

'IDU' AND ITS ROLE IN THE PERFORMANCE OF VISHNUMOORTHI THEYYAM

Nandakumar Koroth, IRISH, Koothuparamba, Kannur



The present Kasaragod District exhibits a peculiar culture that differs in many ways from its neighbouring districts . The land is known as '*Sapthabhasha Sangamabhoomi*' by the presence of the people with Seven different languages as their mother tongue. Numerous forts built by the Nayakas, Mavilans and ruling families demonstrate the uniqueness of the district. The neighbouring state, with its people and culture, has influenced much the life and society of the district. Several unique rituals and practices had been emerged in the district centuries before. The megalithic sites, rock engravings, mural paintings, *kalaris*¹, *Idus* and inscriptions tell the ancient past of Kasaragod. The large number of forts found at different places of Kasaragod explain the repeated attacks and struggle for supremacy of the region in ancient time. Remains of twenty eight forts are seen at Kumbala, Chandragiri, Bekal, Hosdurg, Chithari, Panayal, Kundamkuzhi, Bandadka, Kasaragod, Povval, Manjeswaram, Nileshwaram, Pilicode, Matlayi, Madhur, Majvayal, Kattukukke, Adhoor, Cheemeni, Shiriya, West Eleri, Cheruvathur, Kadamkod, Kolangat Mala, Veethalamkunnu, Madikkunnu, Pilicode, and Kannankai. The presence of these forts had always attracted the travelers and history books.

The region between Olavara River and Chadragiri River has more unique symbols regarding the remains of the past. The heritage and culture of the Kasaragod District is best demonstrated by the existence of semi circular mud mountains known as *Idu* built by the inhabitants of the area hundreds of years ago. The *Idus* remain as the symbol of resistance by the natives against the

¹ Traditional weapon training centres of Kerala

invasions, assimilation and settlements from time to time by the Aloopa dynasty, Perumals, Brahimins, Nairs, Ikkeri Nayakas, Mooshika dynasty, Nileshwar Dynasty, Mysore Sultans, Portuguese, Dutch, French and the British. The idus related to the performance of Vishnumoorthi theyyam.²

The places related to *Idu* got the names like Iduvingal, Idu, Ottakuthiru, Kuthirummal, Iduvinkunnu, Kunnummal, and Kuthiru. Most of the structures lost their original size and some have totally disappeared, still the place names throw light on the existence of the *Idu* in those areas.

Regarding the origin of the name *Idu*, no relevant evidence is available. But the influence of Tulu culture can be seen in the word *Idu*. The meaning of *Idu* in Tulu is aim or to put. The rituals connected to *Idu* support the fact that *Idu* is a Tulu word. Usually archery competitions are conducted in front of the *Idu*. The semi-circular shape served the purpose. Even now, at Mappittachery, Cheruvathur Kari and Pilicode Kottumpuram, archery is conducted as a ritual.

Fred Fawcett, the local correspondent of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, a foreign traveler who visited Kerala in the beginning of twentieth century, opined that he saw an entertainment in the Sothern part of Kurumbranadu. There some youths formed two groups and sat on either sides of an erected semi circular mud mountain measuring a height of 2.5 feet in the centre. They carried bow and arrows made of *eerkkil*³ and set target in the middle of the mud mountain with *Vayathada*⁴. Then began the archery. The archer who successfully targeted the arrows collected all the misfired arrows with utmost happiness. The remarks of Fawcett were about the *Idu* and the connected rituals. In 1901, Fred Fawcett described the performance of *theyyam*⁵. His writings in general show a keen sense of observation and a constant preoccupation with accurate ethnographic detail.

Idus were the archery training centres of Kasaragod district in the ancient days.

Usually archery competitions are conducted as a part of temple rituals in the Malayalam month of *Chingam*. In the beginning of the month, tender coconut leaves were collected and arrows are made out of them for the competition. Archery competitions begins on *Atham* of *Chingam*. Areca nuts are hung on the northern side of the *Idu* during the first nine days and the target shifts to the centre on *Atham* day. Coconut is hung as the aim on that day.

The *Idus* are situated near to the performance places of Vishnumoorthi *theyyam*. *Theyyam* or *thayyattam* is a popular ritual dance of North Kerala. Herman Gundart opined that *theyyam* is derived from the word *daivam*⁶. *Theyyam* embraces almost all the castes and classes of the Hindu religion in this region. Majority of *theyyam* performances were held in *kavus*⁷, *kottams*, *kayakams*, *madams*, *palliyaras*, *pathis*, and other worshipping places from *Thulam* 10 to *Edavam* of Malayalam calendar. The adjacent sacred groves or *kavus* near to the *Idu* are evidences of the Tulu origin of Theyyams. The performance of Vishnumoorthi *theyyam* is the right of *Malayan* caste and Padinhare Chamundi by *Koppalan* (*Nalkkathaya*) caste. No other castes has right to perform it. This rule in

² Theyyam is a ritual art popular in north Kerala

³ Stick running through the middle of a coconut leaf

⁴ Banana stem

⁵ Fawcett, 'Nayars of Malabar', published in the Bulletin of the Madras Government Museum 1901, pp. 243-274

⁶ Dr. Herman Gundert, "Malayalam- English dictionary (1872)

⁷ Kaavus featured as a traditional unit of sacred space for enacting different forms of Theyyams and for the enactment of associated rituals. Kavus originates from the practice of worshipping tress and other natural objects. See J R Freeman, "Gods, Groves and the Culture of Nature in Kerala", Modern Asian Studies 33 no.2 (1999): 257-302

performance is followed even today though the caste bigotry is not in existence. Each family has its own performing territory⁸. The costumes were prepared indigenously and drumming is taught to the performers. The performance includes invocation of the deity, the description of the story of the deity, the ecstatic dance of the deity, the offering of blessings by the performer to the needy and disturbed people. The *theyyam* performed in a variety of forms in the region between the rivers Chandragiri and Korappuzha. And also performed in Kudak region⁹ of Karnataka, some areas surrendering Kasaragod town and in Dharmasthala temple. N. Prabhakaran explains through his 12 chapter book about the story of Kathivanur Veeran *Theyyam*¹⁰. He describes about the process of *Brahmanisation* the the Kudak region and the acceptance of *Brahmin* domination. The fourth chapter of the books describes the journey of Mandhappan and the fifth one about the spread of communism in Kudak. The rituals of the *theyyam* are in its most complex nature in the area lying between Valapattanam river and Chandragiri river. It was influenced by the migration of *Brahmins* and the *Nairs* in to the area. At the *kavus* devotees worshipped *nagas* (snake), different forms of God Vishnu and God Siva. It tells the process of brahmanization of Kolathunad. All the *theyyams* have restricted areas and not allow entering Shiva and Vishnu temples. The evolution of *theyyattam* shows the all embracing nature of it. The rituals are arranged in a manner to suit the needs of different castes, especially for the benefit of *Brahmin*, *Nair* and *Thiyya* castes. There was the existence of *Janmi* system and the unquestioning power of the *Naduvazhis*¹¹ in different parts of North Malabar. Absence of a strong power in this area resulted in the emergence of large number of landlords.

The *thottampattu*¹² of *Vishnumoorthi Theyyam* testifies the Tulu connection to the ritual art. On account of the supposedly late revival of *Vaishnavism* in Kerala, it does not have a deep impact on the *theyyam* cult. Only a few deities are available under this category. This may probably be due to the lesser influence of Lord Vishnu on the village folk that had an uninterrupted tradition of the worship of the Mother Goddess for fertility and the Lord Siva and His son Murukan for protection and security even during the *Sangam* Age. Kesavan Veluthat suggests two waves of *Brahmin* settlements in South India, the first corresponding to the *Sangam* Age¹³ and the second to the early mideival period¹⁴. The Pulankurinchi inscription of about fifth century A.D. records the creation of a brahmadeya settlement, and mentions the superior rights (*miyatci*) of the donees and the subordinate rights (*karan kilamai*) of the cultivators¹⁵. Even spirits, ancestors, heroes, animals etc are defied and included in those categories. The fact that the *Brahmins* of the Konkan Coast are connected with a martial *Brahmana* figure such as Parasurama and that the legend refers to Parasurama as having presented them with arms in order to enable to protect and rule Kerala is significant. Kesavan Veluthat connects this with evidence of

⁸ Teyyam, Wayne Ashley, Regyna Hooloman; P.135.

⁹ Prabhakaran, N., Kudak Kurippukal (Malayalam), Kairali Books, 2008

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ *Naduvazhi* refers to landlords, chieftains and descendants of royal households in Kerala

¹² The prologue chants by the theyyam performer, keep the devotees in a mood of devotion and fervor. Thottam pattu is a folk songs sung just before performing the theyyattam.

¹³ Upinder Singh, "A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12th century", Pearson Longman, New Delhi, 2008, pp27-28

¹⁴ Kesavan Veluthat, "Brahmin Settlements in Kerala: Historical studies, Sandhya Publications, Calicut University, 1978, pp.18-40

¹⁵ Kesavan Veluthat, "The Political Structure of Medeival South India", Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1993, p.198

the institution called the *ghatika* or *salai*, educational-cum-military organizations of the *Brahmins*¹⁶. The educational-cum-military organizations and the martial role of *Brahmins* explain the association of them with *theyyam* performance. In the whole body of *Sangam* works, no mention of *Namboothiris* or *Nairs* or *devaswam* or *brahmaswam* is available. During that period, those sections of the cultivating groups like the *kuravas*, *Vedas*, *pulayas* and *idayas* might have exercised ownership right over the soil which they cultivated¹⁷. The process of aryanisation completely changed the socio-economic structure of North Malabar. With the establishment of *Brahmanised* Pallava dynasty of Andhra origin at Kanchi in the north east corner of Tamilakam (c.600 A.D.) there were greater waves of migration and settlement, the *Brahmin* section of which took the shape of *Agraharas* which may be described as agrarian corporations of huge size¹⁸. Gradually, they became temple centered and propagated the ideology of *bhakthi* which was congenial to the developing feudal social structure¹⁹. The *bhakthi* related to *theyyams* demonstrates the relationship between hegemony and power in North Malabar. Here also, the *Brahmins* carved out huge agrarian corporations with the subordination of the inhabitants. Their influence in religious rituals resulted in the unopposed exploitation of the agricultural labourers.

The places associated with *Ottakolam* festival are known as *Idangal* and there is a chance that it has been later shortened to *Idus*. The connection of *Idu* to *Vaishnavism* is also revealed by the *Parasurama* Legend. The withdrawal of the sea was marked by forming a structure of semi circular mud mountain known as *Idus*. The shape of *Idu* attested the presence of *Ayimukham* in the olden days. The sacred grove near the Cheruvathur Kovval *Idu*, one of the best maintained is known as *Azhivathukkal Vishnumoorthi* temple.

*Ottakolams*²⁰ at the temples near to the *Idus* are usually performed after sun rise. Related to this ,one opinion is that the *Idus* were erected to block sun rays falling directly on the *theyyam* performer. But this opinion is irrelevant because several *Idus* are situated on the west or north of the temples.

Theyyam myth originated from Kolathunadu were mainly *Saivites* whereas the *Idus* seen at *Allada Nadu*²¹ are the remnants of *Vaishnava* cult. *Vishnumoorthi* came to *Allada Nadu* along with a devotee of Lord Vishnu, Palanthayi Kannan. The myth is a documentation of the spread of *Vaishnava* cult in the region.

Another evidence to attest the *Vaisnavite* connection of *Idus* is its comparison with *Banan Kotta*.²² As per the myth, *Siva* appointed *Bana* as the protector of his fort. *Srikrishnan*, an incarnation of Maha Vishnu ,attacked the fort and *Siva* came to help *Bana*. In the battle that followed, Sri Krishna defeated *Siva*. The fort gates later were symbolised by erecting *Idus*. So, *Idus* are also known as *Banankotta*.

¹⁶ Op. cit. Kesavan Veluthat, pp.1-10

¹⁷ Narayanan, M.T., Agrarian Relations in Late Medieval Malabar, Northern Book Centre, New Delhi, 2003, p37

¹⁸ Narayanan, M.G.S., Re-interpretations in South Indian History, Trivandrum, 1975, "Social and Economic History of South India", pp. 1-23

¹⁹ Burton Stein, "Peasant state and society in medieval South India", Oxford University Press, 1980, pp.240-344

²⁰, Ritual connected with *Vishnumoorthi theyyam* in some kavus. The *theyyam* jumps into the pyre prepared for the purpose

²¹ Allada dynasty

²² Fort of *Banan*, a mythological figure

In the *thottampattu* of *Vishnumoorthi Theyyam*, *Narasimhamoorthi* is described as the one who demolished the *Hiranyankotta*. In some ways, *Idus* are the material manifestation of the *Hiranyankotta*. The *ottakkolam* that jumps into the pyre, is really the performance of the *Narasimhamoorthi* who killed the *Hiranyan*.

Idus are seen at Elambachi, Thankayam Manikanal, Kinathil, Cheruvathur Kari, Cheruvathur Kovval, Kuttamath Ponmalam, Pilicode Kottumpuram, Mappittacheri, Mavungal, Iduvinkunnu near Bellikoth, Nileshwar Kizhakan Kozhuval, Nileshwar Padinjattam Kozhuval, Nileshwar Pallikkara Kunjipulikkal, and Kunjalinkeezil. The biggest *Idus* are at Cheruvathur Kovval and Kari.

Idus served the purpose of giving training in archery to the natives. The presence of trained soldiers is necessary for defending the land from the attacks of the invaders. The continuous attacks by the invaders necessitated the construction of training centres and *Idus* served the purpose. The existence of large number of *Idus* and *Kalaris*²³ reveal the importance of the prosperity of the land and the absence of powerful rulers. In the absence of strong dictators, people united to fight against the invasions. The myths related to *Idus* also explain the struggle between Vaisnavism and Saivism in the region north of Olavara river.

Other opinions also raised by some writers regarding the performance of *theyyam* in the *Twentieth century*. As Dilip Menon²⁴ writes, "Folk arts were harnessed in the cause of anti-Japanese and anti-hoarding propaganda and the *otten thullal*²⁵, *poorakkali*²⁶, *theyyattam* all of these found patronage. In the aftermath of the depression, many of the less prosperous *tharavads* had stopped sponsoring the *theyyattam* and other shrine performances. The leadership of the Kerala communist parties, belonging to larger *tharavads*,²⁷ were emerged popular in their element as patrons of the ritual arts. In the beginning of 19th century, victims of police action would be lauded as heroes and martyrs, and many individuals incorporated within the *theyyam* tradition of victims of injustice. Among the persons arrested in the fighting at Karivellur in 1946 was a *theyyattam* performer who 'used to dance communism'. But the spread communism gave new vigour to the performers. Breaking of rituals inturn affected the *theyyattam* and gradually began to lose its popular base. The communist movement which surfaced in the 1930s and acquired influence and power in the 60s-70s became a reason for waning faith in the *theyyam* ritual. In this phase a large number of *kavus* that discontinued practice grew rampant²⁸. Still, the *Ottakolam* performance continues in front of *Idus*.

REFERENCES

- Ashley, Wayne : *Theyyamkettu* of Northern Kerala (1979)
- Balakrishnavarriar, K : *Anustana Vinjanakosam, Arshavidhya parishath* (fifth edition): (2002)
- Balan . C edited : *Kasaragod Charithravum Samskaravum*

²³ Place where training in *kalaripayattu*, Traditional martial art of North Kerala, was given. Also the ancient village schools in North Kerala.

²⁴ Dilip.M.Menon, "The Moral Community of the Teyyattam: Popular Culture in Late Colonial Malabar", *Studies in History* 9 no. 2 ,1993 p. 187-217.

²⁵ *Ottan thullal* is a poetic performance form of Kerala. It was introduced in the 18th century by Kunchan Nambiar

²⁶ Traditional dance ritual performed by men during the nine day *Pooram* festival across North Malabar.

²⁷ System of joint family practiced by Nair caste people of Kerala.

²⁸ *Op.cit*, Dilip M. Menon, pp. 217-18

- Bhasiraj, S. : *Thekkan Keralthile Thottampattu*, Haritham books (2005)
- Stein Burton : *Peasant State and Society in Medieval India*
- Chandera C M S : *Kaliyattam*, National Book Stall, Kottayam (1978)
- Kannakiyum Cheermakkavum*, National book stall, (1973)
- Athyuthara keralathinte Anjatha Charithram*, (1974)
- Uttara Keralathile Saktheya Kavukal*, (1982)
- Vadakke Malabarile Pattutsavam*, (1976)
- Theyyathinte adipraroopam*, D.C books (2004)
- Damodaran, M. P. : *The Malayan of North Malabar and their Teyyam*
- Tradition Binds People Together: Teyyam Performance of North Malabar-A Perfect Example*. Paper presented in the National Seminar and Teyyam Festival in the Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts, New Delhi, March 24 to 26, 2005
- Identity through Nature-Man Interaction: A Case Study on Teyyam Performance in North Malabar, Kerala*. Paper presented in the eve of 28th Indian Folklore Congress in the University of Calicut, Kerala
- Elmore, W.T : *Dravidian Gods in Modern Hinduism*, Asian educational services (1995)
- Jose Kananaikil, Walter Fernandes : *The emerging Dalit identity: the Re-assertion of the Subalterns*, Indian Social Institute, (1996)
- Fawcett F : *Nayars of Malabar*, Asian Educational Services; Facsimile of 1901
- Kannan Peruvannan : *Chilambitta Ormakal*, Kurukshetra prakasan (1997)
- Karipath R C : *Kolathunattile Theyyam Kathakal , Nattu Samskriti*, (1989)
- Mavilarude Pattukal*
- Malayile Mavilanmar*
- Theyya Pravanjam*
- Kingfisher : *Mythology, Gods, Goddess and Heroes from Around the World* (1994)
- Kurup K K N : *Aryan and Dravidian Elements in Malabar Folklore*, Kerala Historical Society, Trivandrum (1977).
- A Cult of Theyyam and Hero Worship in Kerala*, University of Calicut,(2000)
- Theyyam- a ritual Dance of Kerala*, Thiruvananthapuram, (1996)
- Kotari (ed) : *Caste, Untouchability and the Depressed*, Manohar, 1997
- Mahalingam T.V. : *South Indian Polity*, Madras, 1968
- Murray, Hen. A. (ed) : *Myths and myth Making*, Boston: Beacon Press (1960)
- Namboothiri M V Vishnu : *Thottam Pattukal, Oru Padanam*, National Book Stall (1990)

- Uthara Keralathile thottampattukal*, Kerala Sahitya Academy (1981)
- Theyyam*, Thiruvananthapuram, State Institute of Languages (1998)
- Pallath, J.J.: *Teyyam : An Analytical Study of the Folk Culture, Wisdom and Personality*, Indian Social Institute (1995)
- Pepita Seth : *Reflections of the Spirit: The Theyyams of Malabar*, Mapin 2001
- Payyanad Raghavan : *Theyyavum Thottam Pattukalum*, National Book Stall, 1979
Nerinte mozhikal, FFM (Trust) (2003)
- Kerala folklore*, FFM Trust (1997)
Folklorinue Oru Padana Padhathi, Kerala Sahitya Academy (1998)
- Nadinte Mozhi*, FFM Publications (2003)
- Ravi, Ramanthali (ed.) : *Kavukal Theyyangal*, Block Panjayath. (2002)
- Richard E. Fox (ed) : *Kin, Clan, Raja and Rule*
- Sajeewan Azheekode : *Theyyathile Jathivayakkam* Curent Books (2007)
- Uttara Keralathile Thottam Pattukal* , Kerala Sahitya Academy 1981
- Theyyam*, Kerala Basha Institute, Trivandrum (1998).
- Sankunni, Kottarathil : *Eithihymala*, Current Books. (1991)
- Savira Jaiswal : *Karahima* : South Indian History and Society, OUP, 1984
- Theodore Gabriel : *Playing God: Belief and Ritual in the Muthappan Cult of North Malabar* Equinox Publishing 2010