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„Making God My Own “: Spirit Possession, Space and Caste in Theyyam

Spirit possession is a practice that has existed in the Indian sub-continent for several millennia. It allows individuals to rupture the socially-accepted expressions of the self, hence, pointing a finger at underlying issues located within society. Theyyam is a possession ritual that takes place in the Malabar region of Kerala. It is an oracle ritual performed by Ritualists from specific caste communities like the Vannan and Malayan caste groups. These caste groups have a history of oppression and slavery which is meted out by the upper caste-land-owning feudal Lords. Theyyam becomes an outlet for socio-politico-religio-economic oppression. The ritual occurs during the “Theyyam Season” which annually falls between September and June. Spectators and believers from different backgrounds take part in the ritual by speaking to the oracle. They share their worries and consequently the oracle provides solutions. The space of the Theyyam is open to all, transforming into an outlet for anyone with a grievance.

In my paper, I explore the role of possession, caste, space and voice as tools of resistance within these communities. I use the framework provided by Janice Boddy (2003) and Emma Cohen (2008) to contextualise and understand “possession” and “trance”. This exploration nuances the perspective of the embodied self before, during and after the ritual. Patrick Eisenlohr’s (2023) work on ‘voice’ as well as Yasushi Uchiyamada’s (2000) work on the ‘ka-vu’ aids to enhance my argument. Using Isabelle Nabokov (2000) and Shaima Ahammed’s (2019) work, I postulate that Theyyam is not a silenced divinity, instead one that facilitates an egalitarian space for collective grievance redressal. My ethnographic fieldwork consisted of formal and informal interviews of Theyyam Ritualists, their families and spectators of the ritual, in addition to participant-observation method of the ritual in a temple context. The field interviews were conducted in Kannur during the months of June-July, 2025. I argue that the creation of these spaces is democratic, high-intensity and inclusive. In my paper, Theyyam becomes a ritual that challenges the dominant Brahmanical hegemonic ritual praxis while negotiating similar symbols and rites. This is not limited to an antagonistic relationship but points to the negotiations of caste and religious gatekeeping within the Kerala caste society. Possession becomes a conduit that enables a rupture in social expression thereby, building the foundation to provide solutions and address injustices within the social context.

References

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