

Sense of Caste as Sense of Ritual: Ritualization in Thirayattam

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ABSTRACT The paper explores the interplay of performance and caste in the ritual festival of *Thirayattam* in Kerala in South India. This day-long festival features the performances of Thirayattam, in which Dalit (“lower caste”), performers transform and dance as deities in a state of possession trance. In events of the festival, there is ritual action that signal inversion of caste and elevation of status of the Dalit performer. This paper looks at the process of ritualization in Thirayattam, with framework of ritual as practice propounded by Catherine Bell. It takes a close look at the production of ritual environment through strategic action of participants of the ritual complex. The paper studies specific ritual activities to argue that interaction of ritual participants with the space structures the ritual environment in Thirayattam as sacred, pure and hierarchical. The paper argues that the strategic action involved in ritualization builds an implicit disposition of caste-affirmation.

KEY WORDS Thirayattam; ritualization; caste; Dalit ritual practices; sacred space; ritual environment; embodiment; possession

Once a year, between the months of October and April, the festival of *Thirayattam* is celebrated in every shrine of the local deities in sacred groves called *kaavu* across Kozhikode, Kerala. If one were to go around the city during the peak season, the paraphernalia of the festival is hard to miss. It is most common to come across neighbourhoods decorated with fairy lights, coconut frond streamers and the long, white, red and black ceremonial flags, or to hear beats of drums, rising and falling in vigour, invitingly from a *kaavu*. It is also not rare to be held up in traffic from time to time on a regular weekday evening as a passing procession of a deity crosses a busy road to make their way to the nearby *kaavu*. A procession, in such cases, is likely to have a performer transformed as a deity, in deep red costume, with face and body painting and carrying a sword and a three-pronged fire torch. The performers preside under an ornate canopy held up by men chanting “*nada-nada-nada*” (the chant literally translates to ‘walk-walk-walk’). This canopy is flanked on either side by single files of women carrying coconut shell lamps. At the helm of the procession, a band of musicians play traditional drums, *chenda*, that set the beats for the whole procession. The events of *Thirayattam* are a sensory foil to the everyday experience of the social life. It simultaneously draws stark opposition to the daily sights, sounds, activities, and behaviour, and is normalized even as the differences are performed.

This paper is interested in unpacking the performance of oppositions drawn in the ritual activity that holds itself in a circular relationship with the social life beyond the spatial temporal boundaries of the festival. The festival hosts ritualized interaction of the local cross-caste community, in which the format of the engagement is marked by dramatic and radical inversions of status through the inscription of divine power on the bodies of the most subordinated “untouchable” castes, or Dalits. The elevated status of Dalits as ritual specialists and the collaborative participation of different caste groups in the festival have led the local communities involved in *Thirayattam* to celebrate it as an egalitarian festival of the community. The status inversion and themes of rebellion in such ritual performances have given rise to Marxist readings that have considered Dalit ritual performances such as *Theyyam*, which follows a very form of ritual structure as *Thirayattam*, as acts of resistance. Sanjeevan Azhikode’s *Theyyathile Jaativazhakam* which places *Theyyam* as a cultural practice that transcends caste, as it venerates the lower caste performer and creates a platform for all participants to come together despite caste differences. He refers to the decision-making powers afforded to the *Theyyam* and its performers to argue that a relationship of exchange between castes is facilitated by the ritual. He notes that, even though the rituals in *Theyyam* are based on caste, the practice of *Theyyam* subverts hegemony and domination, to create a casteless equality (Azheekode, 67-71). However, as a form of social hierarchy, caste is imagined to be embodied and inalienable. The paper looks at how the performance of status elevation, that seemingly inverts caste hierarchy, amplifies caste consciousness through its transgression of cultural taboo. The paper argues that the strategies of performances, specifically the framing of the space, ritualization of body, and the emergent dynamics of spectacle, are instrumental in establishing the relationship between the ritual and the social. The festival of *Thirayattam* lasts for an entire day and night and feature an array of ritual activities which, in its entirety, is immensely complex and beyond the scope of this paper’s engagement. In order to delineate how ritual marks itself as different or oppositional to the cultural norm, yet simultaneously reaffirms the norms, this paper takes a close look at two rituals of the festival that showcase the nature of cross-caste interactions performed at the

beginning and end of the festival respectively—*Kaavukeral* (‘entering the kaavu’), and *Kudikoottal* (‘securing of space’).

The framework of approach to ritual in this paper is largely drawn from Catherine Bell’s theorization of sense of ritual as a cultural sense, a way of acting, knowing, behaving, acquired by the ritualized body in its interaction operational structures in ritual (Bell, 80, 107-108). In her influential book *Ritual Theory*, Bell develops the idea of sense of ritual as produced through ritualization by building on Pierre Bourdieu’s Practice Theory. For Bourdieu, practice is “defined in terms of a dialectical relationship between a structured environment...and structured disposition engendered in people which lead them to reproduce the environment even in transformed way” (Bell, 78). Seen through the lens of practice, a study of ritual centres an understanding of ritualization as production of ritualized acts that are in constant structured and structuring relationship with their environment. Bell defines ritualization as “the way of acting that sets itself off from other ways of acting by the virtue of the way in which it does what it does” (Bell, 140). Ritualization, in this regard, is not an autonomous set of ritualized acts, nor is it an extension of the social structures replicated in a ritual context to be affirmed and legitimized. The environment is not the source, nor does it exist prior to the ritual action, but is produced through agential human action. By looking at ritualization then, attention is placed on the production of schemes that structure the disposition of the agents to produce action that aligns themselves to schemes of power relationships of its cosmos (Bell, 140-142).

The practice approach to ritual, I argue, is particularly well suited for the discussion of ritual activity of Thirayattam. In Thirayattam, ritual action takes place in a breached environment that presents itself as different or oppositional to the cultural norms of caste behaviour and hierarchy. In this environment, hierarchies are suspended because the ritual action elevates the status of the subordinated caste. The ritualization contains the breach and restores the norm. The theories of ritual as redressal mechanism for taboo breaching, such as the one seen in Victor Turner’s Social drama or Arnold Van Gennep’s Rites of Passage would prove inadequate here. Ritual action follows breach, as it activates a “liminal stage” where norms of hierarchy are suspended, which are ultimately restored through reintegration (Turner “Anthropology of Performance” 34-35, 85-86). However, unlike in social drama, here breach is not the cause of ritual action, but ritual action itself is the breach. Thirayattam creates the breach that it responds to. Ritualization in Bell’s formulation provides a ground to look at process of production and structuring of environment through ritual action. It allows to ask the question of why ritual acts the way it does in the unpacking of how it acts way it does. I also suggest here that the disposition and agency of the social agents in Thirayattam is invested with a sense of caste. Ritualization brings about this sense of caste, which ultimately determines the privileging of opposition and the structuring of the environment.

The work is informed by the methodology of patchwork ethnography, personal memory, cultural knowledge, and participant experience of the field as a female member of the performing community. My positionality in the ritual-social complex, both as a woman and non-resident member of the locality for well over a decade, makes it complicated to call my methodology as entirely autoethnographic. Thirayattam is an exclusively male ritual artform. There are aspects of this cultural experience that will never be accessible to me, which could add dimensions of experience, ranging from ritual mastery to emotions or bonding in shared labour. Women’s roles

in this ritual performance are limited to the behind-the-scenes preparatory work and to the general participation as spectators. On the other hand, the act of spectatorship for women of Dalit communities are qualified by their own kinship with the performers. I am also at a disadvantage as I have never lived in my local community as an adult; my investment in the ritual and community is more emotional than material. However, I am not an outsider either. As someone who grew up with it, my association with the festival is nostalgic. As a participant whose late grandfather was a performer and whose many uncles and cousins are still performers, my spectatorship is always affective and self-reflexive. I have also acquired adequate distancing from the field to allow for objective theoretical engagement and subjective understanding of the field. I collected primary material through field study and documentation of thirty ritual festivals across Kozhikode district in Kerala from 2019 to 2020. I gathered additional information from documentation of these rituals in the 2017 book *Thirayattam* by performer Moorkanadu Peethambaran, with whom I did the first phase of fieldwork in 2019. Interactions with performers, their insights and explanations of ritual actions helped me understand the intricacies of the activities I was documenting. My methodology is a confluence of patchwork ethnography, and autoethnography, both informed by my insider-outsider positionality.

Ritual Festival of Thirayattam: A Peek into the World

The experiential sphere of Thirayattam combines entertainment, local fair, social gathering, worship, magic, and art in a carnivalesque celebration set against ritualized cross caste interaction of a local community. Thirayattam refers to the performance of aestheticized trance worship ritual by various marginalized Dalit communities, in which folk deities associated with kaavu worship cultures are believed to be channelled through the ritually prepared bodies of the performers. This study focuses solely on the festivals where Thirayattam is performed by the *Peruvannan* (performers, washer folk, practitioners of folk medicine) caste. The performances are conducted as the central events of the annual festival at the kaavu. It is carried out under the ceremonial (if not literal) patronage of a dominant-caste family or of the erstwhile feudal landlords, who once held the managerial powers over the traditional caste-based labour division within the local community. The patrons, usually of *Thiyya* or *Nair* or *Namboothiri* castes, own the kaavu and even have their ancestral homes sharing the grounds of the sacred space, or at least in very close proximity to the sacred space. The patron, in the ritual universe, are positioned as the head of the community for being the custodians of the sacred landscape.

There is no prescribed pattern to the architecture of a kaavu in general, as kaavu space is shaped and built by the nature of each grove. But kaavus do have some common features. There will always be access to some water source, such as a pond or a well or even a nearby river, to which a passage from the kaavu will be built. The water from these sources is considered sacred and is used in the ritual. In the middle of a clearing in a grove is the main shrine of the grove's presiding deities, built on raised platforms called *thara*. The shrines are small structures that house uncarved wooden or stone blocks considered sacred and consecrated with the essence of the deity. The grove itself is just a small patch of wilderness that is home to a variety of plants and animals. The thara for the serpent deity is usually inside the grove itself, rather than in the clearing with the rest of the deities. This space is left undisturbed and is never entered except by the performers during the preparation and performance of Thirayattam of the serpent deity,

which begins at the entrance of the thicket. Protected by its association with the sacred, the grove is kept naturally wild and rarely cut or tamed. A kaavu it is not a place of daily *puja* ('worship') rituals, and is opened only for special occasions and the festival of Thirayattam.



Figure 1. Vazhoor Kunnathu Kaavu with the main shrine, a well and the grove behind it and a thara next to it. Photo courtesy of Neeraja Sasikumar.



Figure 2. Thara of serpent deity inside the grove. Photo courtesy of Neeraja Sasikumar.

The ritual structure of Thirayattam encompasses a network of social alliances based on the feudal caste-ordained system of patronage and labour. The ritual scheme of the festival is designed to include active, ritually-mandated participation of the members of the local

community that is comprised of families belonging to different caste groups. For instance, the blacksmith caste, *Kollan*, is responsible for the upkeep and the presenting of swords, staves, and other metal weapons used for the rituals. *Mooshari* or the caste of stone masons are assigned with polishing and preparing the anklets used by the oracles and various traditional utensils. Even if the families designated with their responsibilities have migrated elsewhere or do not follow their traditional occupation anymore, they are still expected to be present ceremonially to associate themselves with their role in the festival, and by extension, to the landscape and the community. An intricate sacred-social relationship is at play in the interaction of participants in ritual activities in the festival that essentially ascribe these actions with cultural meaning and memory. The day of the festival follows a sequence of large and minor rituals accompanying the performance of Thirayattam. Although all of the rituals are performed in the larger framework of worship, some do not centre the aspect of worship as directly as other rituals, such as a rite of invoking the deity or a rite of offering blood sacrifice. Most of the rituals are publicly staged and allows for immersive spectatorship, while some are performed in private with only select participants present. Both Kaavukeral and Kudikoottal, the rituals that are taken for analysis here, could be read as publicly staged performances of codified cross-caste interactions of participants. These rites are not directly associated with worship of the deities, but they dramatize the act of subordinated bodies entering and leaving the “sacred space” of ritual.

Before the paper proceeds to the sections that describe and analyse ritual activity in Thirayattam, it is important to address the idea of ritual purity and pollution. Peniel Rajkumar in *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation* notes that the word caste consists of the meanings of both the ideas of varna and jati, where varna is the categorization of post-Vedic society in terms of their hereditarily transferred function, and where jati is the endogamous grouping, based on birth or common origin (4). The function on the basis of which, the varnas are divided, is that it is “deemed necessary to ensure the maintenance of social harmony and cosmic stability” (Declan Quigley quoted in Rajkumar, 5). The division of varnas and the regionally specific endogamous groups of jati formed the operational system of social structure organization of Hindu societies. Louis Dumont, in his *Homo Hierarchicus*, was among the first to theorize that caste-system was not separate from the social organization. He argued that it was the basis of the “jajmani system” (patronage) which organized power and social relationships in the villages. (36). He claims that the “form,” if not the cause, of hierarchical organization, which he deems essential for social structure, is in the fundamental opposition of purity and pollution (45). It is directly connected to the division of labour that attributes permanent and graded impurity to professions, and it is also connected to the conditions, practices, and behaviours, in accordance with the opposition of purity and impurity. The opposition, Dumont notes, is manifested in the opposition between brahmin and the ‘untouchable,’ with the brahmin being priestly and most pure, and the ‘untouchables’ being the most impure. The gradation of impurity is connected to proximity through occupation or otherwise with aspects considered impure in Hindu culture, such as death, birth, fermented produce, leather, menstruation and other bodily emissions and excrements (Dumont, 46, 47). This makes the constitution of impurity religious, social, as well as, natural and therefore inalienable to the castes that are attributed with permanent impurity, especially through occupation.

The doctrine of purity and pollution can be seen as being tied with not just separation and exclusion, but also with economic power, status and hierarchy. Even though, the traditional jajmani/feudal social organization has gone through considerable change with post-independence and post-liberalization economy of India, the notions of purity and pollution continue to have cultural significance and impact the material conditions of people.

The Plot: Ritual Action in *Kaavukeral* and *Kudikoottal*

Kaavukeral

Thirayattam festival begins with the ritual known interchangeably as *virunnu porappaadu* ('commencing on invitation') or *kaavukeral* ('entering the kaavu'). About a fortnight prior to the day of Thirayattam, the patrons and the performers enter a ceremonial pact to organize the festival in a ritual called *Thira Nishchayam*. This takes place in the kaavu in the presence of an exclusive audience that includes the male members of the patron family and the ones from the caste with the right to perform Thirayattam in that kaavu, the managing committee members, if any, and the head of the professional performing group.¹

The patrons present the elder of the Peruvannan family with the right to perform Thirayattam (from here on, this elder is referred to simply as *Mootha Peruvannan* or elder Peruvannan) with a token amount of money called *nirathinu panam*, which translates as "money for colours," but is meant to be for the general expense towards the arrangements for Thirayattam. By accepting the invitation and the token amount, the performers enter the pact with the patrons to organize the performances of Thirayattam.

This agreement acts as an equalizer that allows for the participation of the dominant and subordinate castes together in their respective roles within the context of ritual worship. The Dalit castes are considered inherently polluted and polluting to the higher castes. Caste operates very contextually. In the context of ritual worship, caste as located in Hindu religious system and binary oppositions of ritual purity and pollution.

This opposition of purity and pollution essentially prohibits any socializing or collaborative work between the polluted castes and the castes to whom their presence is polluting. As the Mootha Peruvannan enters the ceremonial pact, the space of the kaavu and the patrons, consequently, enter a state of pollution which is necessary for common association. From this point on, the kaavu is open to all other caste groups with *avakaasam* (literally translates to "the right" to perform), such as the stonemason or carpenter castes discussed earlier, to play their roles in the organizing of the festival. To put it very simply, each caste group would act as auxiliary departments in event management. Here, the sacred space of kaavu is constituted as a place of work where each caste group carries out their ritually ordained, hereditary occupation. They would also receive a customary amount to cover the expenditures along with other gifts and a seat at the grand lunch on the day of the festival, all proportional to their role in the

¹The professional performers are ensemble groups of artists who belong to the Peruvannan caste and are commissioned to perform Thirayattam across the region during the season. Most often, some of the members of the groups would be related to the family with the right to perform.

festival. The avakaasams are thus renewed every year for the rituals of Thirayattam through *Thira Nischayam* that effectively places the sacred space and the entire local community in a state of pollution.

The ritual of Kaavukeral extends the ritual pollution established in Thira Nischayam and performs it as a spectacle. On the morning of the day of the festival, the group of performers and musicians assemble at the house of the Mootha Peruvannan. There, they break a fast on rice porridge with grated coconut and tapioca boiled with green grams from the provisions given by the patron. The Mootha Peruvannan comes attired in a long, white cloth fashioned as pleated wrap with a red cloth-like sash or cummerbund around his waist and a black cloth on his head like a bandana. His costume is ritually significant. The performers of Thirayattam wear this as the base costume before they adorn the particular costumes and face and body paints of the *kolam* (the image of the deity represented on the body of the performer) that they are about to perform. The black headcloth acts like a base for the heavy headdresses that the kolam wears. The red slash around the waist functions as a belt for the costume of the kolam. This is the basic styling upon which the image of the deity is built.



Figure 3. Mootha Peruvannan (Subject- Venugopal Melal) preparing for kaavukeral wearing the black headcloth. Photo courtesy of Neeraja Sasikumar.



Figure 4. Completely costumed kolam of Thirayattam (Nagakali – performed by Gijil) during performance. Photo courtesy of Neeraja Sasikumar.

In this attire, the Mootha Peruvannan represents the caste group's preparation to become performers of kolams in a particular kaavu. Attired and ready to be invited to the kaavu, he sits down on the floor at the entrance of his house, facing a lit oil lamp, rice in a traditional measuring cup, water in a traditional metal container. Colour pigments (*niram*) are placed on a large banana leaf in front of him. A headcloth and betel leaves are also placed along with this banana leaf. The lamp, rice, and water are more general Hindu ritual objects placed to signify prosperity and divinity. The betel leaves are used to ritualistically read fortunes. The rest of the objects are directly associated with the craft of the performance. As he sits waiting, the Mootha Peruvannan collects some black soot from a burnt wick on to a metal plate and uses it to draw long lines around the edges of his eyelids.

At this point, a couple of *Velichapaadu* (traditional Hindu oracles in Kerala) belonging to the patron family come charging towards the Peruvannan in a state of trance and motion him to join them. Once the Velichapaadus arrive, the *chenda* (traditional drum-like cylindrical, percussion instrument) performers start playing. The drumbeats alert the people in the locality that the ritual has started and that they should gather in the kaavu and the streets leading from the Peruvannan's house to watch the ceremonial entry into the kaavu. The audience for this part of the ritual is completely made up of members of performing caste and patron caste—the members of the performing group, the chenda artists, the family of the Peruvannan and the oracles from the patron's family.

The Mootha Peruvannan, carrying a coconut frond umbrella in one arm and a ceremonial *thudi* (a small percussion instrument made of wood and goat skin) over the other shoulder, walks towards the kaavu from his home, accompanied by the beats of chenda and *ilathalam* (traditional miniature, hand-held bronze cymbals). The family of the Mootha Peruvannan joins this procession and so do onlookers who have gathered along the street to the kaavu. Depending on the scale of the celebrations, the processions sometimes have *melappu*, a cloth canopy with poles, propped up over the presiding Peruvannan by the people of the village. The loud accompanying beats announce his arrival before he reaches the vicinity of the kaavu, so that the patrons are ready to offer him a ceremonial welcome. The elder member of the patrons' family greets them at the kaavu entrance and gives the Peruvannan permission to enter by sprinkling holy, consecrated water (known as *theertham* or *punyabam*) on the Peruvannan's body. The Peruvannan enters the kaava and starts to shiver and sway as he begins to enter a state of trance. As the chenda beats quicken in tempo for the climax, the Peruvannan reaches the centre of kaavu, where the shrine of the presiding deity is placed, and the ritual comes to an end. The end of this ritual when the Peruvannan has arrived at the centre of the kaavu is called *kaavu theendal*, which literally means 'to pollute the kaavu by touch'. After this ceremonial entrance, a *thottam* (thottams are oral folk songs associated with Thirayattam that are sung for specific purposes at different points of the performance) is sung to invoke the deities and to invite them, out of their shrines, to partake in the rituals. This part of the ritual is called *Kaavunarthal*, literally meaning 'the awakening of the space of kaavu'.



Figure 5. *Velichapaadu* and Mootha Peruvannan in the initial stage of Kaavukeral at the Peruvannan's house. Photo courtesy of Neeraja Sasikumar.



Figure 6. The procession with Peruvannan (inside the canopy) entering the kaavu, velichapaadu facing the procession to welcome him, chenda orchetraat the helm of the procession. Photo courtesy of Neeraja Sasikumar.

The space is thus ritually polluted and awakened, so the festival day carries on with the sequential performances of kolams of Thirayattam and other ritual activities that surround them. The number of kolams and the particular sequence in which they are performed are different for each kaavu, based on aspects of their established worship practices, such as the number of deities worshipped, the significance placed on the deities, etc. Despite these differences, the festival of Thirayattam across different kaavus follow a general sequence of events. The *elamkolam* (a young kolam) is a preliminary form of the deity and is performed as *Vellattu*² (it

² Vellattu is a subcategory of Thirayattam, but it involves a different set of costumes for the deities. It is often seen as a prelude to the Thirayattam performance. Most of the Vellattu performances would have a follow up Thirayattam performance at night.

literally means a ‘white performance’ or performance by the light). Vellattu is performed during the day, in the sunlight. The fiercer or simply the fully-formed versions of these deities are represented as kolams and performed as Thirayattam during the night, in the light of fire-torches.

Kudikoottal

Kudikoottal, literally meaning ‘securing of the abode’, is the very last ritual done at the end of the festival of Thirayattam. This ceremonial conclusion is performed in stages. With this ritual, the Dalit performers leave the kaavu and it is ritually restored as a place of worship, rather than a performance space of Thirayattam.

Kudikoottal takes place in the early hours of the morning after all the kolams have been performed through the night and the last kolam of Thirayattam concludes with a ritual called *chaanthattam* or *chaanthu thira* (performance with paint). As the final performance of Thirayattam concludes, the two performers of the kolam go back to the *aniyara*, (the makeshift greenroom set up in the kaavu) to remove their costume, jewellery, and headdress. They return to the performance area still wearing the body and face markings of the kolam, long, pleated cloths with a sash around their waists which is worn under their costume, the headcloth tied under the headdress and a belled anklet. At this point, their styling with minimal adornments parallels that of the Mootha Peruvannan at the very beginning of the festival in the ritual of kaavukeral. The performer, during chaanthattam, is dressed similarly as he in the process of transforming from the kolam back to his own self.

As the performers return to performing area from the *aniyara*, a singer from the performing group recites a thottam to the beats of *thudi*. A group of *Velichapadus* gather around the performers and go into a state of frenzied trance as the thottam proceeds. The Mootha Peruvannan hands the performers a bowl of chaanthu each (chaanthu is a runny black paste made from natural raw materials like charred rice, burnt coconut shell charcoal, camphor, etc.). By now, the *Velichapadus* who are in the frenzied state, take the chaanthu from the bowls with their bare hands and smear themselves with it, while shrieking ecstatically. The *Velichapadus* also smear the male members of the patron family and the performers completely with this black paint by the end of this ritual. All this action take place to a slow haunting rhythm of *thudi* beats. The *velichapadus* then scatter in all directions and try to run away from the kaavu as though they cannot be contained. The spectators and other participants then forcibly take hold of them, who would be still struggling to get away, and bring them in front of the main shrine. Then, either a *Namboothiri Brahmin* (a traditional Hindu priest belonging to the caste considered ‘highest’ in the Hindu caste-hierarchical order in Kerala), if he is present, or the *karmi* (a non-Brahmin priest learned in Hindu liturgical practices) from the patron family sprinkles consecrated water on them and they come out of trance. This is considered the conclusion of all possession and trance performances of the festival of Thirayattam.



Figure 3. Chanthattam about to begin with thottam singers with *thudi*, performers in attire, male members of patron family around them. Photo courtesy of Neeraja Sasikumar.

Right after intense chanthattam, the ritual of Kudikoottal (securing of the abode) is performed to conclude the festival. Here, two elders from the family of patrons stand on either side of the Mootha Peruvannan holding a long black cloth in front of him. The Mootha Peruvannan recites a short thottam as a prayer of thanks to the deity. The members of the patron family, who are gathered around, throw flowers and grains of rice into the outstretched black cloth and the Peruvannan himself puts a coconut into it from the alter where ritual objects are placed. Holding the long black cloth, he then walks around the shrine once and places it outside the door to the shrine. The priest or the karmi takes the coconut, cracks it, bathes the idol with its water, and puts the coconut back in the black cloth. This shows that the coconut offering has been made to the deity and that the Peruvannan can now take it for himself.

The Peruvannan then takes the black cloth containing the remnants of the ritual festival and leaves the kaavu. He will wrap this black cloth around his waist and wear it when he comes back next year for the ritual of Kaavukeral bringing the ritual process to a full circle. After the Kudikoottal, the kaavu is left undisturbed from human presence for a period of seven days. This is considered a time of respite for the deities, who are then considered free to roam about the space of the kaavu before they are reinstated in their shrines after the seven days.

Ways of Acting: Ritualization and Construction of Ritual Environment

Sense of ritual, for Bell, is an implicit know-how, or an unconscious and embodied knowing, that the internalizing of the ritual environment and the schemes of the ritual produces in a ritualized body. It is a sense that the ritualized body attain the ability to deploy in socio-cultural situations. It is a sense that continues in practice outside the immediate ritual context. This sense of ritual is, inevitably, realization of the dynamic relationship of ritual with socio-cultural processes. She notes “cultural sense of ritual cannot be isolated from other senses of the

socialized person” (107). A ritualized body is produced at the end of ritualization when the body internalizes the sense of ritual an “implicit cultivated disposition” (98).

Studies on caste have established how it operates sometimes as blatantly as untouchability and violence, and sometimes, more insidiously as a consciousness that prevents fraternity. B. R. Ambedkar in his seminal work “Annihilation of Caste” explains caste as system of graded inequality, where each caste group exercises their superiority over another group below them to maintain status of hierarchy (2014). In defining characteristics of caste in general, G. S. Ghurye points to restriction to socializing such as co-dining as a defining aspect of cast (1969). Ambedkar states, “Caste is not a physical object like a wall of brick or a line of barbed wire which prevents Hindus from co-mingling...caste is a notion; it is a state of mind” (Ambedkar 2014). Caste is very much a contextual experience and cannot be generalized beyond a point, but as a conceptual framework that brings together occupation and hierarchical status, it is a scheme that is based in material and social life of people. In ritual context, these aspects get codified in terms of purity and pollution.

In Thirayattam, the participants (members of the local community) are ritually mandated to fulfil their caste occupation as an inherited ‘right’. They are expected to perform these caste-occupations for the festival, bringing a ritual structure to the experience of material life of the community. Many of the participants, especially the ones of marginalized castes Peruvannan (performers) or *Aashari* (carpenters) continue in their traditional caste-based occupation. The goal of ritualization, according to Bell, “as a strategic way of acting is the ritualization of social agents...ritualization always aligns one within a series of relationship linked to the ultimate source of power. Whether ritual empowers or disempowers one in a practical sense, it always suggests the ultimate coherence of the cosmos in which one takes a particular place.” In Thirayattam, ritualization then can be seen as essentially setting up and fortifying, with the aid of sacredness, the social foundation of caste-hierarchy and the ideas of appropriate caste behaviour in the social organization of the community. The ritual action here can be seen as fulfilling the social function of bringing within the ritual complex and attributing sacred dimension to the symbolic conventions of caste domination and subordination in the cross-caste exchanges in the ritual framework of Thirayattam. This aspect is demonstrable in the strategies of construction of ritual environment by the way of acting of the participants in the context of Thirayattam.

Construction of Ritual Environment of Sacredness

In the scheme of the ritualization in the festival of Thirayattam, the ritualized space is produced in a close relationship to the cultural landscape. The collaborative participation and labour of the community produces the ritualized space. The participants carry out a series of formal and informal actions that ascribe the space with cultural meaning. This process brings together aspects of material, social, and ritual relationships as the activity invokes labour, status, and notions of pollution in the collaborative work of different caste groups. The kaavu has multiple significance for the participants based on their action on the space—it is a space of worship, a place of work, and a performance space. As a place of worship and abode of deities, the kaavu is seen as a sacred space. Richard Schechner notes that “a sacred space mandates special behaviour, in that, the act of entering the space itself has an impact on its participants” (Schechner 71). However, it can be seen in the context of Thirayattam that it is the

“special behaviour”, the specific action that privileges the aspect of sacredness and renders the space as different. Sacredness is an attribute that is acquired through cultural labour and ritualization. Sacred is not seen in opposition to profane in a Durkheimian sense. Sacred is simply indicative of divine and seen in opposition to mundane.

The primary attribute of the kaavu is that of a performance arena. This is reflected even in the vocabulary used in reference to the clearing in the middle of the grove; this space that is generally called as *kaavu muttam* (front porch of the kaavu) is referred to as *arangu* (stage/arena) on the day of performances. This transformation in attribution of significance is achieved through the labour of the participants that manipulates the space and reassigns meaning. After Thira Nischayam, during the two weeks of preparatory time, the local community comprising different caste groups come together and prepare the sacred space to transform it into a performance space. They flatten the ground and clear it of weeds and gravel. They also set the soil by spraying water to make it better suited for performing Thirayattam, especially the dances with vigorous footwork.³ Additionally, the Aashari (carpenter) makes a makeshift aniyara or green room, which is built either by the thickets facing the shrine of the deity or at the entrance of the kaavu. Aniyara also has ceremonial importance as the place of transformation of the performer into deity and as the place from where performances begin. They also clear a path from the aniyara to the arangu as the entrance to the staging area and decorate this path on both sides using flower garlands and palm-leaf streamers. They also demarcate the space for the spectators by laying down mats and chairs along the boundaries of the performance arena. They effectively design the stage based on layout of the space.

The involvement of the members of the local community, both voluntary and ritually-mandated with avakaasam, transforms the sacred space by centering the significance of the space as a performance space—a space for performing, as well as viewing. However, their association with the space in their action constitutes the space as a place of work over the other significations such as sacred or performance space. Even though their labour on the landscape occurs prior to the festival and is mostly informal (except the ritually-mandated work of caste groups like Aashari), evidently it is part of the ritual structure and context. The participants, who during the festival will constitute spectators, are social agents producing cultural value and meaning by their action. The community has invested labour, memory, artistry, and imagination in building of the space. They are members of the same interpretive community in the social-ritual network and are, by extension, already emotionally and materially invested in the space. Simultaneously, they are agential bodies invested with a sense of ritual. Improvisations are made every year with the elements involved in the action of setting the space, such as the material used for construction, the expanse of staging area, designating the space for spectators, the choice of decoration to be used, and so on. However, the principle of action, i.e. the reorganizing of space to centre performance, and the collaborative nature of labour remain intact. Despite the action being unformalized, the sense of what this must do is internalized by the participants as inherited

³The Thirayattam season takes place during the summer in the humid coastal region of Kerala. Spraying water helps cool down the ground and in setting the soil, so that it cakes up and doesn't get too dusty while performing vigorous steps.

understanding. Their agential action replicate and reembody the set of schemes that constitute the environment; their agency doesn't allow them to step out of the scheme of ritual.

Construction of Ritual Environment with the Opposition of Pollution and Purity

The significance of space is reconstructed during the ritual festival of Thirayattam. The space is reorganized as a performance space to facilitate Thirayattam or performance of kolam, where the performer transforms, performs and communicates with worshippers as the deity. During Thirayattam, the space acquires privilege as the sacred space of worship by the virtue of performance. The rituals of Kaavukeral and Kudikoottal that frame the beginning and end of the performances of sacred action, draws oppositions of pollution and purity by the action of Dalit body entering and leaving the space.

Kaavukeral and Kudikoottal lay out the context for the aesthetic and worship ritual performances of Thirayattam, in way of a prelude, and a post-script. Kaavukeral marks the ritual polluting of the space as the Mootha Peruvannan enters the kaavu. With Kudikoottal, the Peruvannan leaves the kaavu bearing the black cloth and the remnants of ritual objects. These objects of the ritual pollution are to remain with him until the next festival of Thirayattam, marking his state of perpetual pollution. This is an act of the polluted body leaving the kaavu carrying objects associated with ritual pollution. Together these rituals dramatically showcase the initiation of inter-caste association, the coming together of community across caste divisions through pollution, and conclusion of inter-caste interaction by removal of pollution.

The action of polluting the space by presence of the performer and removal of pollution by their removal presents the assumption of ritual purity as the normative state of the environment. For ritualization of purity as the ultimate state, the ritual creates the distinction it responds to. Within the scheme of ritual, purity is not enacted or practiced in the space of kaavu. However, with the strategic ways of acting of establishing and removing pollution, ritual legitimizes the imagined purity and effectively others the Dalit bodies. The construction of sacredness as the legitimate and normative state of the kaavu is now associated with the concept of purity as well.

The ritual environment is constructed and reconstructed through strategic ways of action which ultimately produces the sense of worship system that is sacred and pure, and by that virtue, exclusive. It becomes an environment that has legitimized the logic of excluding the ones whose very labour and action constructed the environment.

Ritual Construction of Status

In Kaavukeral, the procession of Mootha Peruvannan entering and polluting the kaavu is staged as spectacle. The elements such as orchestra of chenda (percussion drums), *elathalam* (brass cymbals) and *kombu* (wind instrument), the special attire worn by the elder of the performing caste, the ornate cloth canopy, the chanting, the state of trance of the oracles and the visual grandeur of Peruvannan entering the kaavu makes the ritual a lively performance experience. The sequence of events, that is the oracles going to the Peruvannan's house and inviting them through gestures to the kaavu, the joining in of more people in the procession, the patrons greeting the Peruvannan at the entrance, and finally the entering of the inner sanctum in

the state of trance, plays out like a narrative plot. It is also an interactive experience spatially, as the spectators either move along with the procession to watch the events or they gather at various points on the way between the Peruvannan's house and the kaavu. A section of the crowd would already be waiting at the kaavu, to watch the procession entering the kaavu. The spectators' vantage points shift, depending on when they decide to join the event, whether they enter the kaavu along with the procession with the performers or watch the procession enter the kaavu with the patrons. The sequence of events in Kudikoottal is also similarly symbolic and is performed as a dramatic event.

At the core of the ritual action in Kaavukeral, there is the enactment breach of cultural taboo of caste presented as a spectacle. The ritual action discussed here is propelled by and is designed for the breaching of caste norms through the inversion of the relationship between upper-caste patrons and Dalit performers. These norms that are breached are conceptually restored at end of Kudikoottal when the Mootha Peruvannan leaves the kaavu carrying the black mark of pollution with no fanfare or procession. Dalit performers are bestowed with superior status and honour that breaches the normative caste relationship that deems them to be subservient under the dominant upper-caste patrons.

On the day of the festival, the Dalit performers are ritually exalted as the primary practitioners of rites or ritual-specialists. The role of the Peruvannan is crucial to the festival. As performers who transform into kolams and who thus facilitate a tangible interaction between worshippers and deities, the ritual, although carried out to appease the deities, also placates and provides expression for the worshippers' devotion.

During the festival, and specifically during the rituals of Kaavukeral, Dalit performers engage in a performing a series of taboo acts. The elder Peruvannan walks in the central presiding position in the ceremonial procession carrying not just an *edakka* (small drum), which is a prop that represents his role as a ritual performer and entertainer, but also a coconut palm leaf umbrella, which is a mark of dignity and privilege. Dalits were traditionally not allowed to carry umbrellas as that right was reserved only for the upper castes. The canopy that Peruvannan walks in is held up by members of the socially superior patron-family. The patrons in this act publicly humble themselves before the spectators, especially the local community, as they make a display of respectfully receiving and honouring the socially inferior, polluted Dalit performer.

The ritual actions that breach taboos build opposition of purity and pollution. Ritual pollution remains the condition for all ritual action. The conclusion to pollution, as seen earlier, is with the removal of Peruvannan with Kudikoottal, which also involves the action of accepting the cloth soiled from the ritual. This ritual act also recalls the status of Peruvannan's caste occupation as washer-person and his role in sublimating menstrual pollution of upper caste women by washing and providing changes of clothes. It is also a conclusion to his elevated status as the ritual-specialist. Thus, the environment is completely restored to normative caste relationships.

The reinstatement of caste-hierarchy at the end of Thirayattam, it could be argued, has an unusual character. Unlike social status that is transcendable within a community, tribe, family, or any other corporate entity, caste is considered embodied and it cannot be transcended. The Dalit performer is perceived as inherently polluted, and this pollution is never suspended when norms are breached and suspended.

The breaking of taboo and inversion of caste behaviour is performed as a public spectacle by both Dalit performers and the upper-caste patrons. The taboo is broken in order for the participants to engage in cross-caste rituals. This is, in turn, necessary for the reiteration of the caste-hierarchy that is intentionally and temporarily reversed in the ritual action.

With status elevation and restoration in ritual strategy, the festival invokes the opposition of dominance and subordination in social status. In the restoration of social status, the hierarchical structure of caste is restored. The ritualization, through its many ways of acting, structure the environment as sacred, pure, and hierarchical; in doing so, it legitimizes the social-cultural structures of caste. The sense of ritual or the cultural disposition that a social ritual agent is invested with through ritualization is ultimately an internalisation of structures of caste.

Conclusion

In the strategic ways of ritualization in Thirayattam, sacredness is naturalized, purity is legitimized, and the status of subordination of the Dalit performer is normalized. The scheme of ritualization employs series of strategic action that structures the environment through the interaction of social agents with the space. These strategies are subsumed to produce an overarching sense of ritual. To analyse ritual construction of environment with implicit values, the paper looked at the transformations and manipulations of space by the virtue of action in three aspects of events in the ritual framework of Thirayattam:

1. The collaborative, non-formalized preparatory work carried out by the participants of the local community. The paper notes that this collaborative work in the context of festival also assumes structures of ritualized action.
2. The rituals of Kaavukeral and Kudikoottal as actions that draw oppositions of pollution and purity.
3. The rituals of Kaavukeral and Kudikoottal as actions of elevation and restoration of caste status.

In the initial interaction of the social agents with the space in the preparatory work, the kaavu is a place of work. Their action on the space reorients the space into a space of performance. In the performance of Thirayattam, with its attribution to divinity, the space centres worship and is constituted as sacred. The attribution of sacredness on the space of the kaavu is cyclic and is conditional on the presence of the social agents who transform the place as performance space and the performances that invoke divinity. As sacredness is naturalized through ritualization, the normative association with kaavu becomes that of sacred. This idea of the sacred space is further qualified as a space of purity and as a space of hierarchical caste association in the actions of Kaavukeral and Kudikoottal. The ritual environment that is produced through these strategic action is sacred, pure and caste-affirming.

Glossary

aniyara	Makeshift green room
arangu	Stage for performing
<i>avakaasam</i>	Right (n)
chaanthu	Black medicinal paint made especially for Chanthu thira
chaanthattam or chaanthu thira	A ritual that marks the end of possession-performances
chenda	Traditional percussion instrument
edakka	Small traditional percussion instrument
ilathalam	A traditional small cymbal
kaavu	Sacred grove/ site of Thirayattam
Kaavukeral	The ceremonial entering of kaavu by the elder Peruvannan
Kaavunarthal	The ritual of waking up of the performance space by recitation of an invocation
kaavu muttam	The front courtyard of the kaavu
kaavu theendal	The process of ritually polluting the kaavu
karmi	A learned practitioner of liturgic rites
kolam	Image of the deity represented on the body of the performer
Kudikoottal	The ritual of securing the abode
mudi	Headgear
Nair	Dominant, land-owning Shudra-caste in Kerala
niram	Colour
nirathinu panam	Contractual payment for arranging colours
Peruvannan	A Dalit caste of washermen, folk-medicine practitioners and Thirayattam performers in Kerala
thara	Foundational unit of family/ locality
Thirayattam	Ritual possession-performance of <i>Thira</i>
Thira Nischayam	Ceremonial giving of contract by the patrons of the kaavu to the performers to conduct Thirayattam
Thiyya	Landowning OBC caste, also patrons of Thirayattam in most kaavus
thottam or thottam pattu	Oral invocation songs
Vellattu or Vellaatam	Aesthetic ritual performance before Thirayattam
Velichappaadu	Oracle
virunnu porappaadu	Another term for Kaavukeral; arriving on invitation

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