

Unveiling Theyyam: Exploring the Ritualistic Splendor and Cultural Significance of an Ancient Art Form in South India

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ABSTRACT

Theyyam is a captivating and vibrant ceremonial art form deeply rooted in the culture and traditions of the Indian state of Kerala. Renowned for its mystical and awe-inspiring nature, Theyyam holds significant religious and cultural importance in the region. The term “Theyyam” is derived from the Malayalam language, where it translates to “God” or “Deity.” The fundamental concept behind a Theyyam performance revolves around the belief that celestial beings exist and occasionally inhabit the bodies of skilled artists, commonly referred to as “Theyyam artists” or “Theyyam dancers.” These performers assume the roles of living gods and goddesses through intricate ceremonies, elaborate costumes, elaborate makeup, and captivating performances. This research provides a critical analysis of a traditional practice, focusing specifically on the ceremonial art form called Theyyam in Kerala. The theoretical foundations of discourse analysis, which serve as the basis for this concept, have received limited attention in the field of cultural studies. As Theyyam is an indigenous art form, it has been extensively explored within folklore, resulting in a diverse range of discourses and a deep historical background, contributing to its current classification as a folk ceremonial art form.

Keywords: Theyyam, Myths, Discourse, Performance, Rituals and Culture.

1. INTRODUCTION

Theyyam ceremonies typically occur in the precincts of temples and are deeply rooted in the worship of various deities, ancestral spirits, and heroes. Each Theyyam performance revolves around a specific deity or divine entity, embodying their characteristics, powers, and mythology. The rituals associated with Theyyam are conducted by a designated priest or oracle, who acts as a medium between the human world and the divine realm. Theyyam is not just a religious and cultural celebration but also gives the participating communities a sense of social and economic empowerment. The Theyyakkarans, who are members of lower castes and socially excluded groups, are admired and appreciated by the audience throughout the performances. Theyyam’s appeal has transcended regional bounds, drawing visitors and art enthusiasts from all over the world. It is a thoroughly engaging experience because of the vivacious colours, captivating dancing techniques, and spiritual aura. Through festivals, workshops, and documentation, efforts are being made to promote and preserve this antiquated art form, ensuring that Kerala’s rich cultural history endures for years to come.

2. ANALYSIS

The preparation for a Theyyam performance is an elaborate process. The artists undergo rigorous training, honing their skills in dance, music, and the distinct movements associated with each deity they portray. The elaborate costumes worn by the performers are meticulously crafted, often adorned with intricate designs, vibrant colours, and symbolic ornaments. The makeup, known as “Vishukkriya,” is a crucial aspect of the transformation, involving intricate patterns and vibrant colours painted on the artist’s face and body, adding to the overall visual spectacle.

During a Theyyam performance, the artists enter a trance-like state, channelling the spirit of the deity they represent. With synchronized movements, rhythmic dances, and mesmerizing music, the

Theyyam artists bring the divine presence to life, captivating the audience with their powerful and evocative performances. The rituals performed during the ceremony are believed to invoke blessings, offer protection, and bring prosperity to the community.

Theyyam holds immense social, cultural, and religious significance in Kerala. It serves as a medium of spiritual communion, where devotees seek solace, guidance, and blessings from the gods. The performances often accompany traditional music, such as percussion instruments like chenda, Latham, and weekly chenda, enhancing the immersive experience.

Over the years, Theyyam has gained recognition within Kerala, across India, and the world. It has become a prominent symbol of the state's rich cultural heritage, drawing tourists, scholars, and art enthusiasts to witness its captivating allure. Theyyam festivals, known as "Thiruvayans," are celebrated enthusiastically and fervently, attracting large gatherings of devotees and spectators.

Theyyam's fusion of dance, music, theatre, and spiritual devotion creates a transcendental experience that celebrates the divine and connects individuals with their cultural roots. This ancient art form continues to thrive, preserving the traditions and mythology of Kerala and enchanting all who witness its stunning performances.

3. CULTURE

The tribal culture was the unique tradition of Kerala. The Aryan culture and its part Brahmanism and the foreign Islam and Christianity that came later influenced the aborigines here. Thus, Kerala became a meeting ground for various religious cultures. Having a rich culture in a community of wanderers is impossible. "India was a region where all their wishes were handed over as the address of destiny" (Sajeevan Azhikode, 17). In India's complicated caste social structure, people are born into certain castes that influence their social rank, employment, and life chances. Brahmins (priests and academics), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (merchants and farmers), and Shudras (labourers and servants) were the four basic caste groupings that traditionally made-up society. The Dalits, considered outside the varna system and subject to severe social discrimination and isolation, were below these four varnas (castes).

The influx of Brahmins has created widespread movements in Kerala culture. However, it is not correct to consider only Brahmins as immigrants. According to writer Sivasankaran Nair:

The first to come were the Brahmin fortune seekers. They intermarried with their predecessors, the Yadavas, and brought societal changes. They were skilled warriors and leaders and mixed with the Yadavas, the sons of the soil. A new ruling class was created. Thus, the floors, lands and nations were formed. It was these Naduvazhis and Desavazhis who welcomed the Brahmin migrations. The Brahmin immigrants are the immigrants who have maintained their religious traditions, like Jews, Christians and Muslims. (AchuthanunniChattanath, 30)

4. ORIGINS AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Jainism, Buddhism and Brahminism have played a decisive role in forming a common culture in Kerala society. From the 3rd century to the 6th century, there was a strong phase of Buddhism in Kerala. The influence of Buddhism can be seen in the forms of worship in the Kerala state. 'Ezhunnallath', 'rathamvali' and 'kettukazcha' are worships derived from Buddhism. There are many centres of Buddhist influence in Northern Kerala. The lands where the church was located were also centres of Buddhism. Pallikunn, Pallikkulam, Pallipuram and Pallikkara are examples. Dharmadam was a prominent Buddhist centre in North Kerala.

The region of North Kerala where Jainism is most noticeable is Wayanad. Jains also had a presence in Tulumad. At Karkala, the Gomateshwara statue is a reminder of the former Jain splendour. In ancient Kerala's intellectual and spiritual spheres, Brahmins were the masters of Sanketam. It resulted from the universalisation of Hinduism and the dominance of the Namboothiris. The other social groups that existed in ancient Kerala were the property-owning classes, which included merchants, ploughmen, Velalars, chantors, etc.

According to historians, Kerala experienced an old-class society during the first and sixth centuries AD. Up to the seventh century, this was the situation and there were seven different occupational castes in

early South India, including Thudian (beater), Parayan (beater), Panan (singer), Valayar (singer), Vanikar (merchant), and Uzhavar (farmer). One of the factors leading to a unique condition in the caste communities in Northern Kerala was the Theyyam movement. The number of Theyyias increased as the position of Theyyia spread across the household and nation. Furthermore, castes specifically created for tying 'kolams' were created. Along with Malayan, Panan, Vanna, and Velan, other heirs who tied Theyyam included Kopalan Mavilan, Nalkitthaya, Chinkathan, Tan, and Munnutan. Some castes had to act as caste castes in the caste-based social structure. Theyyaam tie castes and other castes associated with Theyyam in Uttara Kerala are mentioned here (fourth level). Theyattakars Kerala Northern Peruvannan communities that tie Theyyam together are Perumalayan, Panan, Anjutan, Munnutan, Kalanadis, Mavilan, Kopalan, Nalkitthaya, Thulimalayala Velan, and Pulayar. They could be categorised as generic miscreants. Dirt and soil belong to the same community.

The roots of Theyyam can be traced back to the ancient tribal cultures and folklore traditions of Kerala's Malabar region. It is believed that the rites and rituals associated with Theyyam have been practiced for over a thousand years, deeply ingrained in the religious practices of indigenous communities. This rich history and cultural heritage have contributed to the unique and enduring nature of Theyyam. One of the defining aspects of Theyyam is its close association with nature and the worship of ancestral spirits. The performers, as Theyyam artists, embody the spirits of gods and goddesses, who are believed to exist in various forms, both tangible and intangible. These deities are considered to be an integral part of people's lives, influencing their well-being, prosperity, and spiritual journey.

Theyyam serves as a sacred offering and a means to seek blessings, protection, and guidance from these divine entities. The performances are seen as acts of devotion and reverence, where devotees express their gratitude, make supplications, and seek solutions to their problems. It is believed that witnessing a Theyyam performance can bring about spiritual awakening, purification, and healing. Theyyam ceremonies often take place in sacred spaces such as temple premises, open grounds, or even within the households of devotees. The performance usually begins with a series of rituals, including the invoking of the deity and purification of the performance area. "The presence of a priest or oracle is essential, as they serve as the medium through which the divine energy is channeled into the Theyyam artist" (Gopalakrishnan, P. K., 13).

Theyyam is deeply rooted in the belief that the natural elements, such as trees, rivers, hills, and animals, embody the presence of these deities. The performers often visit specific locations in the natural landscape that are associated with the mythology and legends surrounding the respective gods and goddesses. This connection to nature highlights the harmonious relationship between humans and the environment, emphasizing the importance of preserving and respecting the natural world. Theyyam is a communal celebration that brings together the entire community. It is often organized and supported by local communities and families who host the performances and provide hospitality to the artists and attendees. These events foster a sense of unity, belonging, and cultural pride among the participants, reinforcing their shared heritage and religious beliefs.

The intricate rituals, elaborate costumes, and vibrant makeup used in Theyyam performances serve as visual representations of the deities' divine attributes and characteristics. Each Theyyam persona has its distinctive appearance, reflecting the specific deity being invoked. The costumes are adorned with symbolic ornaments and intricate designs, adding to the overall visual spectacle and creating a captivating ambiance. The music accompanying Theyyam performances is an integral part of the experience. Traditional instruments such as chenda, elathalam, and veekkuchenda are used to create rhythmic beats and melodic tunes. The music enhances the energy and mood of the performance, captivating the audience and creating a mystical atmosphere. Theyyam's significance extends beyond mere entertainment or artistic expression. It is deeply intertwined with the cultural, social, and spiritual fabric of Kerala. The preservation and continuation of this ancient art form are a testament to the enduring traditions and beliefs of the region's indigenous communities. Theyyam serves as a bridge between the past and the present, keeping alive the folklore, mythology, and spiritual heritage of Kerala's Malabar area.

5. THE RITUALISTIC PROCESS

The main Theyyams are Ali Theyyam, Anka Daivam, Ankakkaaran, Ankakulangara, Aryapponkanni, Asuraalan, Ayirathi Bhagavathy, Bali, Bappiriyam, Bhairavan, Bhadrakali, Bhagavathy, BillaraChoottakkaali, Chorakkalathil Bhagavathi, Dhoomaa Bhagavathy, Gulikan, Kaala Raathri, Kaaran Daivam, Karinkaali, Karanor, Karinthiri Nair, Karumakan, Karuvannoor, Kanda Karnan, Kannikorumakan, Kammiyamma, KayaranDaivam, Kelan, Kandanar, Kulavan, Kuttichathan, Kurathi, KurikkalTheyyam, Kshethrapaalakan, Kuttichathan, Kalachaamundi, KayaranDaivam, Kaattumadantha, Malankaari, Malankkuraththi, Makka Bhagavathy, Manthra Moorthy, Marppuliyam, Malliyodan, Muchilottu Bhagavathy, Munnayareeshwaran, Naaga Kanni, Naga Kali, Nemam Bhagavathy, Orankara Bhagavathy, Oorpazhachi, Padaveeran, Pampoori, Paraaliyamma, Perumpuzhayachan, Pethaalan, Poomaaruthan, Poothaadi, Pulimaaruthan, Pullichaamundi, Puliyooru Kannan, Puthiya Bhagavathy, RakthaChaamundi, Raktheswari, Theechamundi, Theethara Bhagavathy, ThekkanKariyaaththan, Undayan, Uchitta, Vairajaathan, Vasoori Mala, Veeraampinaaru, VeluthaBhootham, Vettakorumakan, Visha Kandan and Vishnumoorthy.

Many detailed procedures and rigorous preparations go into the performance of Theyyam. It usually occurs within the boundaries of temples, holy gardens, or open areas known as “Kaavu.” Construction of magnificent shrines called “Kaavukal” and procuring requisite clothes, props, and cosmetics supplies are done well in advance of Theyyam. The principal character in a Theyyam performance is typically a male artist who, prior to the performance, goes through a rigorous period of spiritual and physical preparation. It entails fasting, meditating, and performing particular rites to purify the body and mind. Theyyam’s elaborate and gorgeous costumes and cosmetics are used. Natural colours paint the artist’s face and body, resulting in intricate motifs that depict the individual deity being portrayed. The elaborate, colourful outfits are embellished with feathers, traditional jewellery, and other items. The artist's transition into the deity enhances the performance's overall aura and mystery, which is a visually appealing process.

6. THEYYAM PERFORMANCE

Many onlookers and devotees are present for the performance of Theyyam. The performance space is typically illuminated by candles and bonfires at night, giving off an otherworldly aura. The performance’s background music is equally engrossing, with wind instruments filling the room with their melodic sounds and the rhythmic rhythms of the drums. The actual performance combines dance, theatre, and rituals. The performer, totally embodying the deity, glides with elegance and agility while making elaborate dance movements and steps that are thought to represent the deity’s heavenly qualities and attributes. The motions mesmerise the audience, frequently complemented by dramatic facial expressions and vocal shouts. Theyyam performances are not merely for entertainment but are considered sacred and spiritually significant. The presence of the deity within the artist is believed to bestow blessings, heal ailments, and guide the devotees. People from all walks of life, irrespective of caste or creed, come together to witness and participate in these performances, seeking solace and divine intervention. Theyyam performances are regarded as sacred and spiritually meaningful as well as entertaining. The presence of the deity within the artist is thought to deliver blessings, heal maladies, and guide devotion. People from all walks of life, regardless of caste or faith, gather to see and participate in these acts to find solace and divine intervention.

Theyyam is incredibly important to Kerala culture and religion. It serves as a link between the past and the present, reuniting people with the customs and beliefs of their ancestors. The shows act as a medium for passing down knowledge, folklore, and moral principles from generation to generation. Theyyam is essential in promoting a sense of belonging and social cohesiveness. Regardless of social standing or origin, the performances unite people, establishing solidarity and group identification. Theyyam ceremonies frequently involve community participation, strengthening shared accountability and camaraderie. Theyyam has developed into a major tourist destination in recent years and has received recognition on a global scale.

7. CHALLENGES AND THE FUTURE

Despite its rich cultural heritage and significance, Theyyam faces several challenges in the contemporary period that threaten its sustainability. These challenges stem from changing social and economic dynamics, urbanization, and the pervasive influence of globalization. In order to ensure the continued practice and appreciation of Theyyam, concerted efforts are needed to address these obstacles and engage the younger generation. One of the primary challenges faced by Theyyam is the shift in social and economic dynamics within Kerala. As younger generations increasingly move to cities in search of employment and opportunities, they may become disconnected from the traditional rural communities where Theyyam is deeply rooted. The rigorous training, spiritual practices, and time commitment required to become a skilled Theyyam artist may be less appealing to the younger generation, who are often pursuing modern education and career paths.

8. CONCLUSION

Furthermore, the influence of globalization and Western cultural values poses a risk to the preservation of indigenous art forms like Theyyam. The influx of Western media, entertainment, and lifestyle choices may divert the attention and interest of the younger generation away from traditional cultural practices. It is crucial to create awareness and foster enthusiasm for Theyyam among young people, emphasizing the unique cultural significance and the value of preserving such ancient traditions. Efforts to promote and sustain Theyyam should include educational activities that highlight the historical, cultural, and spiritual aspects of the art form. Integrating Theyyam into the curriculum of schools and colleges can play a crucial role in introducing young people to its significance and encouraging their active participation. Additionally, cultural exchange programs that facilitate interactions between urban and rural communities can create opportunities for the younger generation to witness and engage with Theyyam firsthand.

Collaboration with cultural and tourism organizations can also help promote Theyyam as a valuable part of Kerala's greater cultural heritage. Integrating Theyyam performances into cultural festivals and tourism initiatives can attract a wider audience and generate interest among both locals and visitors. This exposure can provide economic opportunities for Theyyam artists and encourage the younger generation to see the relevance and potential of pursuing this art form. Furthermore, leveraging digital platforms and social media can play a significant role in raising awareness about Theyyam. Creating online resources, sharing videos and documentaries, and utilizing social media campaigns can reach a broader audience and generate interest beyond the local communities. This can create a virtual space where young people can learn about Theyyam, engage with artists, and actively participate in the promotion and preservation of this cultural heritage.

In summary, sustaining Theyyam in the face of changing social and economic dynamics requires a multi-faceted approach. This includes raising awareness and enthusiasm among the younger generation through educational activities, cultural exchange programs, and integrating Theyyam into Kerala's greater cultural and tourism environment. By embracing these efforts, Theyyam can overcome the challenges it faces and continue to thrive as a vibrant and cherished cultural tradition in Kerala and beyond.

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