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From Grove to Temple

Effects of Sanskritization, Hinduization, and Templisation of sacred groves in the ritual performance of *teyyam* in North Kerala

Abstract

Sacred groves are very important elements of Hinduism, and acquire different characteristics in different parts of India, just like other aspects of Hinduism do.

However, due to political, cultural or social processes, some of these forests have been converted into temples, and the rituals practiced there have been brought closer to the dominant Brahminical cult, with an evident loss of the richness and cultural diversity of Indian spiritual practices.

Those processes can mostly be explained as Templisation, Sanskritization, and Hinduization. In this essay we examine the consequences of those procedures upon the sacred groves of northern Kerala, and especially upon the ritual of the *teyyams*, living gods who inhabit these woods.

Introduction

Sacred groves and forests are an integral part of Hinduism. Indian mythology records multiple events occurring in the forests while several trees, plants, and wild animals are bestowed with religious significance.

Sacred groves all over India are destination of pilgrimage, and the site for specific rituals and celebrations. Like Hinduism, these woods are diverse and unique in the different regions of India: sometimes these are vast tracts of virgin territory, other times the woods consist of just a centuries-old tree surrounded by a fence. In this article, we shall examine the sacred groves of North Kerala: their rituals and recent changes and trends affecting the concept and format of the sacred grove and the performance of the corresponding religious practices.

Prolific research has been conducted on the ecological, social, and economical importance of the sacred groves.

Our approach is from the point of view of ritual performance and our concern is about the effect that the changes occurring on those spaces may have on the ritual performance of the *teyyams*, living gods from North Kerala.

We begin with considerations about sacred groves in India, their role in Hinduism, and their relevance to nature and resource conservation. We briefly introduce the notions that allow us to understand the processes that are currently taking place in Indian sacred groves: Templisation, Sanskritization, and Hinduization, and discuss some relevant questions concerning the matter of Hinduism as a religion.

The subsequent sections of the article focuses on the sacred groves in North Kerala. Though, there are some variations, the most representative form of sacred grove in this area—



Fig. 1 – A North Kerala teyyam kaavu: located in a forest clearing, it consists of an enclosed yard with a main sanctuary, smaller sanctuaries for minor deities, ritual altars and a well. Sree Pramancheri Bhagavathi Kaavu, Payyanur. Photo by Filipe Pereira, January 2023.

approximately corresponding to the territory of the medieval kingdom of Kolathunadu—is the *kaavu*. We provide a general description of such places of worship, referring to some regional, and socio-cultural variations.

The most relevant type of ritual performed at *kaavus* is the *kaliyattam* (dance drama), accomplished annually by *teyyams*, or living gods. Here, we shall explore the general conceptualization of the living Gods and their performances and we introduce a new perspective over the dramaturgy of the *kaliyattam*: a two-layer fabric, in which one of the layers is a score of sacred energy, *sakti*, which grants the cult of the *teyyams* an extraordinary performative uniqueness.

At this point, we enunciate a problem: as a result of our ethnographic observation, we realize that some of these *kaavus* and *madappuras* are being renamed as *devasthanam* or *kshetram*, due to the process of “templisation” (Roopesh 2019; 2020), and we observe signs of Sanskritization, and Hinduization (Srinivas 1952) in the rituals and in the divinities. We can infer the conceptual signification of this change, relating it to the social aspirations of historically repressed populations who strive to acquire a sense of social valorization by renaming their sacred groves with the designations of mainstream Brahminical temples.

The consequences of such hegemonic drift can be accounted in terms of loss of the cultural uniqueness of southern forms of Hinduism, including unmatched performative rituals.

The impact of it can be noted especially in the exceptional performance of *kaliyattam* of the *teyyams*, whose dramaturgy is developed upon the logic of transference of energy.

This essay therefore intends to highlight the negative outcomes of reshaping, or renaming, sacred groves into temples, and of Sanskritizing the native rituals of those groves

Indian sacred groves and forests

The Indian subcontinent is a divine geography where every detail of the landscape is ascribed a multitude of mythological meanings, and narratives of marvellous events. A rock, a river, a mountain, or a tree, can have very strong associations with divinities, and be charged with intense spiritual power. Among these topographic features, sacred groves and forests are not only relevant for their religious connotation but also for their ecological value; they can be seen as ecologically inspired religious spaces. Environmentally orientated forms of human worship, with a focus on nature, trees and forests, can be located in the mythology, in the Puranas, and in the *Itihasa* (epics), such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The mighty *Hanuman*, *Bali*, *Sugriva*,¹ and a wider kingdom of monkeys, side by side with elephants, wild boars, birds, and all sorts of holy wild animals have been depicted in Hindu mythologies as an essential part of the sacred and ecological relation of human beings with the World. A kind of “religiously inspired ecological ethos” (Freeman 1999, 261) can be observed in all variants of Hindu ritual structures and processes.

According to Hindu theology, the grove/forest is an integral part of an individual’s life on earth, and of the process of attaining *moksha* (liberation). Before reaching the stage of *sanyasi* (Hindu sage), a man or a woman must be in *vanaprastha* (the stage of the forest dweller) (Sharma 1999). Thus, many forests are sites of pilgrimage, and sacred groves are dedicated by local communities to their ancestral spirits or deities (Malhotra 2001), and to the cult of Mother Goddess (Gadgil and Vartak 1976).

It so happens that, due to their spiritual importance, these groves tend to become temples, in a process that involves *templisation*, *Sanskritization*, and *Hinduization*. Templisation is a notion introduced by O. B. Roopesh and it refers to “the process of converting myriad forms of existence of worship places into a standardized form of Hindu temple” (Roopesh 2019, 89). Sanskritization and Hinduization are concepts proposed by Mysore Narasimhachar Srinivas (1952; 1969); the first discusses a social process by which lower castes imitate ritual practices observed by higher castes to achieve social mobility in a hierarchically rigid caste system. Hinduization is the process by which non-Hindu (or pre-Hindu) religious elements are assimilated into Hinduism by identifying them with specifically Hindu elements, such as local gods being described as avatars of the great gods of Brahminical Hinduism.

Sabarimala, in Central Travancore, is a typical example: a hilltop temple dedicated to Ayyappan, within the Periyar National Park (and tiger and elephant reserve), attracts 40 to 50 million devotees a year, who must traverse a long forest and many forest-clad hills. “*Ayyappan kavus* of Kerala Western Ghats are often patches of dense primeval forests. The sacred hill of Sabarimala, where millions flock every year, could have originally been a sacred grove” (Gadgil and Chandran 1992, 184). Later, the grove was cut down to make way for the temple, where the Brahmin priests act as the main officiants and, although the devotees are mainly from the lower strata of society, yet the rituals were Sanskritized.

Hinduism is not a hegemonic religion. It perhaps cannot even be counted as a religion in the traditional sense: it has no known founder, no known historic beginnings, no central authority, and no common creed. The word “Hindu” was not coined by the Hindus themselves, and Hinduism is an invention of eighteenth-century European scholars (Klostermaier 1998).



Fig. 2 – Two theyyakkaran perform the vellattam of Vasurimala Teyyam; in the background, we see a kodimaram (flagpole), an element of ritual authority from Brahminical temples. In the kaavu, this is a caricatural sign of Hindu hegemony. Malayan Kaavu, Thalassery. Photo by Rajesh Komath, December 2022.

Gilles Tarabout (1997) raises three important considerations: 1) there is not a term equivalent to “religion” in Indian languages; 2) the lower castes were considered outcastes by the upper caste Hindus until recently and 3) the notion of belonging to a Hindu majority has developed among the elites from the 19th century on, and the Untouchables were slowly integrated into it with the development of nationalism.

Hinduism can be seen as “the indigenous religious synthesis across the whole of India, which subsumes a variety of regional sub-traditions (including ancient tribal and Dravidian beliefs and practices) under the hegemonic umbrella of Sanskrit Brahminical doctrine” (Freeman 1991, 93).

Brahminical Hinduism claims its descent from the ancient Vedic religion, and rests on the priestly caste of Brahmins, and on their knowledge of the Sanskrit sacred texts. Even if it comprises many denominations, traditions, movements, and sects, centered on one or more gods or goddesses (Nelson 2007), in liturgical terms it can be described as a hieratic way of practicing rites in a temple, centered on an idol. The main ceremony performed at the temple is the *puja*, the worship of an image. *Puja* “offered daily at the home shrine is a scaled-down version of the grand services performed at temples” (Klostermaier 1998, 142).

The practices related to sacred groves, although very numerous and diverse, are generally to be viewed as regional sub-traditions, rather than integral to the Brahminical Hinduism, or related to the Vedic tradition: “The nature of religious cults associated with such sacred groves suggests that the practices are very ancient, deriving from the hunting-gathering stages of the society” (Gadgil and Vartak 1975, 314).

Until the mid-20th century, *Shudras* (lower laboring castes), *Avarna* (outcastes) and *Adivasi* (tribals), all of them *Dalit* (untouchables, pollutants of the society), were not allowed into the Brahminical temples,² and usually did not own property or farming lands. In the South of India, some of them tended to follow a way of living based upon forest resources. In the historical set of circumstances of the unprivileged populations, ecology was both economy and social balance: the sustainable use of natural resources was a guarantee for survival, and the forests were the only refuge for tribal communities to collect wild edible plants, as well as traditional medicinal plants and herbs (Waghchaure et al. 2006). In 2006, an Act of the Indian Parliament recognized the forest rights of Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers (Forests Rights Act 2006), to counter the “appropriation of resources by colonial exploiters, and by proponents of economic growth since independence, [that] has damaged or destroyed many groves in India” (Chandran and Hughes 2000, 180). Regulation and local implementation of this law has been difficult and entailed several contradictions, as it directly affects opposing individual interests (Thadathil and Bachan 2022).

Up to now, local populations, with their many traditions of nature conservation, were “most likely to be motivated to take good care of the landscape and ecosystems on which they depend” (Gadgil 1992, 269), including sacred groves. But, the set of social and economic circumstances has changed and “most of the forests themselves have become a rapidly fading memory” (Freeman 1999, 257). Modifications in the social structure, and consequently in the *kaavus* (sacred groves) of northern Kerala, also have implications for the ritual performance of the *teyyams*.

Sacred groves in northern Kerala: *Kaavu*

A sacred geography of northern Kerala spreads between two rivers: Korapuzha, in the south of Kannur district, and Chandragiri River, to the north of Kasaragod; and from the Arabian Sea, in the west, to the hills of Coorg in the east, including some parts of Wayanad district. The region thus designed, also known as North Malabar, roughly corresponds to the medieval kingdom of Kolathunadu, and has a specific sociocultural identity when compared to the rest of the State. Among these distinctive features, the most extraordinary is certainly the ritual performances of *teyyams*, living gods who incarnate through dance, song, and storytelling during *kaliyattam* (dance drama) festivals, which happen regularly at *kaavus*.



Fig. 3 – The palliyara (sanctuary) of this kaavu, as many others in recent times, is decorated with a stylization of Kim Purusham, a character from the Mahabharata that is alien to the teyyam tradition. Chera-Vellikkeel Theeyakandi Kathivenoor Veeran Kaavu, Taliparamba. Photo by Filipe Pereira, January 2023.

Nowadays, it is only conceptually that these *kaavus* can be referred as forests. They may best be described as a courtyard, or *arangu*, adjacent to a *tharavad* (joint family home),³ delimited by a low wall, sometimes just a row of bricks. The ground, usually of beaten earth, is sometimes paved with cow dung. In a central place on the *arangu* stands the *palliyara* (sanctuary) of the main deity, surrounded by the *palliyara* of the other deities dwelling in the *kaavu*. The type of construction of these shrines can be very varied, ranging from a simple hut made of coconut mats, to brick constructions with elaborate columns and roof decorations. Sometimes shrines can be just a niche in the wall or a *pooja muri* (worship room) inside the *tharavad*, with an entrance from the *arangu* side. In specific places there are altars, or *kalashatharas*, stones for breaking coconuts, or *thengha kallu*, and other small structures, according to the specific ritual needs of each *kaavu*. Within the enclosure, or very close, there will always be a well or a pond (Chandran and Hughes 1997).

Behind the shrines are the *aniyara*, changing rooms for the performers, one for each caste or family troupe, usually set up on a temporary basis with coconut mats or canvas. In rare cases, in notoriously wealthy *kaavus*, these facilities are permanent and built of brick. In a more secluded place, usually at the back of the *tharavad*, there is an improvised kitchen and an open-air dining hall. Also, in the richest *kaavus*, these have permanent infrastructures, such as washbasins, stoves or counters. *Kaavus* may be managed by a joint family, by a caste community, or by a statutory trust for temple management (Chandrashekhara and Shankar 1998).

This is a brief outline of what cannot be generalized: in fact, each *kaavu* is unique and has its particularities: diverse deities protecting different families and communities with cultures and traditions that vary for each village and for each social group. There are *sarpakaavus* (snake groves), usually associated with Nair's family houses, *madappuras* (sheltered caves) which are specific shrines for the *teyyam* Muthappan, *kaavus* connected with *illams*,⁴ and there are *kaavus* in tribal settlements. In short, there are thousands of *kaavus* in northern Kerala, which represent the multiplicity and diversity of the local cultural and religious identities. The ritual tradition of the *teyyams* is a common factor shared by almost all of them.

The living gods: *teyyams*, their dance drama, and *sakti*

Teyyams are the gods dwelling in the *kaavus* of northern Kerala. Their particularity is that they are embodied in a designated performer through a process of transformation driven by singing, dancing, and storytelling. The term *teyyam* is a derivative of the Sanskrit *daivam*, meaning divinity. They are not a representation of the deity; rather, they are the god itself. They may be lineage ancestors, local heroes, puranic or village deities, animals, or spirits from the woods. No one can say how many *teyyams* there are but, considering local variants and different designations, it could be over six hundred. While many of the deities are female, the performers are always male.⁵

The most common festival performed by *teyyams* is the *kaliyattam*, literally a dance drama, which takes place every year at every *kaavu*. Each of these *kaliyattams* is unique, as each *kaavu* has its own *teyyams*, and specific ritual practices, which can be significantly different from other *kaavus*. Typically, it is a festivity of an extended family, or of a caste community, or of a tribe, and the *theyyakkaram* (*teyyam* performers) are members of other castes or tribes, who hold a hereditary right to perform at that *kaavu*.

As the performance of *teyyams* is the prerogative of some of the lower social strata, a situation of momentary social reversibility occurs: the divinity embodied in a *Dalit* (untouchable) individual must be worshiped and obeyed by all, beyond caste hierarchies. This condition triggers complex relations of power (Freeman 1991), processes of appropriation and interpolation of meanings (Dasan 2012), and multifaceted interactions with political institutions and agents (Ashley 1993; Koga 2003); both historically and contemporaneously.

The institutions of *kaliyattam* and *teyyams* are based on a medievalist fiction, which reproduce imaginary relations of caste, power and status (Vadakkiniyl 2016). Its economic features also intend to mimic *jajmani*, the feudal system of mutual obligation, and *janmavakasam*, traditional birthrights. But the true economic cost of the cult is very high since the organization of the festival involves many people, great expenses, and a wide distribution

of costs and benefits (Komath 2013a). Not only some social groups, including performers, musicians, and *kaavu* officials, but also street vendors, and some manufacturers, largely depend on these events.

The cult of *teyyams* is fully integrated into Hinduism. But some elements of the ritual tradition may go back many centuries before the advent of Brahminical Hinduism in the territory of present-day Kerala (Gabriel 2010), being linked to the beginning of agriculture, as it is essentially a fertility cult (Chandran 2006), and to a pre-Hindu tribal hero cult (Kurup 1977). It may also have had some kind of interaction with Buddhism and Jainism, from which it inherited some of its visual patterns (Pallath 1995).

Very transgressive and irreverent, the *teyyams* presents numerous paradoxes. From the point of view of performance, even if it is not an artistic genre (Pereira and Ziganshina 2020), it is still a sacred drama and it contains a dramaturgy which, we propose, has the singularity of being woven in two layers.

What we call the first layer of the dramatic structure is a rough narrative which, in most cases, is composed of excerpts from an epic song, the *tottam pattu* of each *teyyam*, by meaningful elements in the costumes, and in the face and body paintings,⁶ and by the significance of the props. But generally, it is in the deity's behavior, when he makes his dancing appearance, where most of the dramatic narrative can be recognized: the energetic martial dance of the warrior hero ancestor, the staggering and self-restrained gait of a blind martyr, the indomitable frenzy of the goddess when in her infuriated form, and her gentle protecting motion when motherly. Altogether, the sung recital, the figure, and the behavior of the *teyyam* make up a narrative that is explicit enough for those who have known it since childhood, transmitted orally through family life. However, this story is constantly subjected to adaptation and adjustment, conforming to the dominant Hindu narrative (Dasan 2012). In this case, a drawback can be pointed out in the transgressive nature of some deities, who become identified as avatars of gods of the Hindu pantheon, or subordinate to them, resulting into an eventual loss of efficacy of the ritual.



Fig. 4 – A sign of a kaavu shifting towards the adoption of images seen in temples: a black rock carved oil lamp standing on a tortoise i.e., Kurma, the second avatar of Vishnu. Malayan Kaavu, Thalassery. Photo by Rajesh Komath, December 2022.

The second layer of dramaturgy is non-discursive, non-narrative, and abstract. It is less explicit to the observer, though central to the performers. It is a 'chart' of energy stages and 'guidelines' for its application which each performer is taught from a young age. It structures a composition of manipulation, accumulation, transformation, and transmission of sacred energy, the *sakti* of the divinity.



Fig. 5 – Thudangal begins with chenda (drums) playing in group to let villagers know about the starting of the festival. Malayan (lower caste drummers) are adopting the dress code of Marar (caste of Brahminical temple musicians): mundu (lower cloth) with a golden stripe, and gold neck chain. Malayan Kaavu, Thalassery. Photo by Rajesh Komath, December 2022.

Sakti is power, the primordial energy, dynamic forces that operate through the Universe (Datta and Lowitz 2005). It is present in anything, and it can be transformed and transferred. *Kaliyattam* is a tantric⁷ operation that consists of collecting the *sakti* of the deity, increasing and accumulating it, and transferring it to the devotees in the form of blessings.

The first stage of *kaliyattam* is the *thudangal*, or beginning (Freeman 1991; Gabriel 2010), when the *theyyakkaran* sing excerpts from the *tottam pattu* in front of the shrine of the deity that he will embody. He receives an oil lamp lit in the sacred flame that burns permanently inside the sanctuary. This flame, and consequently the lamp, is imbued with *sakti* and it will be present throughout the initial phase of the ritual. Singing the *tottam pattu* is an element of energy amplification, as will be the mantras that the performer will recite during the process of dressing and painting. The performer, who has undergone ordeals in the days before the ritual, is in the state of *vrtha* (abstinence) and *ekacintha* (unified mind), which are conditions to receive and operate the energy.

Throughout the ritual there are successive procedures intended to increase the *sakti*: the god's weapons and objects, charged with divine power, are received from the sanctuary; by magical operations, common food items are transformed into *prasadam* (the god's food), also loaded with *sakti*; animals are offered in sacrifice. The dance, the music, the extraordinary

actions of the *teyyam*, as astonishing as walking over burning coals (Kandanar Kelan, Vayanatu Kulavan), or laying over it (Pottam Teyyam, Uchitta, Puthiya Bhagavathy, Thee Chamundi), and climbing high trees (Bappiriyan Teyyam), everything contribute to an overload of energy. This leads to an outcome, the discharge carried out in the form of bestowal of blessings charged with the sacred potency on devotees; a transference of the accumulated *sakti*.



Fig. 6 – Muthappan Puralimala, also called Thiruvappan, hallowing at a railway station madappura. Madappuras are the specific kaavus for the teyyam Muthappan. This madappura/kaavu has been sheltered with a tin roof, causing significant distortion to the drums sound. Pazhayangady Railway Station. Photo by Filipe Pereira, December 2022.

Threats to the ritual performance of *teyyam*

The efficacy of rituals must be sought in their embodied cognition and not in their symbolic expression (Sax 2010). The rituals of the *teyyams* might have been subjects to constant changes in meaning as a result of their integration into Hinduism and due to their interaction with the changing society. As noted above, in the past this practice may have been involved with other religious systems. But this migration of context did not seem to alter its efficacy, since the alterations must have taken place at the first layer of the dramatic structure which is the (pseudo)-narrative.

We defend that the efficacy of the rituals of the *teyyams* rests on the second level of dramaturgy, on the energy script. As we have been discussing, the threats to this ‘dramaturgical layer’ of the ritual can be understood as templisation, Sanskritization, and Hinduization. Converting *kaavus* into standardized Hindu temples, modifying its ritual practices to match those of higher castes, and assimilating the native *teyyams* by identifying them with the gods and goddesses of the mainstream Brahminical Hinduism, might be some of the most threatening dangers to the ritual efficacy, and to the preservation of this tradition.⁸

As for the causes of these processes, Srinivas (1952; 1969) sees it in the desire of lower castes to ascend socially, Dasan (2012) attributes it to the political and economic power of upper caste patrons, and Roopesh (2019; 2020) sees it mainly in the hegemonic pressure of a Hindu nationalism (Hindutva). Komath (2013a) warns of economic aspects, and Koga (2003) for political issues.

We also have to consider Westernization as an influence. Srinivas (1956) had a peculiar opinion that Westernization and Sanskritization were closely linked, as the Brahmins positioned themselves as intermediaries between Western culture and the population of India. Thus, the westernization of India helped Sanskritization and vice versa.

Westernization is also associated with Folklorization and Touristification: modern Indians may have a perception of their own live traditions as an exotic folklore (Pereira and Ziganshina 2020), and may tend to standardize its institutions into more marketable, and tourism-friendly forms: groves into temples, ritual into folk art, *teyyams* into Vedic gods, and a complex dramaturgy of vital energy into a simplified Puranic narrative.

The result is expected to be an enormous loss: the incomparable ecological richness of the sacred groves, the cultural uniqueness of the *teyyams*, the unparalleled energy-based dramaturgy of the *kaliyattam*, and the singular identity of North Malabar merged into a normative All India.

Notes

1. Mythological monkey gods.

2. In Kerala, the Temple Entry Proclamation was issued in Travancore in 1936. The Proclamation abolished the ban on the so-called “low caste” from entering Hindu temples. In the rest of Kerala, as in the rest of India, the right to enter temples for all Hindus derives from the Constitution of India, dated 1949, which abolished untouchability.

3. The institution of *tharavad* presents another set of questions connected to social mobility. Historically, *tharavads* were joint family houses who had large agricultural properties and authority over the resident populations. They were as much the ancestral family home as its landed estates, and the individuals of the matrilineal family. The *tharavads* were the basis of the feudal government of the Chera Empire (Gough 1954): the etymon *thara* means village and it was a unit of civil and military administration, in the classical period. These *tharavads* controlled and maintained many groves, as well as temples, within their large strips of land: keeping both systems of worship granted social and political power, and the control over the rituals.

However, in contemporary social discourses, it is observed that castes that did not have the right to land ownership and social authority also refer to their family homes and kinship lineages as *tharavads*. The phenomenon can be understood from the perspective of political economy and cultural dynamics: around the 1960s and 70s, there was a decline of *tharavad*, as the Kerala government introduced the land reform bill and distributed land to the landless and peasants. The upper caste large estates were transferred to the lower castes, particularly to *Tiyyas*, as a tenant caste in northern Kerala. Many *kaavus* were therefore also transferred to *Tiyyas* and other subordinate castes. This shift in political economy and the cultural dynamics around land altered social power in relation to land and groves. The *Tiyyas*, who now own lands that belonged to higher castes, began to implement family houses in the

image of those of the old lords, which they called *tharavad*, with new adjacent *kaavus*, where *teyyams* are worshiped (Komath 2013a).

4. *Illam* is the traditional joint family home of the Namboothiri Brahmins. Like the *tharavad*, it integrates the house, the land and the lineage, in this case patrilineal. It also went into decline with the land reform but, unlike the *tharavad*, it was not appropriated by other social groups: *illam* is always a house of Namboothiri.

5. A single exception is Devakkutti, worshiped exclusively on the island of Thekkumbad every two years, where the deity is embodied in a woman from a specific Malayan family, who has gone through menopause (Anju 2014).

6. Face and body paintings of the *teyyams* are actually considered writings, as they are very symbolic and descriptive: *mukhathezhuthu*, face writing, and *meyyazhuthu*, body writing.

7. Tantra is a form of Hinduism in which *sakti* is worshiped (Klostermaier, 1998: 160). It manifests itself in different traditions and schools and also has an influence on Buddhism.

8. After the land reforms implemented in Kerala in the 1970s, the property of the upper castes, including *teyyam kaavus* and snake groves, passed into the hands of the lower castes. Mainly, the management of these groves was entrusted to administrative committees, which, due to the empty space of political and social influence left by the decline of upper castes, have been composed of modern bureaucrats and the new rich who, in their aspirations, institute the processes of templisation, Hinduization and Sanskritization, by reconverting and dedicating them to deities of Vedic Hinduism. Ultraorthodox Hindu organizations believe that the essence of Hindu order rests in society, and that the caste system will regulate it. In order to place this order over the State, they aim at controlling the temples, through its administration committees, as they consider the temples as the nucleus of Hindu society. Branches of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) have been functioning in and around the temples, with the intention of forming a Hindu Rashtra (Hindu nation). When RSS spread its organizational wing to other areas such as among *Vanavasis* (tribal communities), they turned to the groves as a basis for their political activism. Resultantly, the *teyyam* groves become a site of contestation where Marxists and RSS began competing to control its authority. In certain parts of Kannur district, one can only view saffron RSS flags in and around some groves, while Marxists hangs their red flags and images of Che Guevara as part of the festivities of other groves (see Komath, Rajesh. 2013. *Nattudaivangal Samsarichu Thudangumbol*. Calicut: Mathrubhoomi Books). In general, these reconstructed sacred groves tend to follow a Brahmanical ritual order, inviting Namboothiri priests to conduct *pujas*, and reinstalling idols of Brahmanical deities to replace the *teyyam* forms of worship. Almost all *teyyam kaavus* now perform *pujas* to Ganapathi, a Brahmanical idol, before the ceremony begins, or establish a ritual connection with the nearest Brahmanical temple. Blood sacrifices are replaced by offerings of milk and oil, in the rites performed with *toddy*, this is replaced by tender coconut water: the substance of the rites is transformed into Vedic Brahmanical practices. The content of the mythical story of local deities/*teyyams* is replaced by Puranic characters. Sensing a wider acceptance of Sanskritized versions of *tottam*, and the performance of the rites, *teyyam* performers are tempted to change the execution of the ritual performance.

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