defines social hierarchies of lowliness and highness of others who form a communitas around the Theyyam. The social condition in which a Nambiar and a Kurup approaching the Malayan in the form of Theyyam, and touching his feet in great respect. A local Mappila who has witnessed both this contradictory contexts, so dramatically broke out with a familiar folkloric saying that:"his life is the one that had seen the two worlds". These aspects of revealing social realities could be viewed in line with what Durkheim stressed on ritual as an approach of studying religious life, that the notion of being an instance of "society representing itself to itself".

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Generally, the people of north Kerala perceive Theyyam as a ritual and festival, a mode of worship and beliefs, in their own specific way and it has an active presence in their everyday life. A ritual practice continues to exist even today because it has deep roots in the consciousness of the people as a pattern of worship. Therefore, if one asks a person from these localities to tell about Theyyam or more plainly what is the Theyyam, one would respond very actively as if he/she knows every aspect of it. Of course, one could have manifold memories of the Theyyam as part of their family life and it is a form which resembles the antiquity. A Vaniyan caste member would claim it is Muchilottu Bhagavathi, Thiyyas would say it is Muthappan and Kathivanur Veeran. Whatever be the answer, in north Malabar any question on Theyyam is bound to receive some specific answer. But, it will vary from person to person, caste to caste, and family to family. There is a subjective element in their responses as it is subjectively and generationally transmitted perception. Therefore, it is many things to many people. But in academic pursuits and writings it is defined, interpreted and seen as an object of social sciences and humanities according to the nature of their understanding defined or limited by the disciplinary background that a scholar intend to place the discussions on the phenomenon. The theoretical, conceptual and ideological apparatus and paradigms will form its tints and moods accordingly. The purpose of this part of the chapter is to traverse the manifold approaches to the Theyyam emerged in the works, that have studied, analyzed, and interpreted the phenomenon in many ways and generated multiple meanings centered around the Theyyam.

Dalrymple narrates nine lives in search of sacred in modern India. It pauses question of how traditional forms of religious life transforms in the context of social change. The Dancer of Kannur

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is one such life. It is a tale of the complexities of the Theyyam dancer’s life and how the modern
times reconstruct the social space and the subjectivity of these dancers. The book depicts a life
world of a dancer that interfaces two worlds of reality. A prison warden for the two months of the
year, for nine months as a manual labourer, building wells and in between becomes god in the
form of Theyyam in its seasons, especially from December to February. The life points out that
the Theyyam dancers become a vehicle through which villagers thank their gods for fulfilling their
wishes. Though these dancers belongs to lower castes, even a hard core casteist Nambuthiri
worship them and wait in queue to touch the feet of the Theyyam. Thus, it brings forth a picture
that reveals the changing social dynamics and the role of a Theyyam dancer in the contemporary
society.

The author introduces percussion players as ’dark-skinned Dalit drummers’ and a Theyyam
dancer, Hari Das, as ’dark and muscular figure of the man’. It was thus explained to suggest that
it is a social space that indicates a dark man’s sacred space. Although it is the dark one who
assumes the position of the Theyyam, very often it is savarnas (superior castes) who comes to
pay obeisance before the Theyyam.

While describing the story of a Theyyam, he states: ’a Dalit boy of the Tiyya caste’. The word Dalit
has been used in the narrative to identify castes who are considered to be lower castes. But the
same word has similarly used to denote the Thiyyas also who are a dominant caste in the present
day society. Mostly it is they who control and dominate the ritual field of the Theyyam today. Most
of the kaavus in north Malabar now run under the control and authority of the Thiyyas. Thiyyas
perceive dancing castes as polluting and impure. Undermining these huge social status
distinctions between these two groups in the realm of social power of north Malabar, the author tries to encompass all these lower castes as Dalit. These sort of portraying castes would provide a common notion of south Indian caste system to the author's wider readers, but it is to be critiqued in the sense that social distinctions and its subtilities in its actual working would have serious implications in the understanding and representation of these ritual domain as well as the power relations within it.

It is also interesting to note that Dalrymple's description of the Theyyakaavus are close to those that existed in north Malabar around the 1950s. It goes like this: 'In the midnight shadows of a forest clearing, bounded on one side by a small stream and a moonlit paddy field and on the other by the darkness of a rubber plantation'. In all probability, it is likely that Dalrymple did get to see one such kaavu. Nor am I saying that such kaavus have ceased to exist. But, there is steep fall, a noticeable dip in the number of such kaavus. Kaavus have now morphed into temples and concrete structures unlike it was so close the forests, groves and makeshift arrangements.

Dynamics of caste relations and its positions of domination and subordination are very rigid in the field of Theyyam. There might have various changes according to the changing social relations of the time and space. The savarnas locate flaws in the Theyyam's execution of its role and think nothing of physical abuse even to this day. The acclaimed Theyyam artiste Kannan Peruvannan has confessed of this personal experience during the course of an interview undertaken as part of my research. Once the kolakaran (person who dance the deity) ceases to be a Theyyam, then he descends to the low rungs of the caste hierarchy and the upper caste can go as far as hitting him on his back. He did not exhibit the desired degree of obeisance with folded hands, stand up on
seeing them, may be reasons for the violence meted out. When Hari Das returns to the 
*Nambuthiri* (who took blessings from him as a Theyyam) a week later, to dig a well in the 
homestead, the *Nambuthiri* does not recognize him. The labourers were served their food beyond 
the *verandah* of the house. A separate bucket of water to be used for washing the hands was 
kept far from the house. Food was offered in the plantain leaf. It need just be thrown far off. The 
*Nambuthiri* did not permit them to draw water from the well they had dug. Although we say that 
rigidities of the caste system are erased with the passage of time, caste lingers in ever so many 
ways, both overt and covert, in Kerala society.

After he has appeared as the Theyyam, blessed the people, taken off his headgear, shed his 
costume of tender palm leaf fronds, removed the headband, then he ceases to be a person who 
deserves recognition as an individual, and is relegated to the lowest rungs of the caste hierarchy. 
This indeed is the irony that confronts the Theyyam within society. A question that fails to throw 
up any answer. Hari Das put the focus on such social realities too.

Theodore Gabriel's\(^5\) monograph focuses on the Theyyam ritual in general and analyses ritual 
processes of the *Muthappan* Theyyam in particular. Apart from a range of discussions on north 
Malabar region, religion and caste, it argues that the cult of the *Muttappan* is rapidly becoming 
popular while moving from its original regions of origin to all over Kerala and even beyond. It has 
rapidly been worshiped in regions where *Malayalee* diaspora is present. The author disagree 
with what Gavin Flood\(^6\) has argued that these rituals are meaningless if it take out of its context. 
But also agree that it may be totally meaningless if it is taken to Arab population of the Gulf States

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or to the Chinese in Singapore. Nevertheless, its success is depend on the availability of its worshipers and their devotion and loyalty to the god. So if there is the presence of devotion and loyalty, no reason why the cult should not be meaningful to a people even if they are so afar from their native locale. Rather it becomes more relevant to these people as a link with their culture and religion.

The monograph also lay stress on a historical time that the *Muthappan* cult might have practiced. It points to a time before the arrival of Aryan hegemony and indicates of a pre-Aryan, probably a Dravidian one which would mark a phase in the development of religion in Kerala. The arrival of Brahminical Hinduism and Buddhism into the region might have penetrated to the indigenous religious traditions but the Theyyams, the shrines and sacred groves would have to be considered as the vestiges that remains even today. Ancestor or hero worship is also considered to be a potential element of these religious phenomenon. The story content of conflicts between classes and castes to fight for the emancipation of low castes groups from oppression etc., might have emerged out from the overwhelming effects of pan-Indian Brahminical traditions. The myth of the *Muthappan* cult also make a point to remove the caste and class barriers and mostly a resistance to accept the dominant way of life of the Brahmins. The author has used the word 'cult' in a pejorative sense in Religious Studies as well as in popular parlance to describe this phenomenon as it induces powerful emotions of loyalty and devotion by those who are committed to the worship of this god which are, of course, historically determined.
Bhawani Cheerath-Rajagopalan and Rajesh Komath's book on Theyyam illustrates that the Theyyam is a cumulative experience telescoping the history of a people, punctuated by Dravidian practices impacted by the Aryanisation and classicism of religion. This ritualistic form enables to make an organic bonding with nature and people. Even in the era where symbols of modernity edge out folk practices and genres, Theyyam retains its presence adjusting with the changing time and spaces that still keeps up its linkages with the land and its people. The book weaved together these aspects while traveling through the windward side of the Western Ghats, meeting the dancers, castes and communities who keep alive this tradition. With the thin descriptions, and with the thick uses of visual images, the book unravels various kaavus, forms, colours, costumes, beliefs and worshipers. It touches upon lives and stories that keep up their link with the tradition even while they are engaged in varied occupations and places. The chapter entitled 'life as a Theyyam', depicts the dual duties of various persons and castes. For instance, the life of Vinod—a Theyyam dancer and a local postman, Srinivasan—the caretaker of Theyyam kalari and a peon in Koodali High School, Balan—taps his income from his landholdings, but he is punctual to attend for the annual Theyyam to carry out his specific roles. These aspects of lives intertwining the elements of tradition and change but unite them around a tradition called the Theyyam.

Dinesan's work is a quest into the myths and practices of Theyyam. As a mode of ritual-bound worship, the Theyyam has successfully retained its significance, and kept pace with the changing

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7 Bhawani Cheerath-Rajagopalan and Rajesh Komath, *Theyyam: The Other Gods* (Bangalore: Stark World Publishing, 2012). The book could be used as a reference for myths and rituals of the Theyyam with extensive use of photographs. Those who wish to view images of various forms of Theyyam that I describe in this dissertation, this book will be useful. A detailed Theyyam calendar, which gives information on location of kaavus, various Theyyams performed there, and its corresponding Malayalam calendar that begin from *Thulam*-October to *Meenam*-April. This provides a detailed mapping of sacred spaces and Theyyams in north Malabar.

times. It is a dimension of its internal ritual dynamic. Analysing the Perumkaliyattam⁹ festival, he argues that, it is the internal potency and dynamism of the Theyyam that prepares it for uninterrupted survival. Extending his explanation further he speaks of the growing acceptance of Theyyam and the space it carves out for itself in the cyber space through Internet. This work is the outcome of an understanding while enters into the people who conduct the Theyyam, as well as, those who make Theyyam a reality. The study attempts to explain on the basis of the perception that with changing times Theyyam is an entity which imbibes elements constantly from the changing society, thus has the osmotic potential to reconstruct itself to appear according to the changing aspects of time and spaces. The Theyyam, thus successfully renews itself.

Payyannur is the region of this study. Since the author is a native, he is free from the problems of alienation from the field that foreign scholars of anthropology usually face while engaging with an alien territory and culture. According to him, the familiarity with this area, and a culture he was exposed to, even as a child, facilitated easy access to the practitioners and seek data as well as to interpret it according to the nature of context in place. The relation with the field and the belonged sensing would help the anthropologist to observe social and cultural patterns which was otherwise not able to strike to mention as an important point to discuss. This work has such an advantage of being a native of the region and culture. Apart from describing the myth and rituals of Muchilottu Bhagavathi, the Theyyam which is the reigning family deity (kuladevta) of the Vaniyar caste, he has been able to incorporate a first hand description on the Perumkaliyattam at the Muchilottu Kaavu in Ponthuruthi in 2006. In the course of this, he is able to narrate the socio-historical background that worked in creating Muchilottu Bhagavathi.

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⁹ A grand Theyyam festival generally conducted after a gap of long years.
He describes his experience in a *kaavu* he visited for the research. As part of the rituals when ‘*prasadam*’ was distributed the researcher became the first to receive it. He presumed the priority given to him was due to his position as a researcher. But he got the answer during a conversation with two members to whom the *kaavu* belonged: since a person who belonged to his caste was present there, it was customary to exchange *prasadam* to him!—These kinds of minute aspects of the practices could only be grasped because he belonged to the locality. In spite of detailed explanation the researcher does not reveal his caste. In the ritual domain of the Theyyam, the revealing of caste and its duties and obligations has its own significance that may reflect on the interactions between the owners of the *kaavu* and the researcher. Thus, the narrative so unearthed could be influenced by these sorts of subjective realisation of self and identity. Social meanings of human interactions locates within these realisation of total context.

Sanjeevan’s\textsuperscript{10} book is again a native account of the Theyyam practice. It reveals the concrete relationship of the Theyyams to caste groups in north Malabar village society. But, at the same time, as he argues that: though it is ridden with caste norms and customs associated with each forms of worship, it creates or imagine a casteless society. Thus, the Theyyam become a potency that create castes but it also fight against caste, its prejudices and distinctions. It also point out various phases of formations of various Theyyams and bring forth hitherto unknown primary sources on the practices of Theyyam such as documents regarding the rewards and expenditure incurred to the functioning of Theyyams in some of the major *kaavus* and *tharavadus* of north Malabar.

More broadly, the book probes the society in which Theyyam struck roots, and enquires into the association with Theyyam, the caste framework and its social relevance. The author claims that an extended community which includes the patriarch, titular heads, dancers, the immediate neighborhood of the *kaavu* etc., work in unison to sustain the Theyyam tradition. While the Theyyam functions within the parameters of the caste equation in the social fabric, it transcends the caste framework. But, how it transcend beyond caste norms and its systems is not well substantiated. The author is of the confirmed view that by attributing the rigid definitions of caste to the Theyyam dancing communities and spaces, a reinforcement of the significance of the hierarchy of caste within Theyyam takes place. While people worship their own ‘*kula*’ Theyyams-family Theyyams and have been worshiping them over the years, people belonging to other castes also hold them in reverence. For example – *Vettekku Oru Makan* is a *Nair* lineage deity—but the *Kshatriya* and *Nambuthiri* worship the same. The *Muthappan* is held dear by the *Nair*, *Thiyyas*, the *Kurichiyar* and the underprivileged.

The practices and rituals of Theyyam emerge from the caste structure. Hence, the Theyyam determines the placement of the patriarchs and the *madayan*\(^\text{11}\). For this reason, the author states, though caste is deep rooted in Theyyam, the caste-oriented dependence, the give-and-take that takes place, is made possible by the Theyyam itself and therefore, make it relevant beyond the caste divisions. A *Thiyya* child brought up by a *Pulayan*, the owner helping the serf, deifying a slave as the representative of god and then pay obeisance to him, are stories on the Theyyam, used by the author to argue that Theyyam functions beyond caste considerations. The author's conviction is that caste divisions served primarily to denote division of work.

\(^{11}\) *Madapura* is the unit that houses the *Muthappan*, and the owner of the place and main priest of the deity is called a *madayan*. 
As a Theyyam dancer in a specified sacred maps, I could tell that the execution of one's duty and obligations in these local territory as a right given by dominant tharavadu of the area, takes on as an obligation with the blessing of his ancestors, to please them as well as the ancestors of the superior castes. The Theyyam is in fact carrying out a subordinate duty assigned to him by the local authority. There may be many cases whose attitudes have undergone changes. Some kaavus have become secular. But it has also to be remembered a situation does prevail, where a Theyyam is admonished by the caste superior for having stopped to pose for a photograph, thereby reflecting that the superior-subordinate relationship exists here. As the owner of the kaavu could exercise this power in the midst of the Theyyam dancing, it shows how much social power he feels over the Theyyam itself. The Theyyam kaavus do practice an apartheid among the Theyyams by permitting their kula, lineage deity to ascend the sacred seat. This practices of distinctions goes quite contrary to what the author has to say, and establishes that inequalities based on caste divisions and status are glaring in kaavus. The preparation for Theyyam and associated division of work is clearly on lines marked out by caste. These aspect could not be invalidated if one is seriously looking into the sociological aspects of the Theyyyam.

Damodaran's work ethnographically portray the life of a specific caste—Malayan—who dance and do other forms of folk rituals through their hereditary occupation of singing and dancing for others as a means of livelihood. This group of people is an endogamous caste whose social position is more or less remain fixed and unaltered in the course of social change. This is because the north Malabar village social structure strengthened and perpetuated the age old

customs of the Theyyam even today which isolate these group within a social folder without much potency to break the social fabric of isolated culture. The pattern of interaction, man and his ecosystem, between individuals and culture, a symbiosis thus evolved make possible the Malayan to carry out their hereditary occupation and the preservation of their Theyyams. The work is done with the insights of the anthropological theories and methods of functionalism and structural functionalism of early anthropologists such as Malinowski and Radcliffe Brown. The study of Theyyam and its relation with nature and man bring forth insights of culture but more closely enables to review the history of north Malabar.

Geetha\textsuperscript{13} also observe various rites and rituals of the Malayan caste through their varied folk performances that has transmitted from generations to generations. There are imprints of personal touch as well as socio-cultural specificity in the performance of folk genres of the Malayan. Thus, it is identified that there are personal, locality based socio-cultural specificities and timely differences in the folklore knowledge of the Malayan. The study has adopted the method of structural analysis of myths and rituals, looking closely its functions that reveals the aspects of how a group of people respond to the changing social system. As sorcery was integral to Malayan's life and culture, it reflects in the life cycle ceremonies very predominantly. Thus, the magico-ritual elements are very prominent in Malayan's Theyyam. This is done not for his own caste, but for others as a service in the social structures of north Malabar. Most of the magical practices of these group is performed for the goodness of the larger society which was also acted as a need of those society. The rituals and practices so don by the Malayans has an extra feel of supernatural aspects. The mythical explanation endows that the Malayan are not magicians but a

\textsuperscript{13} P. Geetha, \textit{Uthara Malabarile Malayarude Nadodi Vignanam}, Unpublished PhD Dissertation (University of Calicut: Department of Malayalam, 2007)
magician or sorcerer turn to be the Malayan. This gives the Malayans a capital to adapt the changing forms of rites and rituals in the contemporary society.

Another study focuses on the social mobility of the Malayan caste in north Malabar with an ethnomusicology perspective is that of Kaley Mason. The caste is engaged in dancing Theyyam, observe sorcery including black magic, *kuttiyettukal* (midwifery) and *balikala* (a ritual rite for good delivery) as part of their lesser birth rights and they are also endowed with the flair for traditional musical instruments. This is something that they have cultivated over generations of practicing in the hereditary profession, for the feudal lords and local chieftains—a skill the Malayans have acquired by way of their execution of their ritual services. The Malayan sets the rhythmic beat for all Theyyams.

The Malayan handles the musical instruments in every *kaavu*. The chenda, kurumkuzhal, *ilathalam*, *aripara*, *nadaswaram* are the instruments they acquired the skill. The Malayan’s ability to render the *thottams* (songs to invoke) with a fine sense of music can be assigned to the flair that is handed down hereditarily, and is acknowledged by all Theyyam dancing castes and hosts. The Malayan is an expert in other similar folk rituals/performances like *vedanpattu*, *kothamuri paattu*, *kannerudoshapaattu* and dramatic presentations like *uchaballi* and *ninabali*. Theyyam and folklore practices that lie close to this are passed on as part of oral tradition and for this reason the knowledge is protected by successive generations from the community, and prevented from dying out.

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16 Various musical instruments used as an ensemble and for special ceremonies including marriage etc.
This hereditary musical sensibility of Malayan has cultivated through providing ritual services to high caste landlord families. The cumulative experience gained by them in the entrenched feudal social framework has helped the Malayan to reap the benefit and convert into community asset in the modern spaces. This argument contests the normally upheld view on the sanskritisation that faces such subaltern social groupings and compels them to seek social mobility by uprooting from their hereditary occupation. The changing social processes in Kerala’s history aids in adding value to their musical legacy. The study has adopted ethnographic case studies with the Malayan families and explored the questions of how Malayans are investing their musical assets, to enhance their musical reputations in modern arena of performances. The work argues that the hereditary musicality of the Malayans serves as a strategic means for gaining access to diverse forms of capital-social, cultural and economic. This has shown as an example on how key identity opportunities are capitalised by disadvantaged communities in Post-Independent India.

The study, though of a small community, he has done an in depth survey of the group by living in their midst for around sixteen months, procured opinions, whereby studies the minute and the gross in them. For a scientific understanding of the history of music and its received community character, he trained in playing the chenda, and kurumkuzhal, the musical instruments of the Malayan. This enabled the researcher to locate the sensibility and the aesthetic of the Malayan’s music.

The ethnographer recognizes his status as a middle class white-man and suggesting that it might prove a limitation as far as his approach to the subject is concerned. But agree that he has, to the possible extent tried to work within the given context and methodology prescribed and taken care
to see that the likely biases are averted. Thus, the researcher is fully aware of the aspect of self reflexivity in locating the specificities of the field of Malayan's musical productions. Since the work concentrates on the musical content in Theyyam it derives its information from a small group of persons within the Malayan castes who have been able to develop social-political capital from the vocation, thereby excluding from its ambit, the totality of the Malayan’s social-economic condition. The absence of a major segment of the Malayan population from the study is a limitation of the work. The content has neither gone into the lives of the Theyyam community who are engaged in their hereditary role only for two months in a year, and in other months work in the chaliya (weavers) alleys, or engage in odd jobs.

Rajesh Komath’s\textsuperscript{17} attempts to explore the socio-economic mobility of the Theyyam performing community by taking a close look at the community residing in Chirakkal and Karivelur villages, in north Malabar, adopting the transition mobility matrices to measure the status of horizontal and vertical mobility pattern of households and individuals. The inquiry was made into the changes that have come about over generations–from the father to the son, from the mother to the daughter- and the reasons for moving away from the hereditary profession to newer forms of employment. The social barriers to enter into other professions was also identified. The study revealed that the Theyyam communities were far behind the other castes in the villages as far as the mobility of the families in the social hierarchy are concerned.

Educational mobility matrices shows that the members of the Theyyam communities reach high school levels only, whereas their counterparts in other castes reach beyond higher secondary

and reach post-graduation levels. There is hardly any change in their occupations either. In both the villages only a family could be identified as educated with government jobs, in sharp contrast to the other communities where both parents and offspring are well employed. Of the 12 Theyyam performing families selected for the study, 10 of the families continue to be engaged in their hereditary occupation. Implying that there has been no shift in the character of employment they seek. Among these, while one family displayed a moderate shift in mobility, another showed a major shift (highly mobile) in occupational status. Seen against this, the Thiyyas, Nambiar, Maniyani, and Vaniyar castes achieve moderately to highly mobile degrees of shift in their employment levels. About more than half the families achieve social progress through improved employment opportunities. This is also observed that a major diversification of occupation has affected to these castes according to the natural change of the society. While earlier studies give more stress on sociality of the castes and the Theyyam, this is a study which has laid emphasis on the changing material conditions of the groups in a society.

Tarabout\textsuperscript{18} discusses the major social and political discourses that has taken place in a society and cultures associated with the Theyyam. It has put it in the perspective of a post-structural analysis within the context of globalization which problematises an extremely regional cultural amalgam like Theyyam, the agencies within it, and the associated local castes and communities. It claims that the globalisation is not just a loose international economic relations, but that it has grown into a decisive determinant of man’s cultural heritage. It is attempted to be explained through a local folk genre like the Theyyam. This systematically link multiple representations, social discourses of Theyyam to various agencies and patrons based on the already established

sources and materials on the Theyyam. It stress on conflictual and resistent dimensions of Theyyam in the changing dynamic of society both within and outside the locational premises of it. However, Tarabout does not endorse Appadurai's\textsuperscript{19} view regarding the historical discontinuity vis-a-vis globalization, instead, he rests on the dimension of historical continuity in the processes of globalisation. Tarabout has delved into Theyyam as something that is integrated with the historical process. By opening up the different streams of studying the Theyyam, he relies on his perceptions from below to show the historical trajectories associated with the it.

The colonial and western views on Theyyam was that it was an amoral and inhuman practice. William's\textsuperscript{20} work adopts this premises and stream of thought very pertinently. Theyyam is just what remains of the primitive practice of creating faith in immovable objects, and therefore the sense of worship is absent, according to William. Further, such beliefs do not benefit man from a psychological point of view; on the contrary it harms. By conducting Theyyam, the upper castes in reality are exploiting the lower castes. Besides, they are generating profits from these festivals. Moreover, it proves a stumbling block to cultural progress. William was training to join the Christian priestly order, for which he was enrolled at the United Theology College in Bangalore. The belief that the Christian faith was the only means of salvation would have made him look at Theyyam through the tinted lens of Christianity on the one hand and more biased subjective induced elements on the other.

\textsuperscript{19} Appadurai was talking about globalisation as a phenomenon which has de-linked with the process of historical continuity as a main argument in his work titled modernity at large. See Arjun Appadurai, \textit{Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization} (Minneapolis:University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

\textsuperscript{20} V.William, \textit{Devil Dances of North Malabar (Thirayattam or Theyyam Tullal)}, Unpublished Dissertation, Bachelor of Divinity, (Bangalore:United Theological College,1944).
The social discourse of socio-religious reform movement in the late nineteenth century, defined and interpreted the Theyyam as the worship of spirits (*bhootharadhana*). Tarabout describes these historical moment titled as 'reformist in action'. The educated among the *Thiyyas* of north Malabar also shared this view. In the words of Murkoth Kunjappa\(^2^1\), *Sree Narayana Guru* was an electric shock in the society in those times. He eradicated practices like killing cock for sacrifice, consumption of toddy and the worship of *maadan* and *marutha*\(^2^2\). Instead he installed idols of *Ganesha*, *Sivan* and *Subramanian*. *Guru* was of the view that all rituals including the Theyyam have to be discontinued in *Andalur*, near *Thalasserry*. *Murkoth* is a renowned elite *Thiyya* family in north Malabar. During his visits to *Thalaserry*, the *Guru* had visited the *Murkoth* family. It was *Sree Narayana Guru* who undertook the installation of the idol in the *Jagannath* Temple in *Thalassery*. However, it was this group of elite *Thiyyas* who protested about the *chenda* being played by the *Malayans* in their temple on grounds of impurity of caste.

**Changing Spaces, Altered Definitions**

Against such a changing course in history, Theyyam did not cease to exist, instead, a proliferation was more pronounced in the period that follows. Theyyam successfully withstood the alterations that came up with. By the 1930s the Theyyam underwent changes, as part of the changes in the society. It came to be redefined. It was hailed as the symbol of Kerala culture. The Communist party also attempted to shift the sacred aspects of the Theyyam and tried to shift its veneration from the sacred spaces to other modern spaces as an art form. A new leftist sensibility was rapidly met with the intellectual sphere of Kerala. With the coming of revolutionary writers like

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\(^2^2\) A mode of lower caste worshiping *kali* especially in southern part of Kerala.
Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai\textsuperscript{23} and Kesava Dev\textsuperscript{24} who revolutionized themes by portraying social realities, wherein, the low born castes, the destitute were a major focus. Thus, the images of the 'primitive' and 'irrational' symbols were relocated as the 'oppressed' or repressed classes. Among them Theyyam was also redefined as the culture of the common man. Citing several Theyyams as examples the Theyyam became the symbol of the clarion call for liberation and the voice of the social progress.

Energized by the views of the Communist party, subsequent writings on Theyyam was approached as an object of folk genre and attempt has been made to redefine Theyyam as an art form than that of a rite or ritual. This is time where we find the Theyyam dancer morphing into a Theyyam artiste. Folklore experts like Chendera, Payyanad, Nambuthiri described the cultural and spiritual angle of Theyyam and also did document Theyyam thottams, the vaachalulikal, the ritual processes etc as their folklore study projects\textsuperscript{25}. Kurup's\textsuperscript{26} historical and sociological perspective on this folk traditions has been an influential break which made Theyyam to come in the limelight as it was in english language. Most of the later studies had been taken this work as a bench mark to make further aspects of the Theyyam. It also observes that the roots of Theyyam can be traced to the Sangam era, between 1\textsuperscript{st} Century AD and 5\textsuperscript{th} Century AD.

\textsuperscript{23} For instance see the literary works like Tottiyyude Makan (Scavenger's Son); Randidangazhi (Two Measures); Tentivargam (The Beggar Clan); Chemmeen (Prawns); Kayar (Coir).
\textsuperscript{24} See his works like Odayil Ninnu, Nadhi, Bhrandalayam, Ayalkar etc.
\textsuperscript{25} Theyyam has received much attention from studies of Humanities, Linguistics and Folklore. To have a brief review of the substantial body of works in these domain see M.D Raghavan, Folk Plays and Dances of Kerala (Trichur:The Rama Varma Archaeological Society,1947); Chendera, Kaliyattam; Raghavan Payyanad, Theyyavum Thottampattum, (Kottayam: National Books Stall,1979); Raghavan Payyanad, Folklorinoru Padana Padathi; Raghavan Payyanad, Folklore (Kerala: State Institute of Languages,1986); M. V. Vishnu Nambuthiri, Theyyam (Kerala-State Institute of Languages,1998); M.V. Vishnu Nambuthiri, Uthara Keralathile Thottam Pattukal (Trichur: Kerala Sahitya Academy, 1980); and also see Chirakkal.T.Balakrishnan Nair, Thiranjedutha Prabhanthangal (Trichur: Kerala Sahithya Academy, 1981).
\textsuperscript{26} K.K.N. Kurup, The Cult of Teyyam and Hero Worship in Kerala, Indian Folklore Series No. 21 (Calcutta: Indian Publications, 1973); Arjan and Dravidian Elements in Malabar Folklore: A Case Study of Ramavilliam Kalakam, (Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala Historical Society, 1977); Teyyam, A Ritual Dance of Kerala (Thiruvananthapuram: Department of Public Relations, Government of Kerala,1988).
When Kerala Theatre Studies became active, students of theatre approached Theyyam as a part of folk theatre. Kavalam Narayana Pannikar’s play ‘Theyya Theyyam’ took Theyyam into the arena of performing art. The Theyyam has moved out of its traditional space and found a place in the Republic Day celebrations at New Delhi and in spaces as folk festivals. Thus, Theyyam has taken steps into the kaavu as a ritual or rite, as a character in the proscenium, as part of process of nation building, and on the international fora. Theyyam moves into its variegated realities and thereby finds its niche keeping in sync with the changing times.

Controversy on Art or Ritual

Mayuri raises the issue of socio-political process of Theyyam and how politics is involved in ritual. This politics is not confined to the realm of tharavadu, but extends to the micro politics of locality, and macro positions of state and nation over these sorts of folk genres. By stating what Gough had observed on the declining process of the Theyyam that with the emergence of a capitalist economy, democratization of society, and with the fall of the matrilineal family structure, the forms of ancestor worship—dead among the Nayars—like Theyyam would vanish. But what has been observed here is that people started debating on the mode and spaces that the Theyyam has to be enacted. As a form of worship it might have adopted its own attributes of the time and space. Mayuri focuses on the specific event in context. ‘Theyyam Art Training’— a

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27 See the brochure ‘Theyya Theyyam’, National School of Drama, New Delhi. This was part of II year students theatre productions which is part of their curriculum. The play was also staged on 24th December, 2004—6.30 pm at Viloppilli Samskriti Bhavan, Thiruvananthapuram.
28 As part of documentation of the ritualistic spectacle in its essential spontaneity, folk festivals of Theyyam has been a grand event conducted by the School of Drama, a department of the University of Calicut. See for more details G Sankara Pillai, eds., Theatre of the Earth is Never Dead: Traditional Arts Project (Trichur: School of Drama, University of Calicut, 1986).
workshop was conducted in Taliparambu with the support of the Folklore Academy and financial assistance of Youth Welfare Board between 10–19 October, 1998 with the aim of imparting the skill in Theyyam to the younger generation. On the concluding day, ten Theyyams appeared in complete costume in Kannur city near stadium ground. This display of the Theyyam in the city centre drew much flak between those who felt the relocation of the Theyyam from its traditional arena was wrong, and those who found nothing amiss in the changed ‘space’.

The Folklore Academy Chairman, M.V Kannan had stated, before the commencement of the event, that there is no harm in the Theyyam moving from its sacred space. Furthermore, the Theyyam community could not survive solely on traditional practice of Theyyam in kaavus alone, and its survival will be threatened if contemporary spaces for Theyyam are not opened up. This exposure would only raise the self-esteem of the Theyyam practitioner. The prerogative to choose the performance space was purely that of the Theyyam dancer and therefore theirs was the last word and there was nothing wrong in it. This was the broader stand of the progressive left. But, some kaavu owners and members of the Theyyam community registered their disagreement—that the Theyyam is not something to be performed on public roads, and there was neither the element of ritual nor belief in it. It is a religious ritual. Some Theyyam practitioners supported this stand. If Theyyam is dragged to the streets they are exposing themselves to severe reprimands from the believer and the owners of the kaavus, they explained.

The decision on who dons the Theyyam is not based on the predictions on the spread of the soothsayer’s cowrie shells. It is the practice to leave the final word to the kaavu. The

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31 The Chairman was a practitioner of Theyyam and a lecturer at the Krishna Menon Government Womens College, Kannur.
soothsayer’s presence is purely a technical requirement. The layman presumes that this is right and it is a predestined decision. For them the Theyyam is at the core of their belief system and is also an instrument which offers solace from their grief. C.M.S Chendera, author of the first comprehensive study on *Theyyattam*, who belongs to a family which conducts this ritual worship. He was not an invitee to the workshop mentioned earlier. He voiced his opinion through the columns of Malayala Manorama:

"The soul of Theyyam is faith. The Theyyam that does not practice the associated rituals is actually killing the soul of the Theyyam. The state government has expressed the view that Theyyam accompanied by rituals can be performed anywhere. However, the atmosphere of faith cannot be created on the roads. The organizers should help revive Theyyam *kaavus* that have gone to seed, and not drag it to the streets"\(^{32}\).

Thus, Theyyam became central to the socio-political interactions. This tension of politics and ritual still continue to persist in the micro spaces of the Theyyam.

Studies on the elements of Art in Theyyam have been a subject of research among art historians. Chandran\(^{33}\) describes the formation of art in Theyyam. Putting the question of emergence of Theyyam in its historical perspective, it interprets the tradition of mother goddess and hero worship through analysing the myths and legends of the various Theyyams. It evaluates how from the viewpoint of social science a ritual becomes an ideology. It also brings within the ambit of the book the processes by which village traditions become Hinduised as part of the contemporary cultural politics. The study identify that though some Theyyam appear similar, they

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\(^{32}\) Malayala Manorama, October 19, 1998.

have distinct identities. A comparison has also been made on the face-paintings of Theyyam and Kathakali\textsuperscript{34}. The Theyyam artiste pursues his vocation in full faith, cultivates an inseparable bond with nature, with total conviction in the laws of nature. But the Kathakali artiste is engaged in recreating concepts which are constantly subject to fresh interpretations. The colourful visage of Kathakali only establishes this. But, the Theyyam practitioner, as he argues questions this sort of recreation and improvisation.

Diane Daugherty\textsuperscript{35}examines the funding and patronage aspects of major three performing arts of Kerala, namely Kutiyattam\textsuperscript{36}, Kathakali, and the Theyyam. Kerala state has adopted a very progressive approach in the matter of state funding. The linking of Art with Tourism is a decision in the right direction. But artistes do not receive respectable remunerations. She also points to the fact that in the absence of patronage from the landed gentry for the arts, the contemporary set up is unable to provide security for the present day practitioners of the art and state that while Kutiyattam has been successful in tapping the resources knocking on the right doors, Kathakali receives financial support from the governments, temple festivals and civic clubs. Theyyam artistes languish at abysmally poor levels as put it in her words, ‘dislocated artists, neglected gods’. The mentality of valuing classical forms and neglecting and devaluing the popular folk traditions is the fact that more revealing in her analysis. Patronages of wealthy and powerful groups were the advantages that the classical forms has acquired while the Theyyam meets with its own way and quarrels with micro politics and kaavu owners to get its place in changing

\textsuperscript{34} A highly stylized classical form of Indian dance-drama. For further details see Zarrilli Phillip B, The Kathakali Complex: Actor, Performance & Structure (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1990).


\textsuperscript{36} A form of Sanskrit theatre traditionally performed in Kerala temples.
society. It lead us to engage more with the social lives and historical dimensions of the Theyyam, aspects of which in a way portray in this dissertation.

Nambiar\textsuperscript{37} discusses the Theyyam’s Art-Drama parameters in the book and compares with the \textit{Bhutaradhane}\textsuperscript{38} of Karnataka state. She argues that both the Theyyam and \textit{Bhutaradhane} incorporate elements of the theatre. She has combined the resources of both these practices, recorded it and made the book. The main thrust of the inquiry is how the supernatural forces influence folk traditions. Theyyam is conducted to propitiate the souls. The practitioners approach it as a proscenium performance art. The ritual etchings and embellishments of Theyyam, the extraordinarily large headgear all reflect this. Theyyam and \textit{Bhutaradhane} have been viewed through the prism of art, ritual, theatre, stagecraft, performing art, and tradition. More than faith it is artistic content of Theyyam that has received attention in this book. For this very reason, it argues that the Theyyam and \textit{Bhutaradhane} are a performance arts conducted in ritual spaces.

Pallath\textsuperscript{39} compares the differences between the Theyyams of the Hindu \textit{Pulayan} and the Christian \textit{Pulayan}. The religious conversion by the Theyyam dancing castes of \textit{Pulayar} into Christianity lead to the emergence of a sect called as Christian \textit{Pulayan}. The \textit{Pulayan’s} Theyyam restrict their practice to the \textit{Pulayan pathi} (sacred spaces where \textit{Pulayans} perform their rituals) and this has to do with the fact that the \textit{Pulayan} is positioned rather low in the caste hierarchy of the Theyyam performing groups and also in the overall hierarchy of the Hindu caste order. The \textit{Pulapottan} is represented through the \textit{Pottan} Theyyam. The work also elaborates on how myth, icons, rituals,

\textsuperscript{37}Sita.K.Nambiar, \textit{The Ritual Art of Teyyam and Bhutaradhane} (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, 1996).

\textsuperscript{38} A spirit worship cult performed in Karnataka state, special to \textit{Tulunadu}.

become symbols of these belief systems and mold the world view of a section of the society. The symbols and rituals of Hindu Pulayar are more cosmic, show more eco-sense than the Christian Pulayar, which is more man centered and masculine. The former is more oriented towards Eastern designs that is more akin to spiral patterns while the later shows more towards West and in linear patterns. Both of these differential patterns of symbols of worship shows two different world views of a same group divided on the context of religious conversion. This world views shaping the wisdom and basic personality of peoples.

Dilip Menon\textsuperscript{40} looks at Theyyam as a folk dance and a popular culture. Theyyam is performed within the strict demarcations of castes, which form a culture that communicates with society and made possible to venerate within the efforts of the castes around the festival. Many of the Theyyams were icons that rose against unjust caste atrocities. Theyyam also provides a forum to strongly criticize the powers that be of those days, who were perpetrators of casteist violence. When Theyyam functions as a meeting ground of the lower castes and upper castes, it also draws a line to indicate the do's and don't's. By conducting Theyyam, the powerful high castes complemented the strategy to affirm their superiority and Theyyattam in its turn sustains a stratified society which also identifies this as a social space to participate with distinctive discourses which form a community of Teyyattam. This essay narrates the peculiar features of the region, castes and land relations, and analysis Teyyattam considering its multiple meanings. It also point out historical reasons for the decline of the Teyyattam in the late colonial period while putting the question of social change in north Malabar society and culture.

Wayne Ashley\textsuperscript{41} dwells on the process by which the theatre of Kerala, its political plays and contextualizing Theyyam in those framework of analysis. As a student of theatre, Ashley approaches Theyyam through the viewing lens of theatre stagecraft, an idea that endows the work with a distinctive approach. The author has studied the agencies associated with a local/rural culture and unravels the social process that emerges as the outcome of such an interaction. He enquires how money, ideology, government departments, communities react to a cultural form like Theyyam and look into the aspects of how the binary concepts—'modernity' and 'tradition' separately and jointly reflected in this form of worship. These discussion centres around the question of whether the Theyyam is an art or ritual.

The work has been divided into two parts. The first segment deals with Theyyam as a ritual, the core source of ritual power rooted in it. Besides, in a very distinct manner he has discussed the issue of caste and social orientation. With the engagement of the Marxist party, Central government, Drama Companies and Ford Foundation, the Theyyam gets uprooted from its traditional performing space and is re-located. The latter part of the book re-defines, re-creates Theyyam, as well as, speaks about the restructuring of a tradition that takes place. The work takes us through the changing form of Theyyam, and the process involved in this transition.

Holloman and Ashley\textsuperscript{42} look at the changes that have come over the Thiyya caste of North Kerala, considering Theyyam as a lens to understand the changes. The work analyses how the new political and economic structure affects the Theyyam \textit{per se}, and traditional social standing

\textsuperscript{41} Wane Ashley, \textit{Recordings: Ritual, Theatre, and Political Display in Kerala State, South India}, Unpublished PhD Dissertation (New York University,1993).

\textsuperscript{42} Regina E. Holloman and Wane Ashley, "Caste and Cult in Kerala", \textit{South Asian Anthropologist} 4, no2 (1983):93-104; Wane Ashley and Regina Holloman, "From Ritual to Theatre in Kerala", \textit{The Drama Review} 26, no.2 (1982).
of the Thiyyas. The work makes some very distinct observations. It becomes relevant because it brings up the changed ways of conducting Theyyam, links it with the time and to the overall social change that have come over society. The Theyyam encountered problems in the 60s and the gradual improvement that was evident by the mid 70s witnessed a resuscitation of the kaavus. Old kaavus were renovated, and new kaavus were born. In the 80s when major changes came into society it had its ramifications on the Theyyam too. This change points to two major facts: the land reforms in Kerala, and the migration to the Gulf/Middle East. The land reforms gave a severe jolt to North Kerala’s caste system. When land passed into the hands of the Thiyyas from the Nairs, a transfer of kaavus also happened. Thiyyas rose as the new kaavu owners. Income from the Gulf completely alters the social power and social relations. It shatters the old social order and creates a new order, a political economic changes related to land transfer. Thus, it unravels the aspect of the structure of the ritual and social relocation of an ex-untouchable caste in north Malabar.

Freeman43 gives a thick account of the cultural anthropological analysis of Theyyam, focusing on the aspects of sacred power, purity and violence. It has adopted an ethnohistorical perspective to look at materials and sources of this worship. While tracing the historical continuity of Theyyam as a culture, it delineates the south Indian premises of ritual and worship. It observes that ideology of this sort of belief becomes one that is not allowing to place it as ‘brahminical, the warrior, and the sorcerer-complexes’. But these aspects are assimilated into the worship of Theyyam and thus difficult to differentiate each other. Keeping these differences, the

contradictions among these can be evidenced through the faith, worship, and the strength of the purity of the godly power. Yet, the link with the past survives and retained through the social relations, and myths associated with Theyyam and its practices.

There is more of a historical significance than the content wise that the following works signifies. Thurston delineates the special features of the castes and sub-castes in southern India. It mentions of sorcery, and black magic and spirit worship when he writes on the ethnographic details of the Malayans. He captions the Malayan performing the 'ninabali' of Darikan as 'Malayan Devil Dancer'. If an evil spirit gets into the body of a human being it can be evicted from the body through the rites practiced by a Malayan. It also notes that Theyattams were also conducted on such occasions. The Chamundi Theyyam biting a fowl is labeled as 'Malayan Devil Dancer with Fowl in Mouth'. Fawcett, has also seen the Theyyam in a similar manner. These work reveals the colonial view of the Theyyam. Logan in 'Malabar' when write on caste and occupations, mention the social positioning of castes in chenujanmakkarar and an observation on the Theyyam:

"One ceremony in particular, called Teyyattam—a corrupt form of deva and Attam, that is, playing at gods—takes place occasionally in the fifth month of pregnancy. A leaf arbour is constructed and in front of it is placed a terrible figure of Chamundi, the queen of the demons, made of rice-flour, turmeric powder, and charcoal powder. A party of not less than eighteen washermen is organized to represent the demons and furies—Kuttichattan, (a mischievous imp) and many others. On being invoked, these demons bound on to the stage in pairs, dance, caper, jump, roar, fight, and drench each

44 Edgar Thurston, Castes and Tribes of Southern India, 7 vols, (New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1909).
other with saffron-water. Their capers and exertions gradually work up their excitement, until they are veritably possessed of the devil. At this juncture fowls and animals are sometimes thrown to them to appease their fury. These they attack with their teeth, and kill and tear as a tiger does his prey. After about twenty minutes the convulsions cease, the demon or spirit declares its pleasure, and much fatigued, retires to give place to others, and thus the whole night is spent with much tom-tomming and noise and shouting, making it impossible, for Europeans at least, to sleep within earshot of the din.

Thus, with the time and space, assuming a new mood, colour and structure, consistent with the different social, historical moments, the worship of Theyyam which spoiled the sleep of the Europeans in colonial times and was represented as spirit and devil, has now become something that is art and ritual, or an iconic image of Kerala culture. However, concealed within the costumes of Theyyam, the social lives of these possessed dancers and their voices yet to be explored. This dissertation centres the life of these dancers through direct observation of the ritual and writing about the life of a Theyyam family. As the researcher himself is an active dancer, or performer of the Theyyam, it bring forth a life narratives of Theyyam dancing in the contemporary. Thus, creating an autoethnography of the Theyyam. What distinct the study from earlier literature is that it focuses on the lives lived behind the acclaimed aspects of god, rituals and art.

I have discussed a detailed review of literature in this part of the chapter. It is primarily to go through the studies to identify themes and aspects already pointed out; methods used and to make a sense of the limits of those analysis and perspectives. These review gives us a historical thread of thinking on the Theyyam and portray in what ways it has affected both the natives and the Europeans. The cult aspect of the form has been seen as ritual and then art in the continuing
process of social discourse on Theyyam. It also puts Theyyam in between the rivalry competition of the rural politics and consequent controversy whether it has to be remain within the *kaavu* or taken out. All these discussions are centered around socio-political process of Theyyam and its changing dynamics. What is absent here is the life--socio-cultural and material conditions--in which the Theyyam dancers and their family live to enact the role of village gods. What is Theyyam to them and how they live with the Theyyam as their traditional occupation? What they say about their life in association with doing manifold rituals to the villagers at large. What they say and experience when they take Theyyam out of its traditional spaces? What are the associated conflicts, incompatibilities, and the question of self and identity of the cult to be explored. All these sets of questions are examined by putting the life narrative of a Theyyam family and writing of autoethnography of the Theyyam dancing both in its traditional spaces--*kaavus* and out side. Broadly, it is attempted to look at individual and group experiences analytically using interdisciplinary conceptual tools. The study thus examines the political economy of Theyyam in general. Next chapter narrates a family history of a Theyyam dancing family through the personal narratives of the members, to place in context the social realities of these lives in north Malabar society, which would depicts the aspects of historical sociology and more so on the contemporary social realities of the Theyyam.