

Anthropology of Music Masterclass *** 26th - 29th of June *** Prof. Steven Feld

Premodern Gods in Postmodern Kerala: The special sense of place and musical phenomena in *theyyam* rituals

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Theyyam (*deyvam* = god), one of the ritually, mythically, and performatively richest traditions of South Indian popular worship, performed by members of *Scheduled Castes and Tribes*, can be proven in North Kerala since the 15th century. Media of local deities, spirits, heroes, and animals wear elaborate costumes, recite liturgical stories to the accompaniment of local folk instruments, and dance. Their goal is to enable a visual and acoustic, easily accessible revelation of the deity through transformation, to interact as an incarnated deity, and to give blessings. *Theyyam* can therefore be understood as an interaction-based religious evolution, mirror of hierarchical social structures of North Kerala, and as an indispensable part of religion.

The roles of musical phenomena, present throughout *theyyam* and assuming decisive functions, remain extensively unexplored. Besides dance consisting of a plurality of defined and codified steps (*kalasams*), *tottam* songs—descriptive, narrative songs performed for worship in early Malayalam forms or in Sanskrit, attributable to folklore—represent important elements of the tradition. One can understand them as mirrors of social and cultural life, as well as a catalyst; they emphasize man's dependence on the physical and social environment, and his confrontation with it. The medium (*kolakkaran*) gives the *Scheduled Castes and Tribes* a voice, and bridges the divine with the human, the country with the people, the hidden with the present. The local *soundscape* is taken up in the costumes and make-up of the media, made from locally available materials, and contributes to an emotional and aesthetic connectedness.

In *theyyam*, the idea of sound as cultural system becomes audible and visible, because musical phenomena are included in the ritual in a form the medium can share with the participants. A feeling of place and identification is ensured by constantly keeping the phenomena alive, and by passing on knowledge as well as skills from generation to generation. Through religious beliefs, patterns of relationships between people as well as between people and the environment

are embodied in a special sense of place—as in *theyyam*, the land, musical phenomena, and myths nurture each other. *Theyyam* becomes culture, tradition, and environmental relationship—an expression of the being of all participants in the world, whereby environment functions as multifaceted resource and sound as *a way of knowing*.

The question arises whether and why the described convictions, which can only lead to success through faith and emotional as well as aesthetic patterns on the basis of the local idea of sound, are still valid today. To what extent do faith structures, ritual practices, and social forms from premodern South India find a place in modern, globalized Kerala, and what is the special function of musical phenomena within the tradition? In order to pursue these statements from an ethnomusicological perspective, to study them with regard to their sensory and symbolic intertwining of culture, sound, as well as place, and to understand the situatedness of actors as well as their modes of action, social research on musical phenomena is required. Thus, we are able to discuss their functions and the extent of faith structures, ritual practices, and social forms from premodern South Indian environments of Kerala in the 21st century. The approach contributes to contextualization by seeking emic perspectives of the believers.

The research project requires a discussion of (1) the concept of *Acoustemology*, and (2) the role of musical phenomena in forms of popular worship in South India as well as in tribal animism. These theories are to be broadened by discussion approaches initiated by (3) the interdisciplinary field of *Human-Animal Studies*, since in *theyyam* human-nonhuman-interactions expressed through musical phenomena are an important issue. Characteristics of a tribal culture, having their backbone in myths and legends of the region, are to be reflected, whereby the way musical phenomena are used depends on how participants relate to nature.

My reflections and questions, a work in progress, I will discuss within my presentation are based on two field research trips around Kannur, Kerala. I participated in *theyyam* rituals for different gods and goddesses in January 2017 and 2019; I undertook initial research through participant observation, and collected ethnographic data. In my presentation, I will introduce my audio and video recordings, as well as photographs.