The Politics of Ritual and Art in Kerala: Controversies Concerning the Staging of *Teyyam*¹)

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1. Introduction

This paper analyzes the process of the staging of the *teyyam* and discusses how politics is involved in ritual by taking up the *teyyam* in Kerala. I contend that ritual and art are closely related to politics in India.

One of the early descriptions by anthropologists on the *teyyam* can be seen in the thesis of Gough [Gough 1959: 263, 270], who investigated the cult of the dead among the Nāyar. She interpreted the *teyyam* ritual as strengthening the unity of the matrilineal system of the Nāyar and predicted that the growth of the capitalist market economy and the democratization of political institutions would cause the collapse of the caste system and kinship organization, and that the cult of the dead would also change and become extinct. However, since the 1960’s the *teyyam* has been performed on the stage in Indian cities as well as abroad. Moreover, there has been a tendency for the *teyyam* to revive in the villages since the 1990’s. The *teyyam* has branched out widely beyond the villages and developed contact with the wide-ranging...
economy and thus causing various conflicts and a general transformation in the understanding of teyyam. Ashley conducted research on the teyyam from the late 1970's to late 1980's. He points out that the teyyam has been performed in several contexts, such as the dramas organized by the communists, Republic Day celebrations in New Delhi, and village festivals supported by the Ford Foundation. He states that the teyyam is an arena where the nature of divinity, worship, and proper lineage relationships of members are discussed [Ashley 1993: 346]. Since Ashley completed this research, the staging of the teyyam has become more problematic, and people have started to increasingly question as to whether it is an art or ritual. This problem closely relates to strategic separation between art and ritual and classification of the teyyam as ritual or art.

Tarabout describes how the concept of teyyam has undergone changes from the period of British rule to the present. He states that those elite Indians, who have been in contact with Western culture and society, view the teyyam as an art. They wanted the promotion of Kerala culture as well as the progress of the socio-economic conditions of the performers [Tarabout n.d.]. However, not all folklorists are open to foreign interaction, and some are against staging teyyam as an art form as they consider that such an interpretation could destroy local culture.

Both Ashley and Tarabout point to the influence of western culture as a root cause of the phenomenon of the staging of teyyam, but show less consideration to the relationship between micro-politics and local history.

I will describe the changing situation surrounding the teyyam since independence, focusing mainly on the phenomenon of the staging and commoditization of the teyyam, arguments surrounding it in the late 1990's as well as the revival of the teyyam as a ritual practice in rural areas. I will contend that the interpretation of the teyyam as a ritual or art form not only relates to the politics of the taravāṭu, but also the politics of the locality, state and nation as a whole.

Section 2 describes the legend and organization of the teyyam ritual which developed under the relationships between kingship and taravāṭu. Section 3 gives an overview of studies and recordings of teyyam rituals. Section 4 shows examples of how teyyam has been performed on the stage since independence by focusing on the life history of a
Here, by considering the arguments surrounding a stage performance in 1998, I further examine the ideological conflict among leftists, rightists, anti-capitalists and localist supporters who objectify the teyyam. Section 5 points out the influence of commercialization and tourism on the teyyam and the resistance of the teyyakkāran. Section 6 examines the phenomenon of the revival of the teyyam ritual since the 1990’s and the strengthening the previously reduced power of the taravātu.

2. **Teyyam Ritual**

2.1 *Taravātu, Kingship and Teyyam*

Teyyam is a general term for gods and goddesses who are worshipped only in North Kerala (Malabar), mainly in the Kasargod and Kannur districts during the dry season. Teyyam is a colloquial word derived from daivam, which means god in Sanskrit. The ritual is also called teyyam, whilst the festival for teyyam is called kaliyāṭṭam. Āṭṭam means dance. One theory is that kaliyāṭṭam is a compound noun formed from kali (play) and āṭṭam (dance) [Namboodiri 1989: 90]. Another theory is that it is a dance of the goddess (kāli) [Chanthera 1978: 25]. Each teyyam god has its own name such as Muccilottu Bhagavati, Viśnumūrtti, Muttappan, together with its own myth. These teyyams can be classified as goddess, hero deity, ancestral spirit, animal deity, witch, Prānic deity, and so forth. It is assumed that the kaliyāṭṭam native to the Tulu area in South Karnataka was introduced to North Kerala and became a teyyam with some modifications [ibid., 1978: 26]. Some teyyam gods are represented in tiṇa rituals in South Malabar. It is said that teyyams have been influenced by surrounding areas.

Legend has it that the great magician (mantravādī), Maṇṇakkāṭṭaṇ Gurukkaḷ, created 39 teyyams by the power of mantram under the order of Kōlattili Rāja (Chirakkal Rāja) who is reputed to have ruled Kōlattunāṭu in the seventeenth century. Maṇṇakkāṭṭaṇ Gurukkaḷ is the ancestor of the Vannan caste, which teyyam performers belong to. His samādhī is located in Karivellur village in Kannur and has been worshipped by his descendants [Chanthera 1978: 27; Narayanan 1996: 39–43]. It is assumed that Maṇṇakkāṭṭaṇ Gurukkaḷ stylized the costumes, make-up, songs and dances of the teyyam.
The Chirakkal Raja lost political power after British rule, but in the teyyam worship, the raja plays an important role when conferring the titles on teyyakkaran such as peruvanmân and perunalayan. In addition, at the time of pûram festival in Mâtäyi Kâvu temple, the Brahman with an idol on his head walks around the raja. This shows the centrality of the raja in the world. Moreover, the raja’s guardian deity, Kōlasvarûpattînkaltâyi, which means the goddess who protects Kôlattunâtû, is worshipped under different names by the local Nâyar taravâtu. It can be said that the raja reigns in North Kerala symbolically through the teyyam. Nowadays, the raja cannot afford to patronize grand teyyam festivals, but some rituals surrounding the raja have recently been revived after a long interval.

The teyyam is usually performed in the kâvu or taravâtu temple. Kâvu is the sacred grove where spirits are worshipped. In recent times, many trees have been felled and there is no longer any dense forest, but particular trees such as banyan and champak are still considered to be the home of gods or deities. Taravâtu originally meant the matrilineal family of the Nâyar caste, but it has come to stand for the families of all castes and their houses, both matrilineal and patrilineal. In some taravâtus, the founder of the taravâtu is worshipped (kâranâvan teyyam) and snakes are also worshipped (nâgakâmni and nâgarâja).

Thus ancestor and snake worship represent the protection and prosperity of the taravâtu, whilst guardian deity worship represents the protection and prosperity of the former kingdom of the raja.

2.2 Rights, Organization and Rewards of Teyyam

The types of teyyam rituals are classified as 1) individual prayers (nêrcça), 2) small-scale teyyams organized by one taravâtu, and 3) large-scale teyyams organized by many taravâtus. Various local temples, kâvu and taravâtus are linked to each other. The Brahman temple has supreme power and is served by several kâvus, the kâvu being controlled by several taravâtus that have avakâšam (rights) over it. Temples, kâvu and taravâtus are related hierarchically through the teyyams.

In the teyyam ritual, each caste has its rights and role. The priest (antittiriyan), elderly male members (accans), and the representatives of the gods (veliccapâtu or kômaram) belong to a taravâtu, which organizes the teyyam. Practitioners of the teyyam ritual are called
teyyakkārans, and they belong to lower castes (scheduled castes) such as the Vaññān, Malayan, and Vēlan castes. Anthropologist Chris Fuller notes that the division of ritual labor is a very distinctive element in South Indian festivals [Fuller 1992: 148]. Indeed, this division of ritual labor is also a prominent feature in northern Kerala, the home of the teyyam.

The taravāṭus of the teyyakkāran have the cerujanmāvakaśam (the hereditary right) to perform the teyyam in a particular area, and are prohibited from performing teyyams outside their area. Should they break this rule, they risk being deprived of their rights to perform by the authority of the kāvus. There are various rights in the teyyam ritual, and they reflect the power relationships in the region. The principal teyyam can only be performed by teyyakkāran with a title such as peruvannan and perumalayan. This title is given not only by a Chirakkal Rāja, but also by a Nileswara Rāja and a Brahman of Rājarajesvara temple in Talipparamba.

Although caste duty was the principal motivating factor for teyyakkārans until about fifty years ago, payments of rice were also given as a reward. For example, one taravāṭu in Kotakkat village used to pay fifty kg of rice and one rupee to the Malayan group, and twelve kg of rice and fifty paisa to the Vaññān group. The barter system was more popular than the monetary system in the village at that time. Teyyam was a seasonal job, performed only during the dry season, so the living standard of teyyakkāran was low. After independence, the monetary system spread to the villages, and teyyakkāran came to be paid in cash. The amount has been increasing gradually according to inflation and currently the taravāṭu usually pays about 2,000 rupees to each group. Teyyakkārans occasionally negotiate their rewards with their taravāṭus and they have come to consider the teyyam as a means to improve their economic situation, thus leading to a tendency for teyyakkārans to regard their performance in the teyyam festival as a job rather than a religious duty.

2.3 Anusthānam (ritual)

The teyyam is considered to be anusthānam (ritual), governed by many rules relating to dance, music, costume, make-up etc. I will describe the sequence of the teyyam ritual.
Kaliyattam starts in the evening. The teyyakkāran, wearing a simple red cloth, comes in front of the shrine. He receives betel leaves and areca nuts from the priest while other members of the performer’s group beat the cenda (drum) to announce the starting of the teyyam to the villagers. This is called tuṭānīnal (the beginning).

After a while, the teyyakkāran receives from the priest a banana leaf called kotiyila holding five betel leaves, five areca nuts, rice, and five burning oil wicks. Through the flame, saktī (the power of god) is considered to pass over to the teyyakkāran who sings the torram (hymn and song about origin and history of the gods) and invokes spirits to his body and mind. At this point, the teyyakkāran is also called a ‘torram’. Torram is considered to be derived from ‘stōram’ which means hymn or religious paean9) (Namboodiri 1990: 21). Torram is divided into many sections such as anchati (praising song) and kālīnāṭakam (story of kālī) and the last part is called uraccalpāṭitu (song of possession). At this time, the teyyakkāran runs energetically around the shrine, as if possessed.

When this is finished, the teyyakkāran is no longer considered possessed and thus makes his way to aniyara (the dressing room) where his face and body are colorfully painted with several designs. He cannot paint himself, so other members must aid him. With his make-up almost complete and wearing the costume and head gear (muti), the teyyakkāran sits on the stool (pitham) in front of the shrine. Some head gear is so heavy and tall that other members must support it with sticks.10) At this point, he adds finishing touches to his face, especially the lips, looks in the mirror and starts to shiver. At this moment, he is once more considered to be possessed (urayuka). The teyyakkāran is now regarded as a teyyam (god) and dances with choreographed steps (kalāṣam) to the rhythm (tālam) of drums. Each teyyam has different steps and rhythm. The teyyam receives the sword and shield from the priest and through the sword, more saktī is supposed to be passed on to the ‘teyyam’.

After dancing, the ‘teyyam’ sits on a stool and receives offerings such as popped rice and coconuts. In the case of some goddesses or some teyyams, a chicken is sacrificed at the northern gate (vaṭakkēn vātil11)) of the shrine. At the end of the performance, the teyyam calls out the names of the kōyma12) (supreme authority of the temple) and
accans (the elder members of taravāṭu) and blesses them by giving them turmeric powder and rice (kuṟi). The recipients then give coins to the teyyam in return.

Next the teyyam blesses the other villagers who may then talk to the teyyam about their problems. In the end, the teyyam removes the muṭi and he is then considered to have reverted to being an ordinary teyyakkāran. He touches the feet of the priest and accans, and returns to the make-up room.

For the main deity and specific teyyam such as Viṣṇumūrtti, the presence of veliccappāṭu and kōnaram are required. They are oracles and also considered to become possessed (dars'am\(^{13}\)) after receiving a sword from a priest. However, whilst the teyyakkāran can perform at several different shrines, the oracles represent particular gods or goddesses at the specific shrines. Usually, they come from the taravāṭu which organizes the kaliyāṭṭam. They are called teyyam at the time of the temple pāṭṭu utsavam (festival of song).

This is the basic procedure for a teyyam performance, but depending upon the teyyam, there are some variations. Every day some teyyams are performed and the festival continues for one to three, or sometimes even five or seven nights. Whether it is performed in a small temple or a large temple, similar procedures are followed.

At the particular moments such as during uraccalpāṭu, the teyyakkāran is considered to be possessed. Freeman regards this as a marker of “formalized possession” [Freeman 1993: 123–4; 1998: 76]. The teyyakkāran must follow strict rules of movement and language, and before starting to sing the tdrram, he prays to the gods and the ancestral teyyam guru that he can perform the teyyam well. When the teyyakkāran dances correctly, the teyyam is considered to be nalla (good) or to give arangu sōbha (a good impression). Until the 1960’s, the teyyam was considered anusthanam (ritual) not art. Anuṣṭhānam was traditionally an inherited practice and as such was not questioned [Payyanad 1998: 199]. However, when people began to critique and appreciate teyyam, it began to be called “kala” or art, and the teyyakkāran were called kalākāran or artists.
3. The Study and Recording of Teyyam

Techniques of teyyam were traditionally passed down within the teyyakkāram family group and were not disclosed to outsiders. However, since the 1960's, folklore studies on the teyyam have been on the increase. Many books and magazines regarding teyyam have been published and video and audio recordings of teyyam have also been released recently. These have served to influence ordinary people's perception of the teyyam.

Traditionally, techniques of teyyam like singing the tōrram, make-up, costume-making, dancing and instrument-playing were usually handed down from father to son in the patrilineal family and uncle to nephew in the matrilineal one. Children did not need to learn from unrelated masters. Moreover, children learnt these techniques during the teyyam ritual as well as in their homes. Tōrrams were chanted only during the ritual, and were not disclosed to outsiders. They believed that recording tōrram in written form could cause dōṣam (misfortune). Since the 1960's, interest in teyyam research has risen. C.M.S. Chanthera, a high school teacher who belonged to a taravāṭu with authority over a big local temple devoted to teyyam has done pioneer work on teyyam and published the pioneer work, Kaliyattam [Chanthera 1978]. However, he faced a multitude of difficulties in collecting information as practitioners were often secretive and taking photographs was prohibited at the time because the teyyakkāram were regarded as gods during the teyyam.

English books on teyyam have also been published since the 1970's. The first historical book on teyyam in English was The Cult of Teyyam and Hero Worship written by K.K.N. Kurup of the History Department of Calicut University [Kurup 1973]. Kurup's next publication was Aryan and Dravidian Elements in Malabar Folklore [Kurup 1977]. His view is that teyyam had its origins in the Sangam culture of the Tamils. His work introduced teyyam to the world at large and led foreign scholars to begin research on teyyam, thus leading to teyyam being performed abroad.

Folklore studies on teyyam have become more common in recent years. Dr. Raghavan Payyanad, originally of Calicut University Malayalam Department became the head of a new Folklore Depart-
ment established by his university in 1999. He has been instrumental in promoting folklore and teyyam studies in Kerala [Payyanad 1977; 1986; 1998]. Payyanad stated at a seminar in January 2003 that globalization, Hinduization and fundamentalism are trying to alter folklore and this is anti-democratic.16) He also regards western theory as colonial theory which changes cultural heritage. Thus he has been trying to establish a new theory representing a native perspective.

Another scholar, M.V. Vishnu Namboodiri, has also published numerous books on törram [Namboodiri 1980; 1981; 1990]. However, he also encountered difficulties as he faced initial opposition from his relatives about his studies of teyyam due to his being a Brahman and thus of a far higher caste than the teyyakkāran. In 1998, the government organized a workshop seminar on teyyam, the first seminar to deal with törram. Some teyyakkārans at the seminar studied törram from Vishnu Namboodiri’s work reflecting a growing trend of using printed text to memorize törram. This trend may well lead to a more standardized use of törram in the future.

Some studies on teyyam include political ideology and others have been done for the purpose of conserving local culture. However, they are disclosing the secrecy of teyyam and this serves to indirectly influence the form and activity of the ritual. Moreover, souvenir magazines are also published at the time of perunkaliyāṭṭam. Many local folklorists and intellectuals contribute to them and various interpretations of törram and ritual, histories of temples, localities and caste origins etc. are discussed.

Before the 1960’s, the teyyam was rarely photographed, but from around 1998, many temples have started making videos and DVDs to sell at the perunkaliyāṭṭam. Some prefer to see these visual recordings of teyyam rather than going to the temple itself. People have thus come to experience teyyam indirectly through a variety of media.

Moreover, devotional teyyam songs have also been composed by local musicians with poems modeled on Sanskrit worshipping style poetry such as “tirumuṭi darṣam” (viewing head gear of teyyam) which have long been recorded audio-visually for mass consumption. Audio tapes and CDs of törram of the Poṭṭan teyyam were produced by a cultural group in Kotakkat village in 2002. In addition, teyyam websites have also been recently set up by the Kerala tourist department and
Laurence Babb conjectured that the impact of modern media on religious culture in South Asia would be standardization [Babb 1995: 5]. Teyyam may well be standardized in this way, and some form of teyyam may gradually die out. On the other hand, the recording of teyyam using modern media could serve to strengthen the tradition and ultimately preserve and popularize them for future generations.

4. Staging and Politics

Since its formation in 1939, the Communist Party of Kerala has been relatively dominant in the state. Folk arts like ottantullal, pūrakkali and teyyāṭṭam were harnessed to the cause of anti-Japanese and anti-hoarding propaganda [Menon 1994: 176]. During the independence movement, the party used teyyam to convey anti-British messages in the guise of oracles to the local people. The festivals and folklore contributed to the spread of nationalist ideals and also intensified the peasant movement [Kurup 1998: 121]. Folklore is used to heighten a sense of nationalism and local identity even today.

4.1 Process of Staging, Integration, and Local Identity

One of the first stage performances of teyyam was conducted on Republic Day in New Delhi in 1960. Folk dances from several parts of India were performed on the stage, with teyyam representing Kerala folk art [Matrubhumi Weekly 1960]. At this performance, the traditional rules of the teyyam ritual were not strictly observed and the performance was condensed and regarded as an art form rather than a ritual. As Ashley and Tarabout note, the central government has used these to further its efforts to integrate Indians who belong to diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds [Ashley 1993; Tarabout n.d.].

How did the staging of teyyam start and what sorts of negotiations were involved in the process? I have chosen as an example the cultural organization, Kalānikētanam formed at Kotakkat in Kasargod district in 1967. My discussion here is mainly based on Cilanbitta Ōrmnakal [Sreedharan 1997], that is, the quasi-autobiography of Kannan Peru-vannan, a prominent teyyakkāran in the Kalānikētanam.

The Kalānikētanam was founded by K. K. N. Kurup (the Kotakkat
village officer at that time), A. N. Kotakkat and Sreedharan Kuttamath. One day in August 1968, Kurup showed Kannan Peruvannan an invitation from the Village Art Festival organized by the Kerala Sangeeth Nataka Academy in Trissur. The Academy had asked for a *teyyam* performance of *Katuvanūrvīran*. Peruvannan had never before thought of performing the *teyyam* on a stage and certainly had never considered excluding any aspects of the ritual in a performance. However, he was persuaded by Kurup saying that showing only the figure of a *teyyam* without performing the ritual would not break their faith. He therefore agreed to participate in a stage performance [Sreedharan 1997: 109–110]. He acknowledged that a stage performance of *teyyam* and *teyyam* as a ritual in the shrine could be regarded as two separate entities.

In 1974, in Darwar in Karnataka, a *teyyam* performance was organized by Karnataka University. A German historian, seeing *Katuvanūrvīran* performed by Kannan Peruvannan, commented that he was like a “dancing jewel” [ibid., 120]. After that, Peruvannan received a nickname, *nrtaṭakaratnam* (dancing jewel). In 1976, he received the Kerala Art Award from Sangeeth Nataka Academy. This award is given to artists who are engaged in classical dance, classical drama and folk art. Candu Peruvannan was the first *teyyakkāran* to receive this award, and Kannan Peruvannan was the second. From the 1960’s, *teyyakkārans* have come to be called *kalākālan* (artist). They are willing to use this term, which has a nuance of high culture and respect.

*Kalanikētanam* participated in the Asian Olympics held in 1982 in New Delhi, giving a five-minute performance choreographed by A.N. Kotakkat. *Kavaṭiyāṭtam* performers from Madras danced in the center of the stage, with one hundred *teyyams* dancing around them, and then two hundred further *kathakalis* dancing around the *teyyams*. Forty of the hundred *teyyam* performers were students of NCC (National Cadet Corps). In the 1980’s, Rajiv Gandhi established seven Zone Cultural Centers in India, and then several National Festivals took place. Among them, *Kalanikētanam* participated in the Fete de Pondicherry in August 1987, the Hampi Festival in October 1987, the Bharathotva Utsavan in Kannur and Calicut in August and September 1988, respectively, the Uppna Utsavan in Bombay in January 1989,
and the Fete de Pondicherry in August 1989.\textsuperscript{20}

Some of the shrine authorities in the village criticized Kannan Peruvannan and Anbu Perumalayan when they performed on the stage. Nonetheless, they were unable to be too strident in their criticisms since Peruvannan was a famous Ayurvedic doctor and Perumalayan was a great magician (\textit{mantravādi}).

Similarly, Kannan Peruvannan gave several \textit{teyyam} stage performances and received awards for them. His activity brought fame to Kālānikētanam. Even now, Peruvannan, who retired as a \textit{teyyam} artist thirteen years ago, continues to receive awards and give interviews in journals and documentary films. He has come to be a symbol of \textit{teyyam}. Even though some have criticized him for performing on the stage, many villagers seem proud of his achievements and feel pride in their local culture as well.

In summary, Kannan Peruvannan has unconsciously been involved in the staging of \textit{teyyam} organized by the central and state governments. \textit{Teyyam} is a cultural resource used for national integration as well as promoting the locality. As a result, the status of \textit{teyyakkāran} has also risen to the status of professional artist. Thus \textit{teyyam} is both a tool of national integration used by the central government and also a cultural resource and source of identity for local people.

4.2 Cultural Policy of the State Government and \textit{Teyyam}

The \textit{teyyam} is used not only by the central government, but also by Kerala State to raise Keralan identity. Around the time of \textit{ōnam},\textsuperscript{21} the biggest festival in Kerala, the state government conducts a “tourist week” in Tiruvananthapuram. This has been done since the 1980’s. Folk arts from several parts of Kerala are displayed, parades take place, and the \textit{teyyam} is also performed there as Malabar folk art.

In December 1998, the Folklore Festival, Keraleeyam (i.e. about Kerala), took place at Bharathapuzha. The purpose of this festival was to project the identity of the people of Kerala, their lives, traditions, culture and heritage through off-stage and on-stage presentations of their literature, music, arts, and so on [Mohanty 1998: 3]. The Minister for Cultural Affairs, T. K. Ramakrishna, states:

\begin{quote}
In a democratic system, traditional and popular culture has a rel-
evant role in the formation of cultural identity of the society... Our traditional culture has a will to struggle, fight and uphold equality for existence... the traditional culture and art of Kerala have an important role in contributing to the emotional integration of India. [Ramakrishnan 1998: 3]

These remarks show that the state government had organized the event to build up the identity of the people through the use of folklore.

The involvement of the state government in folklore became prominent after the establishment of the Kerala Folklore Academy in Kannur in 1996. The purpose of this academy is the promotion and conservation of the folk culture of Kerala. The protection of the teyyam is especially emphasized. As the teyyam is considered an endangered ritual, they strive to preserve it as an art. The first teyyam workshop was held at Parassinikkatavu in November 1997 by the aforesaid academy. At this workshop, skilled teyyakkaran taught a class in make-up for young teyyakkarans which lasted ten days. The workshop was open to the public, and many students, photographers, art students and researchers came to see it. The techniques that are used in teyyam are traditionally handed down only among family members, but in this workshop, techniques were taught through a system of schooling. The purpose of the class was to deal with the problem of a decrease in the number of teyyakkaran and the difficulties of restricting recruitment to family members. There were doubts about the effectiveness of a class that lasted a mere ten days. Still, despite the short duration, the workshop nevertheless helped to expose some of the traditional secrets of teyyam. With its taboos and secrecy removed, it was hoped that teyyam would become a popularized cultural event.

"Teyyam Art Training" (Teyyam Kalā Parisīlanam) took place under the sponsorship of the Youth Welfare Board, with the aid of the Kerala Folklore Academy, near Talipparamba in Kannur, from October 10 to 19, 1998. On the last day, ten teyyams were performed on a playground in Kannur city. This program raised a controversy about the staging of teyyam. Here I will describe the progression of the controversy.

Before the performance on the playground, a seminar was held to discuss this problem. The chairman of the Academy, M.V. Kannan, a
teyyakkāran and college professor remarked that:

_Teyyam_ artists have several problems. They cannot get enough income only from _teyyam_. Their education level is rising and they are not interested in following their traditional job, _teyyam_. Now _teyyam_ is in danger of disappearing.

He therefore justified staging and promoting _teyyam_ as an art which could raise the self-esteem of _teyyakkāran_.

Prof. A. K. Nambiyar of the School of Drama of Calicut University, a communist sympathizer, supported the stage performance. He said, “The right to decide the place of performance is in the hands of the _teyyakkāran_.” His opinion was that _teyyakkāran_ could perform on the stage as they wished.

A complaint regarding stage performances was then lodged on the floor from the shrine authority, to the effect that a stage program had no _anuṣṭhānam_ (ritual) or _viśvāsam_ (belief), yet _teyyam_ was a religious practice. One young Malayan _teyyakkāran_ feared that if he performed _teyyam_ on the stage, he might be punished by the local authorities, because the people of Kannur were familiar with real _teyyams_.

C.M.S. Chanthera, who had been engaged in _teyyam_ studies over a long period, was not invited to this seminar, but he commented on the playground performance in the newspaper:

The soul of _teyyam_ is _viśvāsam_ (belief). _Teyyam_ which does not follow the _anuṣṭhānam_ (ritual) would destroy its soul . . . The State Government says that _teyyam_ can be performed anywhere as long as it follows the ritual, but an atmosphere of belief cannot be created on the playground. . . . The Youth Welfare Board and Folklore Academy should give assistance to revive the _kāvya_ where the _teyyam_ has not been performed in a long while, rather than produce stage performances.

_[Malayala Manorama, Oct. 19, 1998]_

The right to perform _teyyam_ is one of the main points of this argument. _Teyyakkārans_ used to perform within a fixed area with the permission of the local authorities. Such a power relationship would, of course, not be obtained in the case of a stage performance. The shift of the site from _kāvya_ to the stage would abolish the conventional power relationship and hierarchy.
Chanthera founded the North Kerala Ritual Art Preservation Group *(Uttarakērala Anuṣṭhāna Kalā Samrakṣana Kēndram)* at the Kannur Chamber Hall on November 4, 1998. The purpose of this society was to support *teyyakkāran* and preserve *kāvyu* by retaining traditional rights, customs, styles and beliefs. Chanthera demonstrated against the subsequent stage performance of *teyyam*, and criticized the policies of the state government in newspapers and journals. The BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) central government bestowed a scholarship on the anti-communist Chanthera to support his study of *teyyam*.

### 4.3 The Anti-BJP Stand Taken by the Communists

The formation of the Ritual Saving Society by Chanthera led to a counter-movement. The leftist group, the Progressive Art and Literature Organization *(Purōgamana Kalasāḥitya Samgham)*, and the Malabar Area *Teyyam* Artists Association (MATA) conducted "a meeting against the penetration of fascism into *teyyam* art" at Payyanur on January 24, 1999. They believed that fascists were attempting to change the *kāvyus* into upper-caste Hindu temples and that this was a movement to oppress the lower castes by an upper one. They complained that the fascists had stripped the *teyyam* artists of their freedom, rejecting the diversity of culture, and that this was the fascist strategy of the BJP and a part of a national strategy. They expressed strong opposition to such moves.

Even though the BJP is a minor party in Kerala, support for it is gradually increasing. In the Lok Sabha (Lower House), the BJP garnered 1.76% of the vote in 1984, 4.79% in 1991, and 8.1% in 1998 [*The Indian Express*, 1998 March 6]. During World War II in Kerala, the word fascist was aimed at Japan, Italy and Germany, but it is now being used today to indicate the BJP.

### 4.4 Local Culturalism

Some folklorists in Kerala have noted the relationship between folklore and politics. In *Ideology Politics & Folklore*, the editor of this book, Raghavan Payyanad, states:

Folklore is a strong medium of communication . . . . The modern capitalist society, having understood that this external form of folk-
lore is a strong conveyor of ideas, makes it an instrument for the transference of ideas . . . . The main aim of a producer in a capitalist society is to influence the consumer . . . . From the point of view of folklore, the capitalist and the government agency are the same in this context. The activities of both belong to applied folklore.

[Payyanad 1999: 39–40]

Applied folklore and folklorism\textsuperscript{22)} are said to be used outside a proper context. Studies on folklore came to receive attention after studies by Bendix [Bendix 1988]. Kerala folklorists also came to be interested in folklorism and began to study it. Some of them criticized the instrumental usage of folklore. Anil blamed the commercial usage of teyyam as if it were an advertisement for a sari. Besides this, he claimed that many local identities were destroyed by elite Indians who had received an English education during the colonial period, and so the revival of local identity was necessary as a result [Anil 1999: 69, 71]. Such critics maintain that the elite Indians and capitalists manipulated folklore to serve their purposes, and so local culture was exploited. They emphasize the existence of local culture.

Localisms aimed against globalism and nativism opposing colonialism are general phenomena in non-western societies and especially countries that have been under colonial rule for long periods. The Ritual Art Preservation Group and stage performance supporters both attach importance to local identity. However, The Ritual Art Preservation Group makes much of traditional styles, while those in support of the stage performance attempt to preserve the teyyam by operating politically.

5. Commercialization and Tourism in the Teyyam

The teyyam has come to be used not only for stage performances but also features in commercials, advertisements and election campaigns where it is seen as a symbol of northern Kerala. In addition, dramas and films with themes related to teyyam have been produced. A film about teyyakkaran, "Kaṭiyāṭṭam", was a great hit in 1997. In addition, a TV drama about Peruvannan (not Kotakkat Peruvannan) was aired in 1999.

The teyyam has also been involved with tourism. One big teyyam
festival, *perunkaliyattam* which is held every twenty-five years, was held in Rāmavillyam Kāḷakam at Tricarepur from March 5 to 12, 1999. The State Tourist Department also participated. In a pamphlet issued by the Department, the phrase "A Spectacle of Colours and Rites" was printed together with the help of a local folklore organization, Folk Land, with a paragraph stating:

> Although teyyams can be seen in most parts of Malabar from December to March every year, this art form and the festivities that accompany it has not been fully accessible to the visitor. In an endeavor to highlight the magnificence of our village festivals, Kerala Tourism is privileged to welcome you to its PERUNKALIYATTAM... this magnificent spectacle will be a feast to the eye, sure to leave the onlooker bewitched at the power and mystery of the hoary traditions of the Malabar countryside.  

*[Perunkaliyattam]*

Many foreigners who noticed this pamphlet in Cochin came to see the festival. For them, the teyyam was just a spectacle.

The Kannur Tourism Promotion Council published *Teyyam Guide*, which includes the schedule of teyyams in Kannur. The preface states:

> Teyyam, a cultural heritage in Kannur, is filled with myths and unheard-of elegance as an art. You can see its development from barbarous forms of worship to its present status.  

*[Teyyam Guide]*

Thus tourism tries to sell the mysterious and aesthetic aspects of teyyam as a commodity and thus promotes tourism.

The Tourism Promotion Council also printed greeting cards for teyyam. When I observed teyyam in Wayanad district in March 2001 with Prof. M. Suzuki, one Malayan teyyakkāran complained that somebody took a photograph of teyyam, and made a greeting card from it that he is now selling. He said that because of that, many misfortunes (dōsam) have occurred and they have since been troubled by this.

He then stopped us from taking any photographs because he suspected we would use the photographs for business. In the village and cities of Kasargod and Kannur districts, however, except in special cases, we were able to take photographs. Wayanad is a remote hilly area where tribal people also live. That might have been the reason for
their opposition. In fact, we had previously written a letter to the Wayanad District Temple Ritual Teyyam Performance Society (Vayanātu Jilla Kṣētra Anuṣṭhāna Teyyam Keṭṭiyattra Saṃgham) promising that we would never use any photographs taken of this ritual for business purposes. We were accordingly granted permission to photograph.

The teyyakkāran who had stopped us from photographing emphasized that teyyam is not a drama, but a form of spiritual worship. He claimed that some foreigners have described it as a tribal dance. From these remarks, one can infer both the attitudes of teyyakkāran and other local people towards the teyyam as well as the secrecy found within the teyyam.

Given the limitations imposed by many other economic factors, tourism is a most powerful economic engine [The Indian Express, Aug. 31, 1998]. The teyyam has been involved in tourism and commercialism through the state government and local organization. This has led to fears and doubts that these phenomena may destroy local culture and tradition, and aroused consciousness of the need to protect teyyam as a ritual. Conflicts between tradition and modernization, and ritual and art are lending more significance to teyyam.

6. Revival of Teyyam

During the independence movement, communists went underground to avoid police detection and avoided the teyyam festival. Teyyam as a religious ritual went into decline due to the communists’ negative attitude towards religion. In addition, prices of agricultural products dropped during World War II, and villagers faced impoverishment owing to this. Such combinations of circumstances led to teyyams being discontinued in some taravāṭus [Sreedharan 1997: 91]. Moreover, as a result of the land reform of the 1960’s, taravāṭus lost landed property and economic power, and this, too, inhibited the continuation of teyyams.

However, from the end of the 1990’s, many taravāṭus which had long stopped teyyam restarted it. This was due to the fact that they felt they were experiencing dōśam (misfortune) such as unexpected death and disease amongst taravāṭu members and even domestic ani-
mals. Hence they consulted an astrologist and were told that there was 
ǒdeva kōpaṁ (wrath of god) in the taravātu and thus were advised to 
restart the kaliyāṭṭam.

For example, at a certain taravātu in Kannur district, the kāraṇavaṇaṁ 
(the eldest member of the taravātu) decided to divide the taravātu 
property between his children in anticipation of land reform by the 
Kerala government. He then celebrated the teyyam in the divided 
taravātu. After his death in 1965, the teyyam was not celebrated for a 
long time. Sometime after, his wife and child became mentally ill. A 
trust was formed by other taravātu members in 1989, and they asked 
an astrologer the reason for the misfortune (dōsam). They were in-
fomed that it was because they had not worshipped the gods of taravātu 
for a long time. Hence the trustees bought the taravātu building to-
gether with a small portion of surrounding land and restarted the 
kalīyaṭṭam in 1995.

The property had been traditionally divided through the matrilineal 
line, which means from uncle to nephew. However, after the Malabar 
marriage act in 1868, the wife and children also obtained rights to the 
property. After that, many taravātus, but not all, started to divide 
their property according to the act. Others divided their property ac-
cording to new taravātu rules. However, the temple was not usually 
divided and instead was owned jointly by the subdivided taravātu 
groups. They continued to worship the teyyam, but as some shrines 
attached to the taravātu were passed down patrilineally, this meant 
that the new owners did not feel related to the taravātu and thus did 
not worship their taravātu god. Hence teyyam worshipping ceased 
amongst the new owners. There was dissent about this among the 
original matrilineal taravātu members and this led them to quote as-
trology as an excuse for repossessing the taravātu property.

Taravātu temples owned by traditional taravātu members still main-
tain traditional worshipping styles and have not yet become involved 
in commercialism or tourism. These taravātu teyyams have seen a 
revival as a result of a combination of religious motivation and a desire 
to reacquire their traditional power base.

Moreover, many local people are now migrating to Indian cities to 
work or study and also abroad especially to the Gulf. Generally only 
women and old people remain in taravātus. The taravātu, which usu-
ally had at least fifty members sixty years ago, has evolved into smaller, nuclear families, and has now become merely a place where a lamp is lit in a shrine. Only at the time of teyyam rituals do members of taravāṭu gather.

Since the 1980's, migrant workers from Kerala have been increasing in the Gulf countries and have been remitting funds for the reconstruction of temples and taravāṭus. For instance, the Tīyyar caste temple, Pālakunnu Kalakam receives Rs.10,000 per year from its branch in Dubai [Ashley 1993: 101]. Those living abroad feel a need to strengthen their ties with Kerala and regain their cultural roots, so they are often happy to contribute to the preservation and the revival of their culture through their taravāṭus and caste temples.

Even though the taravāṭu as a physical residence is fast disappearing, its members still look to the taravāṭu for social communication. The teyyam in the taravāṭu attracts members who have migrated from the locality and who wish to construct their identity through the teyyam. To discontinue the teyyam would be to risk losing the member’s identity and is considered to cause misfortune in the form of the wrath of an offended deity.

If one taravāṭu cannot maintain its shrine, it transfers its rights over the shrine to a local multi-caste committee and thus the teyyam is given a new impetus. The teyyam is revived by strengthening the ties of taravāṭu, caste and locality.

Teyyam is popular not only at the taravāṭu, but also at caste temples and kalakam. Medium-scale teyyam festivals are organized by local castes, so teyyam contributes to highlighting the caste’s identity. People are rarely conscious about caste in daily life because stressing the difference in caste has tended to be avoided in recent years. However, the caste system cannot be done away with unless marriages within the same caste are discontinued. A sense of fellow feeling within the same caste has been heightened through ritual more than through hierarchy.

In addition, in the case of a large-scale teyyam festival, people of all castes join in as organizers. In the aforesaid Rāmavillam Kalakam, the majority of members are the Tīyyars, but Nāyar and Maṇiyāṇi are also members of the executive committee. Other castes and even Muslims living nearby have also contributed to the fund.25) Owing to the above, folklorists and local politicians tend to refer to the teyyam as
kūttāyma (unity), notably in inauguration speeches, seminars and other articles. In reality, there is inner conflict between Hindus and Muslims, but to publicly display kūttāyma is important and kūttāyma is considered to be achieved through the performance of the teyyam.

7. Conclusion

The teyyam has, in recent times, been practiced in diverse places and contexts. At sacred places such as kāvu, taravāṭu temples and caste community temples, people regard teyyam as gods, whilst teyyam is considered a spectacle or art form when staged. Decontextualization has transformed teyyam from amuṣṭhānam (ritual) to kala (art), and teyyakkāran (ritual performer) to kalākāran (artist). There have been several different trends relating to teyyam.

The teyyam was traditionally performed only inside the taravāṭu temple, kāvu, or caste temple. It was related to the land and worshipped for the sake of the prosperity of the taravāṭu, the caste community and individual members of the above groups. Teyyam was amuṣṭhānam, and it was not considered to be an art form.

During the independence movement and World War II, impoverishment of villages together with the negative attitude of communists toward religion led to a decline in the teyyam as a ritual. Moreover, the land reform of the 1960’s made it difficult for the taravāṭu to sponsor the teyyam.

After independence, however, cultural organizations were established in India, and the teyyam was performed outside temples and used as a tool of cultural integration. In addition, the Kerala state government established the teyyam as representative of Kerala cultural identity. With them, local cultural groups joined in the staging of performances. Staging of the teyyam and awarding of prizes to teyyakkāran transformed the teyyam into an art form and the teyyakkāran into an artist.

At about the same time, large scale teyyam festivals (perunkaliyāṭṭam) were organized by multi caste committees and related to commoditization, commercialism and tourism.

From the 1990’s onwards, many taravāṭus which had long ceased teyyam worshipping now restarted. Revival relates to the politics of property of the taravāṭu as well as fear of its decline.
Since the end of the 1990's, there have been arguments that the staging of the *teyyam* and globalization and commercialization of *teyyam* have led to a decline in local culture. Folklore activity has become common and new local culturalism has begun to conflict with other political ideologies.

To sum up, the *teyyam* has been performed as both ritual and art forms, depending on the context. There have been many discussions on the preservation of the *teyyam*, which has taken on various forms, some of which have provoked criticism. The *teyyam* relates not only to a belief system, but also to art, politics and socio-economics, and this conflict has arisen as the result of overlapping areas of interest. The politics of the ritual and art forms of the *teyyam* are thus highly complex and this has often led to conflict surrounding the *teyyam*. This conflict will itself continue to influence the form of the *teyyam* and by maintaining continued interest in the various forms, even serve to preserve it.

Recent anthropological studies criticize essentialism, which seeks authenticity from culture, and suggest instead the study of the post modern condition in which modernity and tradition are hybrids [Furuya 2001: 12]. In non-western countries in particular, modernization and westernization affect the objectification of culture through tourism and commercialization, and arguments surrounding this phenomenon often arise [Ota 1993]. *Teyyam* culture is also created through commoditization and staging, and external influences are considered to be contributory factors in the growth and development of such culture. However, it is more important to consider local politics and history, which affect the changing style and meaning of the *teyyam*. The revived *teyyam*, whilst still existing as a temple ritual, has further developed into new forms, including the staged *teyyam*.

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Notes
1) This paper is based on fieldwork covering a period of about one and a half years, from November 1997 to September 1999, and complementary research from February to March 2001 and January 2003 in North Kerala.
2) He sets up oil lamps in the shrine and performs the worshipping ritual (puja) at the time of a teyam ritual. Anti means evening, and tiri means a wick of a lamp in Malayalam.
3) The elderly members of taravatu who have the rights regarding ritual.
4) Teyyakkarans become gods only during a teyyam, while velicappatu or kōmaram are always considered representatives of gods. Kōmaram puts on a red hair band, waistcloth and necklace. The word velicappatu is used among the Tiyyar caste, and kōmaram is used among the Maniyāni and Vāniyar castes.
5) Female members of the Vaṇṇāṅ are called the Vaṇṇātti. Their traditional job was washing but they rarely do it nowadays.
6) The Malayans perform magic (mantravādam) as well as teyyam. Female members were midwives.
7) It is called urvilakku, which means the prohibition inside a particular area. Īr means village and country, and vilakku means prohibition in Malayalam.
8) The title given by the Brahman of Rājarajēswara temple is considered the most valuable.
9) Dr. Gunderts says that the word 'tōllu'ka is an old verb which meant produce and restore to life, and 'tōllam' is a noun form of it (Gundert 1872: 494).
10) Before being fully dressed in costume and make-up, the performer, when simply dressed and dancing, is known as 'vellāttam'. Usually, warrior teyyam ritual requires vellāttam.
11) It is believed that bhūta ganam (ghosts and followers of Siva) reside in the north and thus the chicken sacrifice is made to appease them.
12) Usually, former landlords or their descendants such as the Nayar and Nambi castes take this position.
13) In India, darsām generally means seeing or viewing. 'Darśam' in a temple means seeing the idols of gods.
14) Long tōllam such as Viṣṇumūrtti tōllam could be written on a palm leaf, but this was guarded closely by taṇavāty members and was not considered to cause dōṣam as long as it remained within the taṇavāty.
15) From an interview with C.M.S. Chanthera, recorded at his home on August 20,
17) Kannan Peruvannan was born the eldest son of Kuttianbu Manakkatan, a prominent teyyakkaran. When he was twenty, he was given the title peruvannan [Sreedharan 1997: 9, 80–81]. He had a great knowledge of myths and rituals as well as techniques of the teyyam.
18) Academy supporting music, dance, drama and folklore, which was established at Trissur by the state government.
19) From an interview with Kuttamattu Sreedharan at Kannan Peruvannan's dispensary on July 30, 1999.
20) These were supported by South Zone Cultural Center and Public Relation Department of Kerala. From an interview with A.N. Kotakkat at his home on August 20, 1999.
21) It is the festival based on the legend that King Mahabali, who had been in control of Kerala, would come there to see his people in Chingam month (from the middle of August to the middle of September).
22) Folklorism is an English translation of “Folklorismus” suggested by Hans Moser in 1962 [Bendix 1988].
23) Kalakam is a social and religious organization [Kurup 1977: 2]. Historical details are unknown, but it is said that the four temple organizations of the Tiyyar came to be known as kalakam by imitating kalakam of Brahman established prior to the ninth century.
24) Doṣam means misfortune which occurs as a result of evil deeds and sins. There are several kinds of doṣam including graha (planet) doṣam, nāga doṣam, dèva doṣam, and so on.
25) Rs. 250 was collected from each male member and Rs. 125 from each female member of the Tiyyar. The total sum was 14 lakh rupees. Another 16 lakh was also collected from the public [Sree Ramaçvilyam Kazhakam Perunkaliyattam 1999].

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