SOUNDS FROM A SILENCED DIVINITY

The Interaction of Caste with Music in the Theyyam Rituals of Kerala

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ABSTRACT

The ritual art form popularly known as 'Theyyam' occurs annually in the northern regions of the South Indian state of Kerala. The ritual is orchestrated and demonstrated by Dalit communities, who were formerly treated as untouchables throughout the history of the subcontinent. The impact of caste dynamics on this form of religious expression is explored in this work through ethnomusicological analyses, wherein the musical elements of Theyyam are compared to forms of music practised by upper-caste communities in the same region. This work aims to highlight how knowledge, in essence, is a product of social hierarchy and forms of expressions birthed from knowledge are subtle representations of social discrepancy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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KEYWORD:

Theyyam, ritual, caste, music, information, transmission.

INTRODUCTION

'Theyyam' is a term used to refer to a ritual that occurs in the Kolathunadu area of the Indian state of Kerala, roughly ranging from Kasargod to Kannur. The term 'Theyyam' is colloquially used for both the ritual and the channelled deity, although the word '*Theyāṭṭam*' is preferred by the performing communities. What makes this ritual an important subject for study is the fact that out of roughly 400 different variants of this ritual, every single occurrence is orchestrated by Dalit communities. Dalit (Sanskrit for 'broken') communities, across the Indian subcontinent, have been treated as untouchables within the rubric of the Indian caste-system for millennia and even today, many bear the brunt of this age-old socio-cultural conditioning. Practices revolving around untouchability in the state of Kerala, while rampant until the early 20th Century, have undergone reformation through the efforts of personalities such as Sri Narayana Guru, B.R. Ambedkar, E.M.S. Namboodiripad, and other such personalities who worked toward the dissolution of caste-induced oppression. Albeit casteism lies prevalent in the attitudes and mores of contemporary Kerala, even though it is widely emphasised in the socio-political arena that the state and culture have managed to do away with casteism. This work intends to analyse the extent to which casteism influences the socio-political dynamics of Kerala, if it does at all, through ethnomusicological analyses.

If one were to view the occurrence that is Theyyam as a form of ritualised theatre, a dissection of different art forms that coalesce to form Theyyam – painting, craftsmanship, narration/singing, music, dance and, showmanship become apparent to the viewer. Although, by no means is Theyyam to be viewed simply as an "art form' in the modern understanding of that term, as the performers and the viewers ascribe sacredness to the act as well as the setting. It is undeniably the case with indigenous and historical forms of art in India and many other parts of the globe – art and religion often work in a confluent manner, whereas the interactions of religion and politics form overarching sectarian patterns of interaction. The focus of this study is the music that contributes to the *Theyāṭṭam,* colloquially known as '*vādyam*', and the similarities it shares with the music performed by upper-caste temple music ensembles (such as the *Periya Mēḷam*). This is done with the

intention of understanding how art and politics interact through the medium of religion in the North Malabar area of Kerala. This comparison is studied in terms of instruments, performance techniques, and theoretical knowledge. The aim, therefore, is to demonstrate how in spite of these shared elements, perceptions and practices stemming from the caste system have contrastingly affected the social privileges resulting from the cultural understandings of these art forms as music and the communal identities of the performers.

Research Background

Theyyam is performed predominantly by three castes in and around the town of Payannur – the Vannan, the Velan, and the Malayan, although tradition indicates that there are nine castes that contribute to this performative oral tradition. All of the aforementioned castes have a history that is rooted in untouchability and casteism. As of today, they are recognised as Scheduled Castes by the Government of India. What is interesting to note is that even while donning the garb of a god, a Brahmin individual is still not supposed to come into physical contact with the Theyyam. In the district of Kannur, *mēḷam* as a form of music is performed exclusively by people from the Mārār caste, who come under the subdivision of 'Ambalavasis' – upper caste communities who were historically skilled labourers within the temple compound.

Theyyam, outside of the local art and academia circles of Kerala, is a relatively unscrutinised subject. This paucity of available data, ubiquitous in anthropological, archaeological, and historical circles of Western academia owes itself to the fact that much of the research done regarding this subject is in Malayalam, the native tongue of Kerala. Even while going through the Malayalam literary compendiums on Theyyam, one can recognise them as attempts at creating organised lists of the different kinds of Theyyams that exist, often combined with oral and culture–historical narrative elements. Since the analyses being done here pertains to the musical elements in *Kaḷiāṭṭam* (the colloquial term for Theyyam performances, which literally translates to "dance performance'), these works will not be considered here as they are not relevant within the scope of this research.

Most works on the subject of Theyyam are situated within larger narratives of South Indian history. Kurup[78] provides a brief history of Theyyam and a rough account of the ritual performance. Others, such as Damodaran[79] and Pereira,[80] have analysed Theyyam in a historical/anthropological light and have also emphasised on its importance in the task of creating a more inclusive historical narrative of the North Malabar region.

Theyyam rituals are conducted over a particular season every year, which ranges roughly from November to May. Locations of Theyyam performances are known via word of mouth, which happens to travel swiftly to adjoining areas. The nature of these rituals contradicts the Puranic Hindu idea of 'sacred' as they are being performed by untouchable communities, which essentially ruptures the rules of the caste system. Additionally, ritual elements such as blood sacrifices, consumption of meat, and other factors contribute to this apparent contradiction. The ritual is performed by communities who have historically been treated as untouchables, continuing into the modern era. It has been claimed that various early elements of these folk rituals date back to the Neolithic and Chalcolithic eras[81] and were incorporated and tailored to fit the Brahmanical religion[82] through the process of Sanskritization. The chronological map pertaining to the evolution of this ritual remains a matter that requires further effort, but given the Tantric aura surrounding the rites and the performance (such as the offering of 'impure substances' such as blood and meat) as well as the presence of forms of arts that seem to echo a common beginning (such as the Bhuta Kola rituals from the Tulu region of South Karnataka and Mudiyettu rituals that occur further down south in Kerala) suggest a chronology that stretches back to great antiquity within and adjoining the studied region.

The performance requires the *Kōlakāran* (the man who is to embody the Theyyam) to observe a lifestyle of abstinence starting a fortnight before the main ritual. The main ritual

[78] Kurup, "Teyyam – A Vanishing Ritual Dance of Kerala," 125 – 138.
[79] M.P. Damodaran, "Theyyam Is the Best Tool for Reconstructing the History of North Malabar," *Anthropologist* 10 (2008): 283–287
[80] Filipe Pereira, "Ritual liminality and frame: What did Barbosa see when he saw the Theyyam?" *Asian Theatre Journal* 34, no.2 (2017) : 375–396.
[81] Bridget Allchin and Raymond Allchin, *The birth of Indian civilization : India and Pakistan before 500 BC* (Penguin Books, 1968), 309.
[82] K.K.N. Kurup, '"Teyyam – A Vanishing Ritual Dance of Kerala," in *A Panorama of Indian Culture : Professor A. Sreedhara Menon Felicitation Volume*. Ed. Kusuman ,K. K. (Mittal Publications, 2008), 126.

goes on for 3–6 days, with different stages of the Theyyam being performed on different days. The musicians play at different cadences through the different stages of the ritual. For a *Kōlakāran* and his retinue, the first day usually begins with a '*Thorram*', which is a prayer song recital where the performer only dons a smaller part of the ritual crown. The next day is the '*Veḷḷāttam*', in which half the attire is donned, and the body and face are painted, but the divine crown is absent. This stage could be understood as a psychological warm-up for the main ritual. The day after the *Veḷḷāṭṭam* comes the final stage of the ritual, wherein the *Kōlakāran* dons the sacred headgear, and the metamorphosis from the depicter to the depicted reaches its apotheosis. What ensues next is the embodied enactment of the *Kōlakāran* as the Theyyam from the *Thorram* songs. To aid the climactic tone of this phase of the ritual, the percussions sound more vigorously than ever. For a more lucid description of the Theyyam ritual, refer to Seth (2009).

Based on the presence of counter-hegemonic religious sanctions (such as meat and alcohol) and the worship of deities from Tantric pantheons such as Shiva and Kali, the extent of the influence of Tantric sects, as highlighted by Freeman[83], cannot be understated in understanding Theyyam. Freeman[84] has analysed the ritual and religious development as well as nuances of the *Bhairavan* Theyyam that occurs in the Malabar region. The key element of this work is the exploration of the ritual links shared between the Shaivite Bhairava Yogis and the *Bhairavan*/*Kuṭṭicātan* Theyyams of the local Malayan caste. The importance of the theme of Brahminicide in the background stories of the *Bhairavan* Theyyam is noted by the author, which paradigmatically highlight socio-religious frictions experienced by the performing communities and the Brahminical authority, which could potentially explain the extant link between historical lower caste narratives and ritual imagery with Tantric elements. Since the chronology surrounding Theyyam is predominantly conjectural due to the paucity of historical and archaeological evidence, it would be unwise to assume that the Theyyam rituals were first performed by "Jogi' castes Freeman discusses. While the rigour of the author's analysis cannot be undermined even

[83] John Richardson Freeman. "Shifting Forms of the Wandering Yogi." In *Masked ritual and performance in South India: Dance, healing, and possession,* edited by D. Shulman And D. Thiagarajan, (Centers for South and Southeast Asian Studies, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 147–183.
[84] Freeman, "Shifting Forms of the Wandering Yogi," 147–183.

slightly, the author does not discuss the potential of the 'Jogi' castes having sought the appropriation of their *Bhairavan* cult via the prevalent regional ritual paradigm of Theyyam through representing *Bhairavan* as a Theyyam.

Seth's observation and documentation[85] of the legend and the rituals of the *Mucilōṭṭu Bhagavatī* Theyyam, who is worshipped in the Malabar as an aspect of Durga, is indispensable for the study of Theyyam as the work provides the nuanced account of the Theyyam's ritual in conjunction with thematic elements from the mythological narrative in great detail. While the work does sacrifice critical inquiry in exchange for a detailed account, Seth does note that "wronged women" form a category of Theyyams who are worshipped as goddesses[86]. The *Pāṇayakāṭṭu Bhagavatī* Theyyam[87] (see Fig. 2) would come under a similar classification. This understanding can be extended to 'wronged men' in this case of the *Kaṇḍanār Kēḷan* Theyyam[88] (see fig. 1), who perished in a forest fire while fulfilling his duties, which were enforced by the caste system.

Ahammed[89], through a socio-psychological lens, has highlighted the role of Theyyam in the periodic alleviation of the collective historical trauma endured by the performing communities through the ritual reemphasis of their identity. This recognition of the psychosocial potential that comes from this reclamation of divinity contributes to the scope of this work, wherein information is understood as a set of values functioning within and being transmitted through the rubric of the caste system.

This work essentially views Theyyam, drawing on the understanding posited by Ahammed, as not simply an art form, but as a means of religious expression which intends to counteract the socio-psychological effects of the iniquitous caste system. This idea could be well elucidated in the words of Manmasih Ekka[90], "A Dalit poem is simple, direct, forceful, and writing of it is not a joy-ride in aesthetics but … (a) long-drawn cry for socioeconomic

[85] Seth, Pepita. "The Muchilottu Bhagavathi Cult in Kerala." In *Goddess Durga: The Power and the Glory*. Ed. Pratapaditya Pal. (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2009).
[86] Seth, "The Muchilottu Bhagavathi Cult in Kerala," 152.
[87] Mohanan, Aditya, *Pāṇayakāṭṭu Bhagavatī Theyyam,* 2019, digital photograph, author's collection.
[88] Mohanan, Aditya. *Kaṇḍanār Kēḷan Theyyam,* 2019, digital photograph, author's collection.
[89] Shaima Ahammed, "Caste-based Oppression, Trauma and Collective Victimhood in Erstwhile South India: The Collective Therapeutic Potential of Theyyam." *Psychology and Developing Societies* 31, no. 1 (2019): 88–105.
[90] Manmasih Ekka, "Liberation Theme in Tana Bhagat Prayers," In *Doing Theology with the Poetic Traditions of India: Focus on Dalit and Tribal Poems*, ed. Joseph Patmury (Bangalore: PTCA/Sathri, 1996), 184.

change for liberation from suffering." The ideological essence of this statement can be distinctly seen in the counter-caste/patriarchy origin narratives of many Theyyam deities, even though the *Kaḷiāṭṭam* is as much ritual as it is art. Particularly pertinent to this stream of thought is the *Poṭṭen* Theyyam legend, wherein the god Shiva dons the garb of a *caṇḍāla* (a member of the undertaker caste) to educate the Brahmanical Hindu leader Samkara about the inequities and injustices propagated by the caste system[91]. A counter-patriarchy theme can be inferred from the origin story of the *Mucilōṭṭu Bhagavatī* Theyyam, wherein a young girl's chastity is unjustly brought into question and is used to slander her reputation by the males of her community, which lead to her being transformed into a goddess by the god Shiva[92]. It is interesting to note the presence of Shiva in these counter-hegemonic narratives, an occurrence that possibly results from non-Brahminical or 'impure' attributes (such as meat, sex, alcohol, and blood) that are associated with this deity as well as many local practices across India. It is also extremely important to note that even though Goddesses are depicted through male performers, women do not play a role in any part of the ritual at any stage. Even when one observes the devotees of the Theyyam, there's a stark discrepancy in the number of men and women, with the latter hardly being present. Though this work views Theyyam as a Subaltern expression against hegemonic forces such as the Brahmanical orthodoxy and feudalism, the gender hegemony within the local caste dynamics of the region will become apparent to anyone who observes.

Thus far, there have been no academic works that have centred around the music and rhythm accompanying the *Kaḷiāṭṭam*. One of the most authoritative works in understanding South Indian temple music (*Periya Mēḷam*) was done by Terada[93], which is the main source used in this work for contrasting Mēḷam with music in *Kaḷiāṭṭam* (known by musicians within and outside the communities as *Vādyam,* and in rarer, more formal cases as *Ceṇḍā Mēḷam*). In his work, Terada elucidates the complexities associated with the practices of temple musicians. It can be gleaned from this work that particular sections, *rāgams* (musical scales) and *tāḷās* (rhythmic counts) are meant to be employed to suit

[91] J.J. Pallath, "Theyyam Myth: An Embodiment of Protest," In *Life as a Dalit: Views from the bottom on caste in India,* ed. S. Channa And J.P. Mencher, (Sage Publications, 2013).
[92] Seth, "The Muchilottu Bhagavathi Cult in Kerala," 153.
[93] Yoshitaka Terada, "Temple Music Traditions in Hindu South India: "Periya Mēḷam" and Its Performance Practice," *Asian Music* 39, no. 2 (2008): 108–151.

specific ritual phases through the day. The existence of codified frameworks that convey this information, as seen in Terada's work[94] is integral to this work's comparison between the temple's *mēḷam* and the Theyyam's *vādyam*.

Groesbeck's invaluable analyses[95] look into the dialectics of the interactions between "classical" and "folk" forms of music in India. The analyses done in this work are informed by the threefold classification of the defining traits of Indian classical music – i) legitimation based on an ancient theoretical tradition, ii) preserved disciplinarily through generational training, iii) understanding of melodic configurations through the concept of *rāgam*. The utility of these specific traits in any analyses that is concerned with "Classical" and "folk" forms of music cannot be understated, but a fourth imperative trait must be addressed when enquiring into Indian music, a point the author himself discusses later in the article[96] – the understanding of time through rhythmic patterns and note subdivisions, which is more often than not referred to as *tāḷā* across the subcontinent. Indian music relies heavily on percussive patterns to captivate and steady the attention of its listeners, be it the north Indian *tablā* or the south Indian *mṛdaṅgam*. This point is pertinent to the course of this work because the concept of *tāḷās* is invaluable to understand *vādyam* as means of musical expression. Groesbeck has also highlighted the problems with construing "Classical" and "folk" forms of music as mutually exclusive, given that there are numerous elements that are constantly shared by both the aforementioned groups[97]. His claim that the distinction between "Classical" and "folk" music is not maintained by performers and audiences are fundamentally challenged by the findings presented in this study.

Theoretical Framework

This work is ethnographic in nature, enquiring the manner in which social identity and privilege that stem from the functionings of the caste system. In doing so, it borrows from Redfield's notion[98] of 'little' and 'greater' tradition and applies it to the context relevant

[94] Terada, "Temple Music Traditions in Hindu South India: "Periya Mēḷam," 121–122.
[95] Rolf Groesbeck, ""Classical Music," "Folk Music," and the Brahmanical Temple in Kerala, India." *Asian Music* 30, no. 2 (1999): 88.
[96] Groesbeck, ""Classical Music," "Folk Music," and the Brahmanical Temple in Kerala, India." 90–92.
[97] Groesbeck, ""Classical Music," "Folk Music," and the Brahmanical Temple in Kerala, India." 90–92.
[98] Robert Redfield, "The Social Organization of Tradition," *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (1955): 13–21.

here, as done by Kurup[99]. This theoretical tool helps contextualise and elucidate the interactions and exchanges between the 'greater' Brahmanical tradition and the 'little' local, and in many cases, pre-Brahmanical traditions. Informational and theoretical values from the musical traditions of both the Brahmanical and the Dalit communities, are juxtaposed. The socio-cultural impacts of this juxtaposition are further used to infer contrasting privileges experienced by communities from both ends of the caste spectrum.

Albeit dated, the theoretical frameworks of 'Universalisation' and 'Parochialisation'[100] are also used to contextualise the observed phenomena. These tools help elucidate how local elements of faith interact with 'greater' Hindu elements. Instances would be the presence of the pan-Indian Shiva in local *Poṭṭen* Theyyam narratives. Another clearer instance of Parochialisation would be the enactment of the Narasimha Avatar of Vishnu through the *Viṣṇumūrtī* Theyyam[101] (see Fig. 3).

This work draws from and contributes to Subaltern theories on caste and class privilege, but employs ethnomusicological analyses to discern the values and functions of the observed musicological elements. Socioeconomic impacts resulting from the inferences are further used in the portrayal of the contrast in experienced caste and class privileges, or the lack thereof, by the two categories of musicians studied here.

Research Methodology

The nature of this study would qualify as qualitative as factors such as privilege, both monetary and systemic are observed and analysed. All observations were done in and around the town of Payannur in Kerala. Over the course of one week, 8 Theyyams were observed in 4 different *kāvu* (sacred ancestral properties containing a shrine dedicated to gods/ancestors, which are usually the loci of Theyyam activities). To 'participate', in the general academic understanding of the word, is not possible in these contexts as the acts are only to be performed by the caste communities that conduct these rituals, who are linked through either blood and marriage. But as to the role of the 'viewers' of the ritual,

[99] Kurup, "Teyyam – A Vanishing Ritual Dance of Kerala," 125 – 138.
[100] McKim Marriott, "Village India: Studies in the Little Community." *American Sociological Review* 21, no. 1 (1956): 100–101.
[101] Mohanan, Aditya, *Viṣṇumūrtī Theyyam,* 2019, digital photograph, author's collection.

they are seen as passive participants in the ritual, with almost every ritual ending with people receiving blessings from the divine characters, which is often compensated monetarily for. In many Theyyams, such as the *Thaṭṭum Veḷḷaṭṭam*, the audience forms a relatively more active part of the ritual by willingly being chased around by the infuriated Theyyam as well as taunting and luring him; whereas in the other Theyyams, the viewers take on more of a passive, nevertheless a subtly interactive role. In the case of this study, one of the observed Theyyams titled *Kaṇḍanār Kēḷan,* a fire ritual performer, often does not cease performing until the audience pleads him to do so. In ways such as these, the viewers become a covertly active element of the ritual. This form of 'passive participation', naturally, challenges the dichotomous paradigm of interaction posited by the traditional notion of participant–observation.

It is through the perspective elucidated above that multiple subjects were interviewed over the course of this study, most of them being the ritual percussionists themselves, whereas some were local devotees (the 'passive participants') of both, the Theyyams and the Brahminical temple deities. Two of the subjects were local intellectuals from Payannur. The musicians were often seen taking rests between the different *kalāshams* (phases) of the ritual and were eager to answer questions. This work focuses on colloquial projections and depictions of art forms over formal and theoretical ideas that make up the bodies of the studied forms of music.

As of the past decade, the growing smartphone culture has resulted in locals dedicatedly recording the performances using their own devices, to which the performers often express no discontent and often even encouragement. This made obtaining video documentation of the performances a seamless endeavour.

Ethical Constraints

In the manner described earlier, the interviews were done verbally, and there was no objection to the recording of any performance materials. Almost unanimously, every performer refused to sign a consent form, their reasoning suggesting that they are public performers and do not see any distinction between academic researchers and curious citizens. The performers willingly gave verbal consents for their performances to be

recorded and for their statements to be used verbatim, but refused to sign a consent form as they see their knowledge and expertise as public heritage. To avoid ethical conundrums, the interviewees will not be named in this work.

Another ethical concern informing the course of this work one addressed in the "Transmission of Tradition" by Shelemay[102], whereby the fieldworker acknowledges their role in the transmission of this tradition and thereby implying a mutual growth of the performers and the perceiver/transmitter of knowledge, that is the fieldworker. This, in turn, leads to cultural evolution that stems from the dissolution of certain boundaries that earlier distinguished the researcher and the researched. This point becomes pertinent when the upper caste and class privileges of the author are addressed, whose upper-caste ancestry has played a role in the aforementioned oppression of the performing communities. Therefore, the intention and the predicted results of this work stem from a sense of solidarity that transcends the borders of caste and class. Hence, this work aims to promulgate and contribute to dialogues regarding caste and its implications, rather than "making representations predicated on the Other's absence[103]."

Findings and Comparisons

Performance Structures

Both, the *mēḷam* and the *vādyam* performers are responsible for the creation of a sonic ambience that the deity embodies. At first sight, it may seem that the *vādyam* is being played to random rhythmic tendencies, but when one observes the parallel performances of the *kaḷiāṭṭam* and the *vādyam,* it becomes evident that the sound of the *vādyam* is intended to complement the impulsive motions and theatrics employed by the *kaḷiāṭṭam* performer, and therefore is largely improvisational in essence. In stark contrast, we see the *mēḷam* performers from temples having a definite musical structure which prescribes different instruments and *rāgās* to be employed in particular rituals and through particular

[102] Kay Kaufman Shelemay, "The Ethnomusicologist, Ethnographic Method, and the Transmission of Tradition," *Shadows in the Field : New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology* (2008): 141–56.
[103] Johannes Fabian, "Presence and Representation: The Other and Anthropological Writing," *Critical Inquiry* 16, no. 4 (1990): 771.

stages of the day,[104] wherein improvisation plays a distinct role in its larger, more curated compositional structure. The cultural implication of the aforementioned structural differences between the temple and Theyyam performances can be recognised by the word '*mēḷam*' being used by the locals particularly to refer to temple music performances, whereas the word '*vādyam*' is used colloquially not only in reference to Theyyam but also as a general term meaning 'rhythm', which makes it usable in other contexts as well. Locals, who have been conditioned through the consistent viewing of both performers in both contexts, evidently view *mēḷam* ensembles as having a distinct identity of their own, whereas the *vādyam* players are seen as marginal contributors to a larger demonstration. The reasoning behind this perspective is often explained using the claim that the *vādyam* performers lack the education and skills that the *mēḷam* performers possess. The causality of this ascribed discrepancy can be traced back to the first instance of the systematisation of the musicological elements of the *periyā mēḷam* by Ramasami Dikshitar, an 18th century Brahmin musician from Tamil Nadu[105].

Such systematisation is not found in any Theyyam performances, but there is a strong oral tradition that harks back to a king who was likely to have belonged to the Kolathunadu dynasty, often referred to as 'Chirakkal Thamburān', a title the locals used for the same "Kōlattiri Rāja" from the *Bhairavan*[106] and *Muchiloṭṭu Bhagavathī* Theyyam[107] narratives recorded. It is this king who is said to have brought in another character known as 'Maṇṇanār Gurukkal', who is supposed to have created a codification of the narratives reenacted in the Theyyam performances. The historicity of this character has not yet been verified thoroughly, but he is found in the narratives of the *Bhairavan* Theyyam as the Tantric figure knowns as "Kurikkaḷ", and also is venerated as the *Kurikkaḷ* Theyyam by certain Vannan families[108].

[104] Terada, "Temple Music Traditions in Hindu South India: "Periya Mēḷam," 121–122.
[105] Terada, "Temple Music Traditions in Hindu South India: "Periya Mēḷam," 119.
[106] Freeman, "Shifting Forms of the Wandering Yogi," 170.
[107] Seth, "The Muchilottu Bhagavathi Cult in Kerala," 153.
[108] Freeman, "Shifting Forms of the Wandering Yogi," 170.

Instruments

It should be noted that Theyyam musicians have far fewer instruments in their performances, which could very likely be due to the lack of access to newer resources, very possibly resulting from the socioeconomic constraints propagated by the caste system. One can observe the presence of only the *ceṇḍā* and the dual flat cymbals that are used to keep musical time. Melodic aspects are mostly absent, save for very rare cases where a small wind instrument that mimics the *nādasvaram,* known as the *chīñi korram,* is a part of the ensemble. In stark contrast, the *mēḷam* performers are seen to be using a plethora of instruments such as the *nādasvaram,* the *tavil,* the *ceṇḍā,* the *maddaḷam,* and other instruments that have been observed by Terada[109] and Groesbeck[110]. In particular, the percussive instrument made of wood and stretched leather known as the *ceṇḍā* is the most observable similarity between both the forms of music. The *ceṇḍā* comes under the classification of instruments known in South Indian musical traditions as '*Asura Vādyam'*, a term which roughly translates into 'demonic rhythm', whereas the class of percussion instruments used in Classical musical traditions is known as '*Deva Vādyam'*, which translates into 'rhythm of the gods'. It is interesting to note that even though the classification that *ceṇḍā* comes under is hardly a flattering one, it is by far the most commonly used instrument in any form of musical performance across the state of Kerala. If we were to view *ceṇḍā* as a pre-Sanskritic invention by the local populace of South India, following this stream of narration could lead to further understandings of how 'little traditions' are treated and inculcated into society by the 'greater traditions', often through the process of Universalisation in Indic context.

Music and Education

To find further insights into the effects of the caste system on musicological elements, questions regarding the forms of transmission of knowledge were asked, to which the responses proved to be contextually relevant. *Mēḷam* performers have access to institutions of learning whereby they are educated in measuring time, melodic structures,

[109] Terada, "Temple Music Traditions in Hindu South India: 'Periya Mēḷam,'" 108–151.
[110] Freeman, "Shifting Forms of the Wandering Yogi," 147–183.

and compositional patterns that are used in temple ritual performances, alongside Hindu theology and the accompanying ritual prescriptions. In contrast, Theyyam *vādyam* performers learn technical and theoretical information at the household level, where they learn through watching their older family members perform, as every generation holds the responsibility to carry forward the traditions of their communities. This transmission of information often begins during early childhood years and is usually received only by the males of the families. Doubts are often cleared out through repeated demonstrations, but there are no extant organised syllabi or terminologies that elucidate musical or musicological concepts efficiently and succinctly, as seen in the case of *mēḷam* performers.

Interestingly, both the *mēḷam* and *vādyam* performers learn their musical counting using a verbal counting technique known as *akshara kāla*.To visibly and aurally experience the differences between temple and Theyyam music, yet the musical similarities shared by both, see Sujith[111] and Mohanan[112].

Socioeconomic Implications

As of today, both of these forms of art have been affected by rapid globalisation and the capitalisation of local industries, whereby labour that would earlier contribute to the preservation of their culture has now been diverted towards better-paying modern jobs. The *mēḷam* performers have a source of fixed income which resulted due to government reforms from the early 20th Century, even though the salary proves to be inadequate in most circumstances[113]. This, in comparison with the income schema of the *vādyam* performers, can be seen as a privilege for the *mēḷam* performers, as the former do not have any access to regular income through the performance of their art form and procure income through their art only during the part of the year when Theyyam performances take place. Even in this case, there are no guarantees as donations are their main source of income, the amount of which depends entirely on the grace of the donors. Most *vādyam* instrumentalists have to share these uncertain revenues with their peers which they receive from the *kāvu*

[111] KM Sujith, "Incredible India- kerala chenda melam," *Youtube* video, Uploaded on January 25, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zki6vYLhSg4.
[112] Aditya Mohanan, "Pulikandan Theyyam Chenda Vadyam," *Youtube* video, Uploaded on January 07, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MKBAAO0Kwpo&feature=youtu.be
[113] Terada, "Temple Music Traditions in Hindu South India: "Periya Mēḷam," 133.

committees that host their performances, with no real concern for any specialisation[114]. Theyyam performers are exempt from the state's tourism capsules such as the 'Responsible Tourism Project' since their work is perceived as quasi-artistic due to the ritualistic nature of their performance[115]. Temple performers often reap their benefits via the Devaswom Board, a socio-religious trust that works in accordance with the Government of Kerala. In the case of the Theyyam performers, no such organisations exist that possess the power to negotiate with the government, which essentially has resulted from the historical and modern pauperisation of Dalit communities.

Discussion

As seen above, the association of Theyyam with the Kolathunadu dynasty has been recorded in a few Theyyam narratives and therefore suggests that the aforementioned codification happened after the rise of the Kolathunadu dynasty in 12th century A.D[116]. The character known as 'Gurukkal' or 'Kurikkal' has also been observed to be a part of multiple Theyyam narratives. The manner in which this character appears in the narratives of multiple communities certainly strengthens the veracity of his existence and his role in the codification of *Theyyāṭṭam*, but by no means does it establish historicity. The discrepancies in the practices and narratives of various Theyyams make the task of understanding the degree to which Theyyam practices follow this supposed codification deserving of independent inquiries. It is important to note that even though the narrative surrounding various Theyyams may have been codified at some point in history, this organisation has not been extended to musical patterns that accompany the *Theyyāṭṭam*. Therefore, no two Theyyam performances, in both the cultural and the chronological sense, ever produce the same musical instances.

Based on the discrepancies previously elucidated in the 'Findings' section, it can be argued that the differences in the treatment and transmission of musical information in *mēḷam* and

[114] Anjuly Mathai, "Gods must be stingy," *The Week*, April 12, 2015, https://www.theweek.in/theweek/leisure/Gods-must-be-stingy.html\

[115] Priyamvada Rana, "COVID-19, Caste, Joblessness: What Ails The 'Gods' Of Malabar, The Theyyams?" *Youth Ki Awaaz*, 11th April, 2020, https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2020/04/in-kerala-covid-19-add-to-woes-of-gods-of-malabar-theyyams/

[116] M. G. S. Narayanan, *Re-interpretations in South Indian History* (Trivandrum: College Book House, 1977), 6-10.

vādyam have resulted from overarching sectarian norms and caste dynamics, which also resulted in differential attitudes towards the codification of information in both the observed forms of expression. These differences can be argued to have stemmed from educational and socioeconomic conditions propagated by the caste system, as the upper caste art form seen here has found its place in a 'greater tradition', the rules of which have systematised temple music in Kerala and other parts of South India. Hence, it has had the privilege of being codified and also has had access to different *rāgās* (musical scales) and *tāḷās* (time divisions/signatures) that one can see in Brahmanical musical systems such as in Carnatic music and in other "Classical" forms of music across India. Though some of these elements are employed by *vādyam* performers, close to none of the organised presentations of musicological values can be discerned from the educational experiences of the Theyyam performers. The *tāḷās* employed by the *vādyam* players, when enquired, were casually said to be dictated by the impulsive instincts of the *kolakāran* and fellow musicians in action. This approach to percussion, even though it has the potential to sound similar to the improvisational temple art form of *tāyambaka,* is fundamentally different as the latter focuses on improvisation as the essence of the performance.

The chronology of which instruments predates which remains to be a matter of conjecture, but the popularity of the *ceṇḍā* over any other percussive instrument in ensembles across South India points to a local, pre-Brahminical origin. This claim remains a conjecture until further evidence is presented. What is important is this claim is made by tribal and Dalit communities across Kerala that the *ceṇḍā* predates other instruments, particularly the Brahminical instruments referred to earlier. A deeper understanding of the sentiments that back this claim can be obtained through a Subaltern reading of the festival of Onam.

The association of *Mahābalī,* an *Asura* king from Hindu mythological narratives, with the Onam festival tradition of Kerala is an aberrant aspect of the region's Hindu culture that could possibly lend an understanding into how pre-Sanskritic elements of the region were classified under the tag of '*Asura*' after the advent of Brahmanical orthodoxy. In most cases in India, it is either the gods or the goddesses that are the valorised and worshipped through festivals. Interestingly, in this case, it happens to be an *Asura* around whom the festival revolves. In mythological contexts, *Asuras* have been treated as anti-gods, but

when we come to a socio-political sphere, the term also seems to have been used to make an often pejorative classification between local, and thus often pre-Sanskritic elements of culture. This classification is more of a connotation and hence is not very explicit. Narratives centred around *Mahābalī* by some tribal communities within the state of Kerala have been recorded by Kalidasan[117], wherein a virtuous tribal chief known as *Mahābalī* or *Māvēlī,* was wronged by encroaching Brahmins using deceitful means to strip him of his land and in a few instances, of his life. These indigenous accounts likely precede the modern, Brahminical mythological origin narrative, as these stories hark back to the time when the Brahmins arrived. Even though the antiquity of these narratives is uncertain, the conflict of the tribal communities with the Brahminical orthodoxy can be discerned with clarity. These narratives regarding the festival of Onam are marked by a sense of realism, which challenges the notion that mythologies are purely fictitious and thereby apolitical in nature. Following the line of reasoning perpetuated through the tribal narratives, it would appear that *Mahābalī,* who is seen by the tribes as a historical indigenous leader, was proclaimed an *Asura* during the Sanskritisation of Kerala for the material and political benefit of the succeeding oligarchy. But extant culture often refuses to be wiped out completely and instead, has to find a symbiotic relationship with the contemporary status quo. This could explain why an *Asura* such as *Mahābalī* and an *'Asura Vādyam'* instrument such as the *ceṇḍā*, continue to thrive as an indispensable element of Kerala's culture even today.

When in conversation with local performers and academics, a dichotomy in the cultural imaginary becomes evident – *shāstric* and local knowledge, *Asura Vādyam* and *Deva Vādyam,* lower caste (Velan, Vannan, and Malayan) and upper caste (Mārār) music are some of the twofold distinctions that are made by the general populace. Contrary to what Groesbeck[118] has argued, there are distinctions made by the artists between Classical and folk traditions, not as much when it comes to upper-caste "folk" music as his work refers to, but when it comes to the music of the untouchable communities, as demonstrated in this work. Caste and status play an important role in the structuring of musical elements and

[117] Vinod Kalidasan, "A king lost and found: Revisiting the popular and the tribal myths of Mahabali from Kerala." *Studies in South Asian Film & Media* 7 (2016): 103–118.
[118] Groesbeck, "'Classical Music,' 'Folk Music,' and the Brahmanical Temple in Kerala, India." 89–90.

transmission of musicological values. This claim is not meant to contribute to the dichotomous understanding of "classical" and "folk" music in Western academia but is intended to highlight the differences, both perceived and ascribed, in a more nuanced manner when caste and community are brought into the analyses.

Similarities exist in musical techniques and theoretical elements that are seen in both, the Theyyam's *vādyam* and the temple's *mēḷam*. Employment of elements such as usage of triplets and quadruplets in creating syncopated rhythms, bass drums hitting the first note of every bar while the *ceṇḍā* works on the superseding improvisational layers of the rhythm, the use of cymbals to keep the overall count of the ensemble are just some of the many similarities found in both the forms of music. The differences have more in tandem with the societal perception of these forms of music than real musical differences. In spite of these similarities, a stark contrast that one can see regarding both these forms of music in the cultural imaginary is betrayed through their colloquial depictions – the music of the temple has a distinct name for itself; whereas the term used for the music of Theyyam is *vādyam,* which in translation merely means 'rhythm'. Privilege need not necessarily be understood from the procurement of special provisions for a community, but in this context can be recognised through the possession of a distinct cultural recognition of an art form that is reflected in speech. This distinction here, recognised verbally, translates itself distinctly into the socioeconomic sphere idiomatically.

Conclusion

Well into the 21st Century, one can still observe differences in the privileges and general cultural recognition of these art forms, perceptions that are rooted in caste-based divisions and identity politics. Questions regarding whether or not the *ceṇḍā* predates other percussive instruments in the South and the extent to which pre-Sanskritic musical practices informed the religious music in vogue today are yet subject to much debate. Whether Theyyam predates the Brahmanical presence in Kerala is also a debate that remains open to argumentation, but it is an observable reality that the contrast in privileges propagated by the caste system has been cemented by the advent of the class system. The

ritual, in its very essence, is a form of anti–caste demonstration through the reclamation of divinity.

The socioeconomic implications of the musical differences between the discussed ensembles, in spite of shared elements, continues to grow discrepantly. While the distinction between "Classical" and "folk" forms of music are not to be divided further, reconciliation would be impossible without the recognition of this divide. The distinctions highlighted in this work are not intended to further the observed divide, but to sociologically analyse the many ways in which musical and musicological elements affect and perpetuate privilege or the lack thereof. Many of the arguments presented in the paper above may be subject to change under future archaeological, literary, or historical evidence, but the equation of the downtrodden in society with the *asura* in Indian mythology is somewhat of a 'felt', or an experienced form of knowledge in the Subaltern cultural consciousness. This work is intended not to provide a voice to any community, but seeks to recognise the submersion of voices and thereby create a shared space where further dialogues regarding oppression and expression can ensue. As of the previous decade, Theyyam has been meticulously documented by local filmmakers and academics, and this work intends to contribute to that fervour by introducing Theyyam to the modern academic populace, through the acknowledgement of the problems faced by those who live this way.

APPENDIX A

Fig. 1: The Kaṇḍanār Kēḷan Theyyam from the Kannur district of Kerala.

Fig. 2: *Pāṇayakāṭṭu Bhagavatī* Theyyam from Kankol, Kerala.

Fig. 3: Viṣṇumūrtī Theyyam from Kankol, Kerala.

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Image References

Fig. 1: Mohanan, Aditya. *Kaṇdanār Kēḷan Theyyam*. 2019. Digital Photograph. Author's Collection.

Fig. 2: Mohanan, Aditya. *Pāṇayakāṭṭu Bhagavatī Theyyam*. 2019. Digital Photograph. Author's Collection.

Fig. 3: Mohanan, Aditya. *Viṣṇumūrtī Theyyam*. 2019. Digital Photograph. Author's Collection.