



PHILOSOPHY, HISTORY, AND HERITAGE STUDIES

An Ethnographic Account of *Alitheyyam* or *Alibhuthasthanam* of Sri Bhagavathy Ali Chamundi Temple in North Malabar

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Abstract

This ethnographic account examines *Alitheyyam* (also known as *Ali Chamundi Theyyam*), a unique ritual performance from the Sri Bhagavathy Ali Chamundi Temple in North Malabar, Kerala. Situated within the broader context of religious and cultural syncretism in the region, the study explores how *Alitheyyam* embodies the intersection of Hindu and Islamic traditions. Drawing on Victor Turner's concepts of liminality and *communitas*, the article analyzes the ritual's role in fostering social cohesion, processing historical memory, and negotiating communal identities. The oral tradition underlying *Alitheyyam* recounts the transformation of Ali Mapilla, a Muslim figure, into a subservient deity of the Hindu goddess Chamundi. The performance—characterized by distinctive costumes, symbolic gestures including a mock Muslim prayer, and ritual possession—serves both as a spiritual offering and a medium for collective moral reflection. While the ritual appears to celebrate religious harmony, it also subtly reinforces hierarchies and the “otherness” of Muslim identity within a predominantly Hindu ritual framework. Ultimately, *Alitheyyam* illustrates how myth, performance, and history intertwine to preserve collective memory, address existential concerns, and navigate the complexities of interfaith coexistence in North Malabar.

Keywords : Alitheyyam, Ali Chamundi, Theyyam, North Malabar, religious syncretism, Hindu–Muslim relations, Victor Turner, *communitas*, oral tradition, ritual performance, spirit possession, collective memory, cultural fusion, Bhutha worship, Kerala folklore



Overview of ritual and cultural syncretism in North Malabar

In “The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure,” Victor Turner’s exploration of the Ndembu rituals and his development of the concept of “communitas” offer profound insights into the dynamics of human relationships within cultural contexts. By characterizing communitas as an absolute inter-human relation that transcends societal structures, Turner illuminates the transformative power of rituals in fostering deep connections among individuals. His analysis reveals how moments of communal unity during rituals can dissolve hierarchies and create a sense of belonging and shared identity. This emphasis on the ephemeral yet profound nature of communitas enhances our understanding of the role of rituals in promoting social cohesion and navigating the complexities of human experience, making Turner’s work a cornerstone in the study of anthropology and social dynamics. (Turner, 1996) The adoration of spirits and ancestors in *Bhutha* worship strengthens bonds between people and allows them to face their common fears and goals together. Similar to this, *Theyyam* performances immerse both performers and audience members in a transcendent experience that highlights a sense of shared identity and camaraderie. People frequently transcend their daily positions during these rituals, exhibiting a sense of equality and belonging that is consistent with Turner’s concept of communitas. This brief breakdown of social institutions creates a space for healing, introspection, and cultural expression while also strengthening ties within the group. Thus, *theyyam* and *bhutha* worship both demonstrate how rituals may be effective means of promoting relationships between people, reiterating Turner’s observations about the value of group experiences in negotiating the challenges of human existence.

The merging of several traditions, namely Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, has defined the rich history of religious and cultural syncretism in North Malabar. Festivals, artwork, and social customs that blend aspects of many religions to create a singular cultural fabric are examples of this syncretism. The historical trade connections of the region fostered exchanges between different communities, resulting in a mutually respectful environment and shared cultural manifestations that are still relevant in North Malabar today.

“*Theyyam*” is a term that describes both the festival and the mortal body that an immortal soul enters. *Theyyam* is a belief system that incorporates elements of old tribal traditions and places a high value on the worship of heroes and ancestral spirits. It is a socioreligious ritual in which mythological, divine, ancestral, animal, serpent or heroic characters are represented, each with its distinct physical shape



and story of origin. Bodies of *theyyam* specialists become the vehicles (in dance, possession, speech, act) for the manifestation of deities or spirits. (Vadakiniyil, 2009) It is used to worship the gods, goddesses, spirits, heroes, heroines, animals, and ancestors. In places of worship, these divine abilities are revered through “special kinds” of performances. Those who worship Teyyam as a deity are undoubtedly members of all four Hindu varnas. (Wayne, 2022) In North Malabar, it is a dynamic and essential religious and cultural rite that profoundly expresses the region’s many customs and beliefs. This ceremonial dance style, which is distinguished by ornate costumes, exciting performances, and ceremonial music, serves as a crucial conduit for fostering community spirituality in addition to being an artistic showcase. Hindu mythology and regional folklore are blended together in *theyyam*, which frequently features gods, ancestral spirits, and heroic characters. This helps participants feel a feeling of continuity and identity. Performers seek blessings and spiritual restoration during these socially cohesive events, which are usually held in temples or sacred forests. (Damodaran, 2008) Victor Witter Turner’s contributions to symbolic anthropology and performance theory have profoundly shaped our understanding of rituals and cultural expressions. His exploration of liminality and *communitas* provides critical insights into how individuals and communities navigate transitions and forge social bonds. Turner’s emphasis on the symbolic dimensions of rituals allows for a deeper appreciation of the meanings embedded in cultural practices, such as *bhutha* worship. His work invites us to consider how these rituals serve not only as expressions of belief but also as vital mechanisms for addressing existential concerns, fostering community cohesion, and negotiating identity. Despite some contestation, Turner’s innovative approach remains influential, encouraging ongoing dialogue about the complexities of human culture and social life.

Importance of The Sri Bhagavathy Ali Chamundi Temple

This temple stands as a remarkable symbol of interfaith harmony and inclusivity in Kerala, uniquely allowing Muslims to perform worship within its sacred space. This practice not only reflects a deep respect for diverse religious traditions but also underscores the temple’s commitment to communal unity. The belief that worship at this temple can cleanse the mind and body of evil spirits further emphasizes its role as a spiritual refuge for individuals seeking healing and solace, regardless of their religious background. As the *Alibhootha* temple, it embodies the rich cultural tapestry of the region, fostering connections among different faiths and reinforcing the idea that spirituality transcends boundaries. *Alitheyam* is significant for a



number of social, historical, and cultural reasons, especially when considering North Malabar, Kerala. Its importance stems from its illustration of intricate social ties and historical recollections in addition to its function as a component of the *Theyyam* heritage.

The oral tradition of *Alitheyyam*

Alitheyyam, also known as *Ali Chamundi Theyyam*, is a unique and culturally significant *Theyyam* performance that embodies the fusion of Islamic and Hindu traditions in the North Malabar region of Kerala, particularly in Kasaragod. *Theyyam*, as a ritualistic and performative art form, involves the deification of local deities and spirits. However, *Alitheyyam* is distinct because it centers on the transformation of a Muslim figure, Ali *Mapilla*, into a servant deity of the Hindu goddess Chamundi. The *Alitheyyam* ritual at the Arikadi Alichamundi Temple in North Malabar is a fascinating ethnographic tapestry that reflects the region's rich cultural heritage and communal harmony. This vibrant ritual art form involves a series of intricate performances that blend music, dance, and elaborate costumes, often depicting mythological themes and local folklore. *Alitheyyam* serves not only as a spiritual offering but also as a means of fostering social cohesion, drawing together diverse communities who participate in and witness the celebrations. The event is marked by its lively processions, rhythmic drumming, and the captivating presence of the performers, who embody divine characters, creating a shared sense of identity and continuity among the participants. This ritual underscores the deep-rooted traditions of North Malabar, highlighting the interplay of spirituality and community engagement that defines the region's cultural landscape.

One striking example of transformation within the *Theyyam* tradition is the metamorphosis of Ali Mappila into Ali Chamundi, a prominent deity celebrated during the annual *Kaliyattam* festival at the Arikkady Bhagavathi Temple in Kumbala, Kasaragod, a region known for its religious harmony, according to the legend surrounding Ali Chamundi's deification, Ali, who originally hailed from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, settled in Arikkady as a rice trader. According to the oral tradition, Ali was known for his proficiency in martial arts and black magic, which he used for malicious purposes, particularly in assaulting women. This caused problems to the women members of Arikkady family and they prayed for help from their chief deity goddess Chamundi. One narration was that the Goddess Chamundi chose to intervene. She transformed into an alluringly beautiful woman and lured Ali to a pond for a water sport. There, consumed by desire, Ali removed



his protective amulet. Chamundi revealed her true, fierce form and defeated him at that moment. Following his defeat, Ali repented for his misdeeds, and the goddess rewarded him by allowing him to worship her as a devoted follower. Another oral account is that the goddess Chamundi deputed her sister for killing the magician and killed Ali and later he became the *theyyam*.

This oral tradition reflects the power of storytelling in shaping cultural identity and collective memory. The consistent retelling, with slight variations, underscores how communities can preserve and reinterpret traumatic events, turning them into cautionary tales that resonate across generations. By mythologizing the narrative, allows for a communal processing of violence and tragedy, transforming personal loss into a broader moral lesson. This approach not only honors the experiences of those affected but also reinforces societal values, illustrating the dual role of oral traditions as both a means of remembrance and a tool for cultural cohesion.

Alitheyyam is a fascinating example of cultural fusion that shows how different North Malabar religious and artistic traditions interact with one another. Reflecting the region's rich tapestry of cultural connections, this ritual art form blends aspects of local folklore, indigenous customs, and influences from Islam and Hinduism. The performances frequently incorporate a variety of musical genres, elaborate dance routines, and colourful costumes that incorporate elements from several cultures, resulting in a singular manifestation of spirituality and identity. Participating in *Alitheyyam* unites communities, promoting inclusivity and communication while also celebrating their common heritage. The amalgamation of customs demonstrates how cultural practices can change and adapt, ultimately strengthening social ties between various groups and enhancing the communal fabric.

The concept known as narrative theory is centered on how stories influence people's experiences. The oral tradition of *Alitheyyam* and the Ali Chamundi legend serves as an example of how stories serve as a vehicle for collective memory, a method of reaffirming community ties, and a means of transmitting ideals.

Representation of Ali Chamundi in Theyyam

In *Theyyam* performances, Ali Chamundi is depicted as a bare-chested figure with a black-painted face, often wearing a fez cap, which is a traditional symbol associated with Muslim identity. His portrayal highlights his subservient role to the goddess Chamundi rather than as an autonomous deity. The performance primarily serves to recount his story of repentance and his subsequent dedication to the goddess. The significance of *Alitheyyam* lies in its symbolic portrayal of the interaction



between Hinduism and Islam. While Theyyam is predominantly a Hindu ritual, the inclusion of a Muslim character, Ali Mapilla, reflects the cultural and religious co-existence between the two communities in North Malabar. However, it also subtly reinforces the narrative of the Muslim as the ‘other’ who must be subdued by the Hindu goddess, thus carrying complex social and historical undertones.

Alitheyyam continues to be performed in North Malabar, particularly during festivals like Kaliyattam at the Arikkady Bhagavathi Temple. Rajesh, a *theyyam* performer at the 2023 Kaliyattam festival, told the tale and performed the *alitheyyam* rituals while donning the Bhagavathy *kolam*. Chandran, his older brother, performed *Alitheyyam*. They were both Varnar caste members. As a hereditary entitlement to their *tharavadu*, they carried out these rites. (Rajesh, 2023) Before the *Theyyam* performance, he explained, they spent seven days in the temple’s *aniyara*, a special tent for Theyyam artists, during the Kaliyattam festival. They consume chicken curry made on the temple grounds, which the devotees donated to the Chamundi Bhagavathy. The performers of the *theyyam* belong to the *Kakkapuram Vannar* family, whereas the temple was owned by the *Thiyya* community. For painting the face, they use black ink, while for writing on the body, they use sandal. The *alitheyyam* artist dons a golden *thalappali* or headpiece. Devotees, especially Muslims, held that *alibhutha* or *alibhuthastanam* had the ability to free troubled souls who had sinned while on earth. Ali Bhutha is being blessed with cocks and jasmine flowers. Some of the devotees are offering such things for the betterment of their business and family life. During *Kaliyattam*, the *Alitheyyam* performed a symbolic Muslim prayer and bestowed blessings on the devotees by orally instructing them and offering flowers as prasadam. After donning the *theyyakolam*, the *theyyam* performers chant the *thottam pattu* to invoke the spirit of Ali and look into the mirror that reflects the image of *Alitheyyam* to transform the soul. Rajesh claims that because of the customs his elders instilled in him, he is unable to recall the words that were spelled during his metamorphosis. It is a reminder of the region’s complex history of communal relations, where myths are intertwined with real historical events, and the ritual reanimates those cultural memories. The performance also serves as a focal point for reflecting on religious harmony, albeit with the recognition that latent tensions still exist beneath the surface.

In conclusion, *Alitheyyam* is a fascinating example of how folklore and mythology are used to process historical events and relationships. It encapsulates the syncretic cultural traditions of North Malabar, where Hindu and Muslim elements coexist, and simultaneously, the challenges and complexities of communal



identity and harmony in the region. In contrast to other vague *Theyyam* stories, this one clearly shows good and evil engaged in combat, with good winning out in the end. This story is remarkable because it turns a tragic historical occurrence into a myth, which is then ritually reintroduced into the historical present. The community is able to revitalize its shared feelings and reinforce its identity through this process. *Alitheyyam* is a unique symbol of the cultural and religious fusion between Hinduism and Islam in the region. While *Theyyam* is traditionally a Hindu ritual, the inclusion of a Muslim figure, *Ali Mapilla* (later deified as Ali Chamundi), highlights the cultural blending that has historically existed in North Malabar. This reflects the region's long-standing tradition of religious pluralism and co-existence between Hindus and Muslims.

Alitheyyam is a ritual that transforms historical events into mythology. The legend of Ali Mapilla, who misused his powers and was eventually subdued by the Hindu goddess Chamundi, is likely a mythologized version of a real event. The performance of this story within a *Theyyam* ritual helps to preserve historical memory in a way that reanimates collective community sentiments. This process of turning history into myth helps the community deal with past conflicts and tensions. While *Alitheyyam* appears to celebrate religious harmony, it also carries latent tensions. Ali Chamundi's story portrays him as an outsider (Muslim) who must be subdued by a Hindu goddess, reinforcing the idea of the 'otherness' of Muslims in a predominantly Hindu ritual context. This reflects the underlying complexities of communal relations in North Malabar, where religious groups coexist but have historically faced periods of tension. *Alitheyyam* serves as a reminder of these dynamics. Ali's transformation from a villainous figure to a devoted servant of the goddess Chamundi is significant. It conveys the theme of repentance and redemption, which is central to the myth. Ali's eventual role as a subservient protector of the goddess shows how even figures from outside the traditional Hindu pantheon can be integrated into the ritual framework, albeit in a subordinate position. This adds a layer of moral teaching to the performance. *Alitheyyam*, like other *Theyyam* performances, plays a role in reinforcing community identity and social cohesion. By retelling stories that are deeply rooted in local mythology and history, *Theyyam* serves as a way for communities to connect with their past and reaffirm their shared identity. *Alitheyyam*, in particular, allows the community to engage with a narrative that encompasses both Hindu and Muslim elements, reflecting the region's diverse social fabric.



The symbolic elements of the performance, such as Ali Chamundi's blackened face and fez cap, serve to represent both his Muslim identity and his role as an outsider. His appearance, along with the ferocious portrayal of the goddess Chamundi, creates a powerful visual narrative that reinforces the themes of conflict, submission, and harmony. The ritualistic re-enactment of this myth plays a significant role in preserving these symbolic traditions.

Endnotes

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