

TEYYAM OF KERALA

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Teyyam or *Teyyattam* is a popular ritual dance of Malabar which has become an inseparable part of the religion of the village folk. As a living cult with an ancient tradition, ritual and custom, it embraces almost all castes, classes and divisions of the Hindu community in this region. The ritual aspects and artistic forms of the dance fulfil the religious aspiration and aesthetic imagination of the common people. The process of urbanisation has not disturbed the socio-religious structure of the traditional society based on *Teyyam* and such other folk cults in Malabar. These cults have struck such deep roots that the social changes and modernisation of our day have not been able to destroy them *in toto*.

Origin and Growth

The origin of this sacred dance can be traced to remote antiquity. Dance is one of the earliest forms of human worship. Many primitive tribes have adopted it as a mode of worship offered to a supreme or divine power. The same tradition and cultural lineage have promoted this dance-form through the centuries. There is an uninterrupted continuity of a common cultural heritage of such ritual dance-forms in several countries of South Asia. The *Kolam* dance of Sri Lanka, *Barong* and *Rangda* dances of Java and Bali (Indonesia) and regional variations of *Teyyam* like *Bhuta* dance of south Kanara and *Kolam* dance of Southern Kerala, in the western coast of India, are most probably a contribution of pre-Dravidian and Dravidian elements of a common civilization.

There are some elements of megalithic culture in the *Teyyam* dance of Malabar. The megalithic monuments like rock-cut caves and urn burials have cultural deposits of sword, trident and stool. These artifacts are common objects of worship in the cult of *Teyyam*. Further, the *Teyyam* shrines in this region do not consist of idols. Their objects of worship are sacred weapons like the sword and trident. A few *Teyyam* deities known as *Chamundi*, make visits to caves of local places as part of the rituals. These aspects prove that

Teyyam dance has some association with the megalithic culture of human civilization.

In Tamizhakam, there was a well-known ritual dance for propitiating the god Murugan, known as *Velan Veriyattu*. In Malabar, some items of *Teyyam* are performed by the members of the Velan community. The ancient Tamil works describe the cult of heroes and the practice of erecting *Vira Kallu* or hero-stones for their commemoration. In the same way, chaste women had Masati-stones to perpetuate their memory. One of the well-known dances of that period was *Kutai Kuttu* or umbrella dance which is an important ritual at *Teyyam* festivals. The cult of heroes and heroines is a main branch of the *Teyyam* cult and as such it still maintains the traditions of the Tamil Sangam age.

Brahmanical Influence

The growth and spread of Brahmanical Hinduism in Kerala has largely influenced the *Teyyam* cult. The different branches of this religion like Vaishnavism, Saivism and Saktism, have considerably contributed to the origin of some major deities the *Teyyam* cult. However, Vaishnavism has no wide-spread influence on this cult. There are only a few deities under this category and one of them, called *Vishnumurti*, is a popular god in Malabar. This may probably be because Vishnu has little influence on the village folk who have had an uninterrupted tradition of the worship of the mother goddess or Sakti. It is also believed that the Vaishnava cult in Kerala became popular only sometime after the Saiva and Sakti cults had established their roots in the region.

Many of the folk goddesses worshipped by the villagers were gradually elevated to the status of Bhagavatis. In the same way, folk gods were elevated to the Hindu trinity during the process of Aryanisation of this region. Further, Jainism and Buddhism in Kerala have also left their impact on *Teyyattam*. The sacrifice of cocks, goats, and the blood offering before the magical square or *Kalam* are important rituals for several *Teyyam* deities. However, there are some shrines like Pumala Bhagavati, and Muchilot Bhagavati where such practices are strictly forbidden. This cultural change and certain practices like celibacy and vegetarianism observed by the priests and dancers during the festival are probably the legacy of those religions.

Minor Cults

Teyyam is a major cult which has incorporated several minor cults also. Some of these minor cults are mother goddess, spirit, hero, tree, animal, ancestor and serpent. The village goddess has also a prominent place among these cults. She is supposed to protect people from contagious diseases like small-pox and cholera. The goddess of a locality or village is known after

that place-name. The worship of these deities is intended for prosperity, fertility and security. It is also believed that these gods and goddesses would bring ultimate happiness to the society as a whole. The popular hero-deity of Kativanur Veeran is generally propitiated as a votive for favourable settlements in property matters, civil and criminal suits and happy return of relatives whose whereabouts are unknown. Kativanur Veeran or Mandappan, a medieval hero who fought and died to save his village from the cattle-lifters, was elevated to divinity and worshipped by the village folk. His *Teyyam* is propitiated even in households. Another popular hero-deity is Pumarutan who accompanied the goddess Pumala on her voyage to Kerala. His story depicts a migration and his heroic exploits. Generally he is worshipped only in the shrines belonging to the Tiya community of the region. Each *Teyyam* deity has a similar story either from Hindu mythology or from local events.

Shrines

Teyyam shrines are known by different terms in Malabar. They are *ara*, *mundya*, *kavu*, *muchilot*, *kazhakam*, *kottam*, *mannam* and *matam* belonging to different communities like Tiya, Vaniya Maniyani, Navudiya, Kammala, Saliya, Mogaya, Kusava, and Palaya. A common term to denote them all is *stanam* or auspicious place. Although each community has its own shrine or shrines in a village and a central shrine in a larger territorial division, all communities actively participate and cooperate in the festival of each shrine of their respective area. Each community is united by its traditional caste-council, or assembly of elders, which administers the caste rules of that particular community. Brahmins and Nairs in Malabar have also adopted *Teyyam* as a form of worship and patronised the institution by constructing their own separate shrines. Some of them have separate household shrines also. A few *Teyyam* deities are propitiated in temporary thatched sheds constructed for that purpose in front of the households.

The construction of shrines for different *Teyyam* deities have helped the emergence of a popular architectural style in this region. The shrine is a small wooden structure with carved front known as *Kimpurusham*. The deities propitiated in that particular shrine are carved out on the frontal projection of *Kimpurusham*. More than one hundred deities are beautifully carved and painted by the experts on different structures. A few families of carpenters in this area are the custodians of this art-form. Several shrines are situated in a bushy grove or under big shade trees.

Dancers

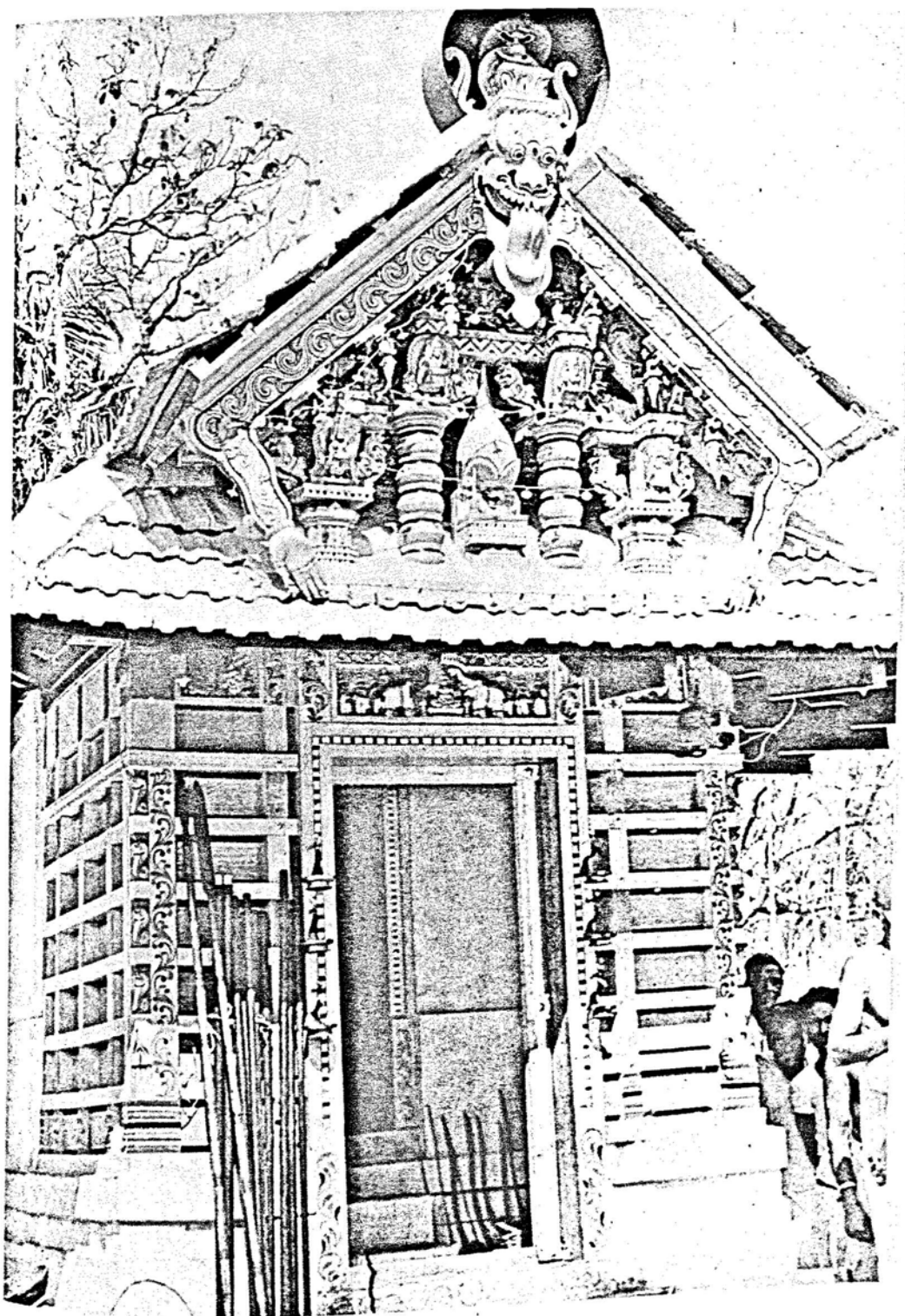
Teyyam festivals are celebrated during the months of December to April. There is no regular performance in the villages. Therefore, the dancers have to depend on other occupations like tailoring, washing, weaving and beedi work (local cigarettes) for their livelihood. These occupations vary

from one community to the other and tribes, like Mavilan, follow hunting and honey-gathering. Such occupations also vary from region to region. A few of them practise indigenous medicine and exorcism.

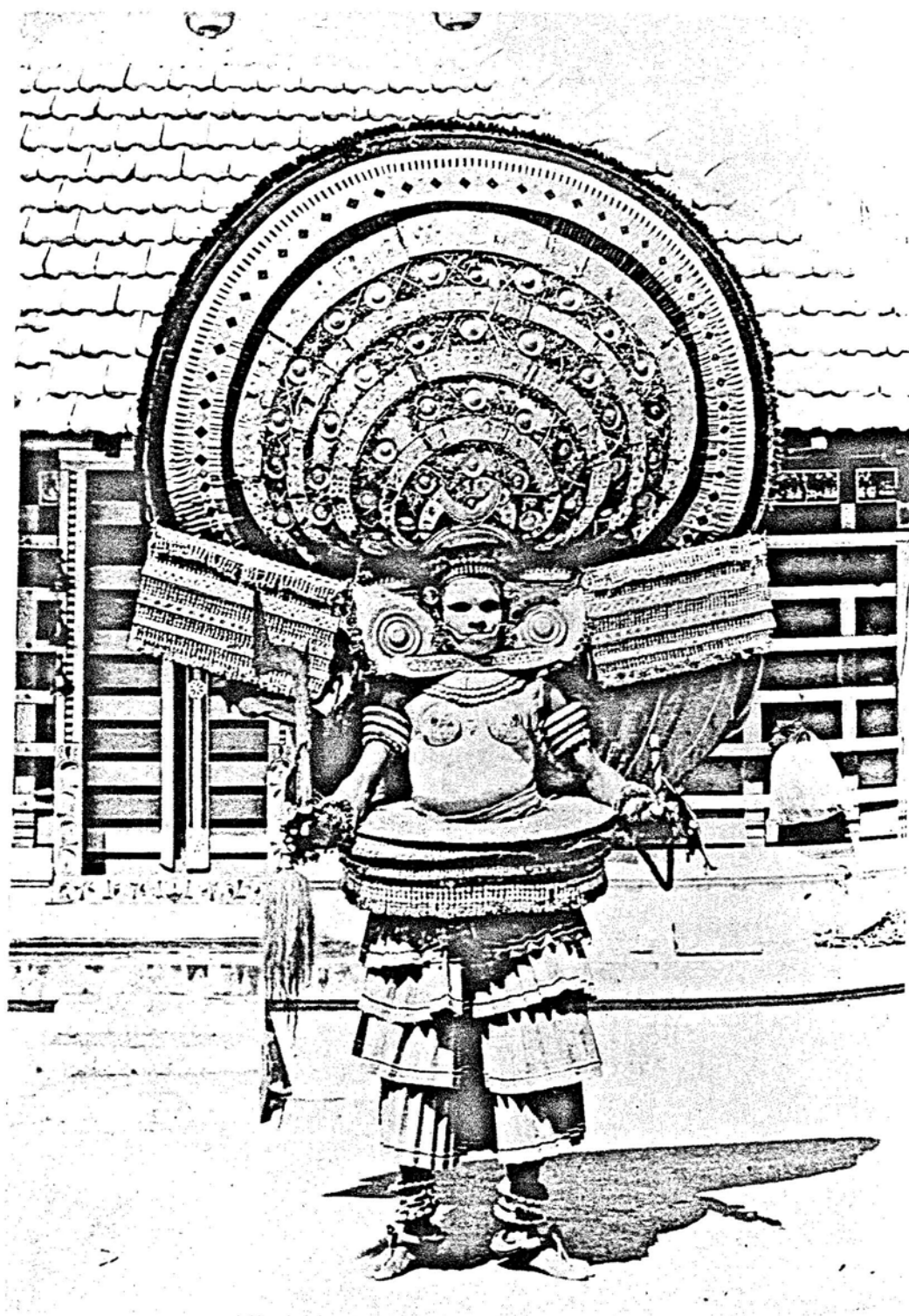
The *Teyyam* performance is exclusively reserved for men. However, Malayalan women recite ritual songs on some occasions and participate in the festival along with their family relations. The whole family of the dancer shifts to the temporary sheds constructed in the vicinity of the centre of performance for assisting him. The members of certain communities like Malayan, Vannan, Mavilan, Pulayan, Munnutton, Anjutton, Velan, Koppalan and Vettuvan participate as dancers and artists. The caste rules do not permit others to become *Teyyam* dancers. Further, a particular category of *Teyyam* is exclusively reserved for one particular caste of dancers. In some places, only a particular caste of dancers can participate in the performance. The caste of the dancer is an important matter in all cases. In the same way only a particular family can perform the dance in a particular place. This is a family right and an absolute right which is locally known by a popular term *Cheru-Janmam* or petty proprietary right. The absolute land ownership is known by the term *Janmam* or birthright in Malabar. Only with the permission of the absolute right holder, can others perform an invocation or dance in a particular shrine or village. A group of villages falls under the jurisdiction of one or two families of dancers. This right passes from one generation to the other by way of the matrilineal system of inheritance. In some festivals, the chief dancer is appointed after consulting an astrologer.

There is no specialisation among the dancers. For instance, a dancer may be a musician, a drummer, a costume-maker and a face-painter or make-up man. As described above, in a particular shrine, the right of dance may belong to one family. There, that family can invite a member from another family as a drummer or for the make-up. The system rotates in such a manner. The main aspect of the performance is invocation and propitiation of the deity by a dancer.

Teyyam festivals are very expensive as there are many rituals and formalities to be fulfilled. Unfortunately the remuneration paid to a dancer is not attractive. A portion of his payment is in kind, like rice, paddy, cloth, fowl, oil and coconut. Further, his expenses are paid for preparing the new head-dress, crown, etc., and also a small amount in cash known as *Kolu*. Devotees give cash-offerings to the dancer during the performance which go towards the funds of the shrine. A small portion of this offering is also given to the dancer. The musicians and the drummers get their share also which is less than that of the dancer. In a grand festival, a dancer can expect an amount of Rs. 100 to 200 both in kind and cash. In other performances, it differs from Rs. 20 to 60. Considering the volume of his effort, skill and long hours of performance, it is a petty amount. In some cases, the performance continues for the whole day or following day and the dancer participates in rituals



Kimpurusham-wood-carving on a Teyyam shrine.

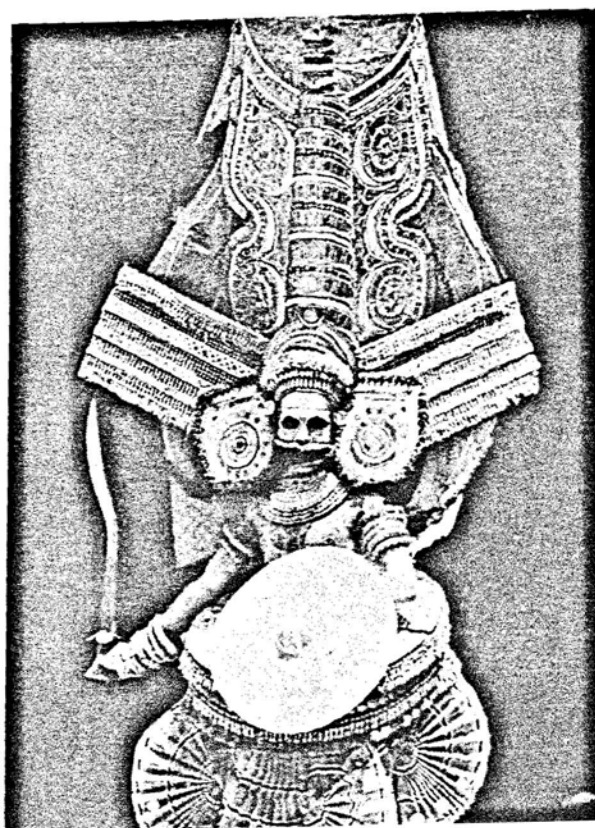


Pulivurukali—Tevvam of a mother-address

*Kativanur Veeran—Teyyam
of a hero-deity.*

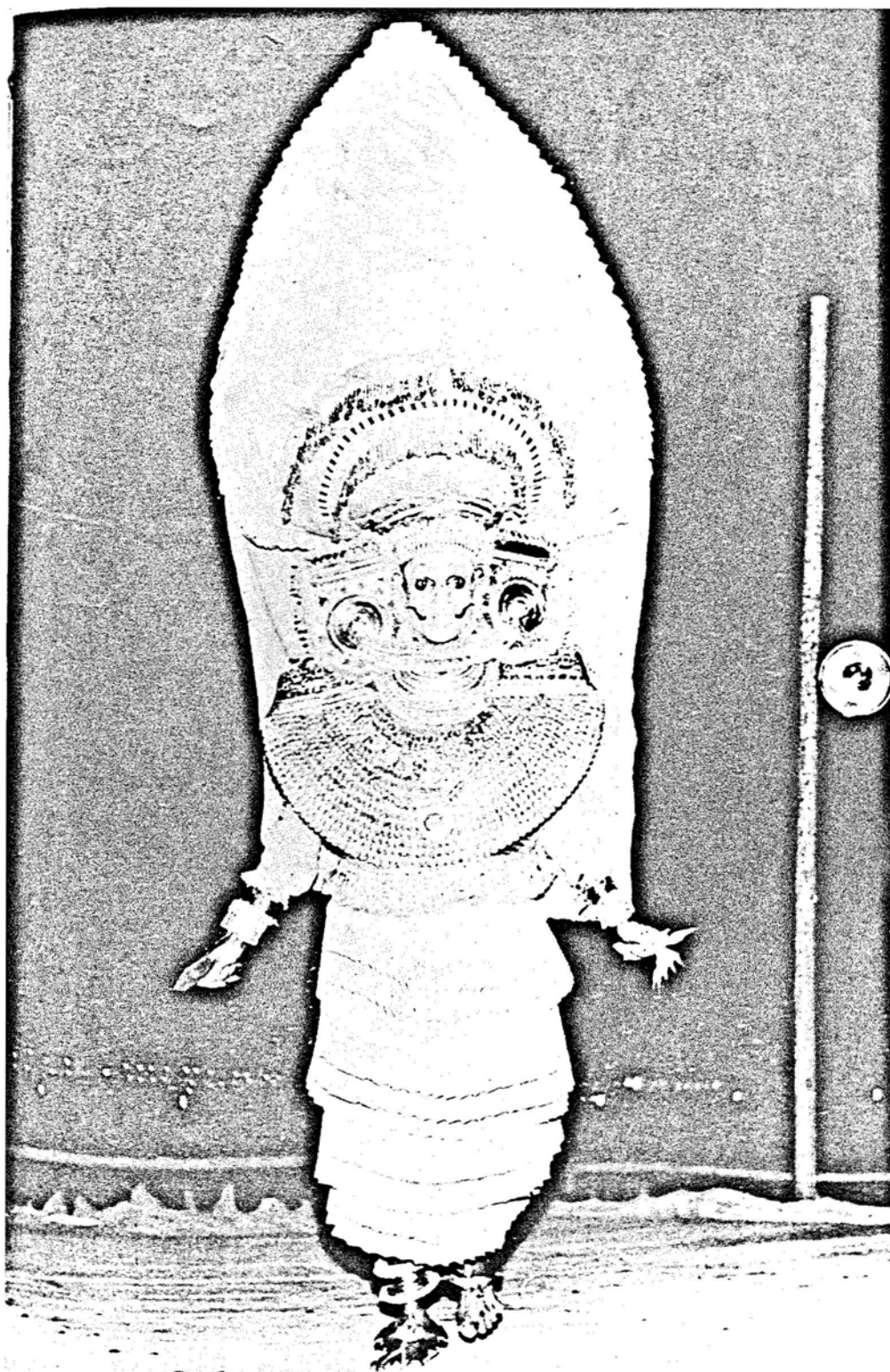


*Pumarutan—another hero-
deity. (Photos-author)*





Teyyam of Vishnumurthy



Tuvam of Kuruntuni (Photos—Akademi Archives)



Drummer with Tevvams: (L. to R) Gandharva Kuntant Vedha and Vicharamma

such as fire-walking. Under these circumstances, the young generation of dancers want to give up their tradition-bound right of *Teyyam* dance and to seek some other occupations. Even an eminent dancer does not want his son to become a *Teyyam* dancer.

Training

The rigidity of the caste system has made the *Teyyam* performance strictly exclusive for certain communities of the region. Although they are traditionally depressed and polluting communities, the dancers are attributed divinity during their performance. After the occasion they come again under the purview of caste rules. Therefore, the training given to them is either by the father or by an uncle. A young dancer has sufficient opportunities to witness the elders' performance and gradually to act as a drummer, a musician and a make-up man and finally as a dancer. In brief, his training is more practical than theoretical. During the training, oil-massage is given to facilitate quick body movements. Further, many of them obtain martial skill, the traditional acrobatics known as *kalaripayattu*, which help them enact the battle scenes of hero-deities like Kativanur Veeran, Pumarutan, Tacholi Othenan, Bali and others. The system of traditional training given to medieval soldiers of Kerala has largely influenced the growth of the martial aspects in *Teyyam* dance.

Theatrical Aspects

As traditional theatre, *Teyyam* has an elaborate system of rituals, actions, and such a detailed process helps the transformation of the dancer's identity into a mysterious divinity. There is no stage for performance, but the entire courtyard of a shrine is utilised for that purpose. After the metamorphosis of the dancers into deities, they bless the people present, speak to them, distribute flowers, and also console the devotees. All of them become a part of the performance on that occasion.

There is a correct order of development in the performance. The beginning is announced by the beating of drums in the evening. Next, the dancer comes before the shrine without wearing the ceremonial costumes but a red symbolic towel. This part of the ritual is known as *Tottam*: standing. Then he recites the ritualistic song of the particular deity to be invoked on that occasion. After this the dancer appears in full-costume and make-up by about midnight or later, now near the deity. Before wearing the ceremonial crown, the dancer recites *Varavili* which praises the early shrines of that deity and reveals its story. The performance then continues for long hours with only short intervals. At the end, there may be a loud beating of drums which is known as *Kottikkalasam*. Finally, the dancer takes off his crown and the people disperse.

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