



Blurring the boundaries between the sacred and the profane: a study of Muthappan worship.

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ABSTRACT

Caste was a scourge that has confounded social cohesion for centuries; it manifested itself in several forms, and temple worship has been particularly affected. This was not always infallibly the case, as exceptions existed, such as Muthappan worship. This paper examines the worship of Sree Muthappan in North Kerala as a ritual practice where the division between the sacred and profane is dissolved. It reimagines Muthappan worship not merely as a religious event but as a living text that enacts culture and subaltern agency through an interdisciplinary approach that draws from literary theory and performance studies. The paper argues that worshipping Muthappan reinterprets divinity as an embodied and democratic experience, in which a deity who moves among the populace and fraternizes with all regardless of status. Additionally, the study emphasizes ritual performance as a site that resists rigid social hierarchies, allowing marginalised voice to be expressed within a sacred context. By prioritizing participation, inclusivity, and collective experience, Muthappan worship question established ideas of purity and exclusion. Ultimately, it offers an alternative cultural model in which spirituality promotes social equality and a shared sense of identity.

Keywords: *theyyam*, caste discrimination, ritual, subaltern, sacred, profane

Until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the caste system reigned rather unchallenged in Kerala. It dominated spheres of life for everyone, adversely affecting the common folk and favourably for the elites of society. Segments of common society would be excluded from activities, based on the concept of purity. One such sphere of life affected was temple worship. Nambudiri Brahmins placed themselves at the apex of divine authority and established the temple centred culture. They ensured that their presence became instrumental to the functioning of ritualistic rites, cultivating dependence on them for its daily exercise. Within this hierarchy, a sizable segment of society had been excluded – the untouchables – owing to their ritually polluting jobs – and considered unworthy of sharing the worship spaces their upper caste counterparts frequented (Kumar). This shows how caste dominated sacrality, making it a platform for social hierarchy rather than community participation.

However, there were several reform movements that sought to undermine this entrenched casteism and steer society towards egalitarianism. Among them, the *Vaikom Satyagraha* stands as a landmark in Kerala's social history, representing a crucial step in the struggle against untouchability. This nonviolent movement ensured everyone's access to three of the four roads leading to the Vaikom temple whilst the eastern path would be reserved for Brahmins (Simlandy). This protest ultimately led to the historic Temple Entry Proclamation of November 1936, signed by the Maharaja of Travancore, which removed the ban on lower castes entering Hindu temples in Travancore ("Tribute to the King"). Nevertheless, the proclamation didn't have much effect in the Malabar region until 1947. It was thus in the post-independence era that signs of egalitarian temple access appeared in that region (Manmathan).

However, long before the proclamation and amidst the prevailing caste system, certain tribal forms of worship co-existed along with the rituals practiced by the Namboodiri Brahmins in North Malabar (Kerala Tourism). They functioned outside the conventional temple practices and allowed the marginalised to participate in worship from which they were otherwise excluded. One such form is the ritual performance of *Theyyam* in which the divine is manifested through a performer rather than being worshipped in an idol (Gabriel 4). The performer, belonging to the lower strata of the society becomes a vessel for the deity making it accessible to the public. This allows temporary inversion of ritual authority, thereby enabling the oppressed to embody divine agency. People belonging to the apex of the caste hierarchy have to worship the God who comes in the form of *Theyyam*, thereby striking a significant reversal of social hierarchy. It is within this ritual context that Victor Turner's concept of *communitas* gains relevance. According to Turner *communitas* is bound to anti-structure, a state which fosters a connection that unites people above all formal social bond thereby creating a profound sense of equality (qtd. in Haggard).

There are around four hundred different *Theyyams*, categorised as major and minor ones that are performed occasionally. Among this variety, *Sree Muthappan* stands as a prominent figure due to its daily *theyyam* performance as part of the ritual (Sangeethika).

Theyyam ritual is always associated with myths and the emergence of *Muthappan Theyyam* must be acknowledged in a climate of severe caste discrimination. The myth associated with this deity is that a Brahmin woman named *Padikutty Amma*, who longs for a child and prays to Shiva, discovers a child floating in the river in a flower basket. She and her husband are happy to take the child into their care, as they were childless. They ensured that he was well-educated, for his time, in everything, including the *Vedas*. Yet, he didn't hesitate to fraternise with people of the lower-castes. He hunted and consumed meat – he defied the ways of his adopted caste. His foster parents were so agitated that they banished him from the household. This prompted *Muthappan* to wander the forest and become an advocate and protector of the lower castes (*Poduval*). This narrative highlights his affinity towards the downtrodden even after being adopted into the life of elites. The narrative also situates *Muthappan* within the ritual tradition of *Theyyam*, where he is not worshipped as a distant transcendental god but embodied through performance, making his egalitarian ethos ritually visible and socially accessible.

Muthappan Theyyam, when observed as a ritual is not just an act of devotion but a cultural practice that negotiates social hierarchy. Unlike the conventional temple centred structure that focuses on rigid purity standards, this ritual enables communal participation where the boundary between sacred and ordinary is suspended. Such a ritual acts as a platform where existing caste hierarchy is temporarily dismantled.

In Muthappan Theyyam, the performer enters a liminal stage (Gabriel 23), where ordinary social structures are suspended and a direct experience of divine power becomes possible. During the Theyyam ritual, the performer who embodies the deity often comes from lower communities like Vannan community (3) and is granted sacred authority that contradicts their usual social status. Through this transfer of divine authority, the performer elevates their social identity by becoming a vessel for the divine. In the liminal stage, they are considered as gods and goddesses, and people belonging to dominant groups such as Brahmins pay their obeisance to the performers (26). This significant reversal of authority reflects the anti – structural nature of *communitas*, which leads to decentralising of divine and social power.

The participation of Brahmins during the rituals and their appreciation of the spiritual benefits attained from the ritual (Gabriel 26), further elevates this social dynamic. Through this participation, these dominant groups seem to acknowledge the authority of the marginalised. These instances display how *communitas* acts as a platform for temporary inversion of caste hierarchy and thereby fostering a sense of equality. However, this suspension of hierarchy is temporary and after the ritual ends the usual rigid caste system is reactivated. Despite this temporariness, the liminal stage highlights the potential for reversal of ritual authority along with communal bonding.

The understanding of *communitas* is further deepened when Turner articulates that it is not to be understood as an ordinary or everyday form of social bonding. It is not merely the easy camaraderie shared among friends, colleagues, or acquaintances. Rather, it constitutes a profound and transformative experience that penetrates to the core of individual existence, revealing a deeply rooted sense of collective unity and shared humanity (138). This type of connection usually dismantles the established social hierarchies and is mostly seen in ritual contexts.

In the context of Muthappan Theyyam, this profound feeling of *communitas* is not exclusive to the visual pleasure created by the performer, but it extends to the dialogues and comments articulated by the performer. The utterances are considered to have a cathartic effect, not only on the performer but also to the audience (Gabriel 23). The conversation focuses on basic human thereby connecting people to the real world and leads to faith and release of emotions among the devotees.

Furthermore, the performer also claims amnesia during the ritual which exemplifies the belief of the people. His assertion of lack of any memory during the possession of deity makes his enactment authentic and elevates the beliefs of the devotees that it is indeed the deity that speaks through a medium (Gabriel 23). This draws more and more people to witness this ritual act where there is convergence of faith and emotion. It is not just the performative elements of Theyyam, but also the words spoken that generate *communitas*. The speech conveyed during ritual functions as an important aspect in bringing people together to experience a profound sense of unity.

Within this ritual environment there are other aspects that blurs the boundaries between sacred and ordinary. These include the consumption of food items by the performer that are usually considered to be impure in conventional temple practice. This phenomenon can be understood through the lens of cultural construction, which aims to describe a situation as a process and also emphasises that each situation can be viewed differently by each culture. It focuses on the fact that every group that perceives different characteristics that might differ from the majority is not considered to be superior or inferior, but just different (Argyriadis). This challenges the idea that notions based on purity standards are not inherent but something viewed differently in each culture. Practices considered impure or inferior in one culture may have a significant meaning in another.

In the Muthappan worship, the performer consumes toddy and dried meat – substances usually scorned by other temples thereby acquiring different perspective (Gabriel 7). Instead of viewing them with disgust, they are being given a sacred meaning within the ritual setting. This depicts how certain culture reestablishes purity notions and creates a deeper meaning. Thus the ritual not only challenges the dominant social structure but also gives meaning to the aspects associated with the marginalised thereby redefining the established notions of purity.

CONCLUSION

Muthappan worship stands as a significant cultural practice that questions rigid social hierarchies and reshapes the understanding of divinity in everyday life. Grounded in the Theyyam tradition of North Kerala, it creates a ritual where differences of caste, purity, and status are briefly set aside, encouraging a more inclusive and collective form of devotion. The manifestation of the deity through performers from marginalized communities turns the ritual into a lived experience, where the divine presence becomes immediate and approachable for all devotees. Elements that are usually viewed as impure are reinterpreted within this setting, emphasizing the shifting nature of cultural meanings and beliefs across societies.

Although the sense of equality within the ritual is temporary, it points to the possibility of a more just social order and nurtures a strong feeling of shared humanity and emotional connection among participants and observers in profound and lasting ways. In this manner, the ritual does not merely mirror cultural values but also plays an active role in transforming them. It functions as a platform where faith, performance, and social experience converge, presenting an alternative vision of community rooted in inclusion, dignity, and shared recognition.

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